

CHAPTER 2L. CHANGEABLE MESSAGE SIGNS

Section 2L.01 Description of Changeable Message Signs

Support:

01 A changeable message sign (CMS) is a traffic control device that is capable of displaying one or more alternative messages. Some changeable message signs have a blank mode when no message is displayed, while others display multiple messages with only one of the messages displayed at a time (such as OPEN/CLOSED signs at weigh stations).

02 The provisions in this Chapter apply to both permanent and portable changeable message signs with electronic displays. Additional provisions that only apply to portable changeable message signs can be found in Section 6F.60. The provisions in this Chapter do not apply to changeable message signs with non-electronic displays that are changed either manually or electromechanically, such as a hinged-panel, rotating-drum, or back-lit curtain or scroll CMS.

Standard:

03 **Except as provided in Paragraph 2 of Section 2L.02, changeable message signs shall display only traffic operational, regulatory, warning, and guidance information. Advertising messages shall not be displayed on changeable message signs or its supports or other equipment.**

04 **The design of legends for non-electronic display changeable message signs shall comply with the provisions of Chapters 2A through 2K, 2M, and 2N of this Manual. All other changeable message signs shall comply with the design and application principles established in this Chapter and in Chapter 2A.**

Guidance:

05 *Blank-out signs that display only single-phase, predetermined electronic-display legends that are limited by their composition and arrangement of pixels or other illuminated forms in a fixed arrangement (such as a blank-out sign indicating a part-time turn prohibition, a blank-out or changeable lane-use sign, or a changeable OPEN/CLOSED sign for a weigh station) should comply with the provisions of the applicable Section for the specific type of sign, provided that the letter forms, symbols, and other legend elements are duplicates of the static messages as detailed in the "Standard Highway Signs and Markings" book (see Section 1A.11). Because such a sign is effectively an illuminated version of a static sign, the size of its legend elements, the overall size of the sign, and placement of the sign should comply with the applicable provisions for the static version of the sign.*

Section 2L.02 Applications of Changeable Message Signs

Support:

01 Changeable message signs have a large number of applications including, but not limited to, the following:

- A. Incident management and route diversion
- B. Warning of adverse weather conditions
- C. Special event applications associated with traffic control or conditions
- D. Control at crossing situations
- E. Lane, ramp, and roadway control
- F. Priced or other types of managed lanes
- G. Travel times
- H. Warning situations
- I. Traffic regulations
- J. Speed control
- K. Destination guidance

Option:

02 Changeable message signs may be used by State and local highway agencies to display safety messages, transportation-related messages, emergency homeland security messages, and America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) alert messages.

Guidance:

03 *State and local highway agencies should develop and establish a policy regarding the display of the types of messages provided in Paragraph 2. When changeable message signs are used at multiple locations to address a*

specific situation, the message displays should be consistent along the roadway corridor and adjacent corridors, which might necessitate coordination among different operating agencies.

Support:

⁰⁴ Examples of safety messages include “SEAT BELT BUCKLED?” and “DON’T DRINK AND DRIVE.” Examples of transportation-related messages include “STADIUM EVENT SUNDAY, EXPECT DELAYS NOON TO 4 PM” and “OZONE ALERT CODE RED—USE TRANSIT.”

Guidance:

⁰⁵ *When a CMS is used to display a safety or transportation related message, the message should be simple, brief, legible, and clear. A CMS should not be used to display a safety or transportation-related message if doing so would adversely affect respect for the sign. “CONGESTION AHEAD” or other overly simplistic or vague messages should not be displayed alone. These messages should be supplemented with a message on the location or distance to the congestion or incident, delay and travel time, alternative route, or other similar messages.*

Standard:

⁰⁶ **When a CMS is used to display a safety, transportation-related, emergency homeland security, or AMBER alert message, the display format shall not be of a type that could be considered similar to advertising displays.**

Support:

⁰⁷ Section 2B.13 contains information regarding the design of changeable message signs that are used to display variable speed limits that change based on ambient or operational conditions, or that display the speed at which approaching drivers are traveling.

Caltrans' Policy regarding the use of CMS signs for child abduction (AMBER) alert messages on State Highways

Support:

⁰⁸ A primary mission of Caltrans is the safe and orderly movement of traffic. It is the policy of Caltrans to display only real-time information that conveys current traffic safety and congestion information on highway Changeable Message Signs (CMS).

Standard:

⁰⁹ **An exception to Caltrans policy on the use of CMS signs shall be made only for AMBER Alerts. Only credible real-time information, where it is crucial to the safety of the victim to disseminate the information to the public in the near term, shall be displayed on these CMS signs.**

Support:

¹⁰ Law enforcement activates an Amber Alert when circumstances meet the following criteria: the missing child is of a pre-determined age; the law enforcement agency believes the child has been kidnapped; the agency believes the missing child is under threat of serious bodily harm or death.

Standard:

¹¹ **The California Highway Patrol (CHP) shall consult with the investigating agency prior to requesting any CMS sign activation. Caltrans shall only respond to AMBER alert requests from the CHP. Caltrans' District Traffic Management Center (TMC) staff and local CHP staff shall jointly agree upon the most appropriate CMS sign message content(s). The TMC staff shall also consult with CHP staff regarding the length of time to display messages (initially 2-3 hours), and extent of roadway system to display the messages (i.e. radius and/or directions and specific routes).**

Guidance:

¹² *TMC personnel should discuss with the requester the limitations on message content, the number of signs that can be deployed within a given time period, conflicts with other necessary sign messages etc.*

Support:

¹³ There is a concern that messages that are too general in describing vehicles might result in inappropriate vigilantism. The preferred response is to display a radio frequency (thus referring the public elsewhere for details) – Caltrans' Highway Advisory Radios (HAR) or appropriate commercial radio. Alternatively, a license plate number (or partial number) might be displayed along with a vehicle description. The display of any contact phone number is discouraged.

¹⁴ Nothing in this policy suggests a requirement to pre-empt true road users safety messages, e.g. unexpected “end of queue” motorist alerts, severe weather advisories (fog, smoke), road closure and detour information etc.

Option:

¹⁵ It may be necessary to turn off an AMBER alert sign that creates a traffic hazard.

Support:

¹⁶ This policy primarily applies to the use of permanently installed overhead CMS signs. Should the use of mobile CMS signs be necessary and appropriate at a specific location(s); Caltrans can expect CHP assistance with mobile sign deployment as needed.

Guidance:

¹⁷ *The TMCs should notify Caltrans' HQ Communications Center when responding to an AMBER alert request. The TMCs should monitor and save traffic data in order to determine if unintended consequences of displaying such a message occurred on the highway.*

Standard:

¹⁸ **A joint debriefing of Caltrans and CHP personnel shall follow every event.**

¹⁹ **In all cases, messages shall maintain the credibility of the CMS system.**

Section 2L.03 Legibility and Visibility of Changeable Message Signs

Support:

⁰¹ The maximum distance at which a driver can first correctly identify letters and words on a sign is called the legibility distance of the sign. Legibility distance is affected by the characteristics of the sign design and the visual capabilities of drivers. Visual capabilities, and thus legibility distances, vary among drivers.

⁰² For the more common types of changeable message signs, the longest measured legibility distances on sunny days occur during mid-day when the sun is overhead. Legibility distances are much shorter when the sun is behind the sign face, when the sun is on the horizon and shining on the sign face, or at night.

⁰³ Visibility is the characteristic that enables a CMS to be seen. Visibility is associated with the point where the CMS is first detected, whereas legibility is the point where the message on the CMS can be read. Environmental conditions such as rain, fog, and snow impact the visibility of changeable message signs and can reduce the available legibility distances. During these conditions, there might not be enough viewing time for drivers to read the message.

Guidance:

⁰⁴ *Changeable message signs used on roadways with speed limits of 55 mph or higher should be visible from 1/2 mile under both day and night conditions. The message should be designed to be legible from a minimum distance of 600 feet for nighttime conditions and 800 feet for normal daylight conditions. When environmental conditions that reduce visibility and legibility are present, or when the legibility distances stated in the previous sentences in this paragraph cannot be practically achieved, messages composed of fewer units of information should be used and consideration should be given to limiting the message to a single phase (see Section 2L.05 for information regarding the lengths of messages displayed on changeable message signs).*

Section 2L.04 Design Characteristics of Changeable Message Signs

Standard:

⁰¹ **Changeable message signs shall not include advertising, animation, rapid flashing, dissolving, exploding, scrolling, or other dynamic elements.**

Support:

⁰² Section 6F.61 contains information regarding the use of arrow boards that use flashing or sequential displays for lane closures.

Guidance:

⁰³ *Except in the case of a limited-legend CMS (such as a blank-out or electronic-display changeable message regulatory sign) that is used in place of a static regulatory sign or an activated blank-out warning sign that supplements a static warning sign at a separate location, changeable message signs should be used as a supplement to and not as a substitute for conventional signs and markings.*

⁰⁴ *CMS should be limited to no more than three lines, with no more than 20 characters per line.*

⁰⁵ *The spacing between characters in a word should be between 25 to 40 percent of the letter height. The spacing between words in a message should be between 75 and 100 percent of the letter height. Spacing between the message lines should be between 50 and 75 percent of the letter height.*

⁰⁶ *Except as provided in Paragraph 18, word messages on changeable message signs should be composed of all upper-case letters. The minimum letter height should be 18 inches for changeable message signs on roadways*

with speed limits of 45 mph or higher. The minimum letter height should be 12 inches for changeable message signs on roadways with speed limits of less than 45 mph.

Support:

07 Using letter heights of more than 18 inches will not result in proportional increases in legibility distance.

Guidance:

08 *The width-to-height ratio of the sign characters should be between 0.7 and 1.0. The stroke width-to-height ratio should be 0.2.*

Support:

09 The width-to-height ratio is commonly accomplished using a minimum font matrix density of five pixels wide by seven pixels high.

Standard:

10 Changeable message signs shall automatically adjust their brightness under varying light conditions to maintain legibility.

Guidance:

11 *The luminance of changeable message signs should meet industry criteria for daytime and nighttime conditions. Luminance contrast should be between 8 and 12 for all conditions.*

12 *Contrast orientation of changeable message signs should always be positive, that is, with luminous characters on a dark or less luminous background.*

Support:

13 Legibility distances for negative-contrast changeable message signs are likely to be at least 25 percent shorter than those of positive-contrast messages. In addition, the increased light emitted by negative-contrast changeable message signs has not been shown to improve detection distances.

Standard:

14 The colors used for the legends and backgrounds on changeable message signs shall be as provided in Table 2A-5 2A-5(CA).

Guidance:

15 *If a black background is used, the color used for the legend on a changeable message sign should match the background color that would be used on a standard sign for that type of legend, such as white for regulatory, yellow for warning, orange for temporary traffic control, red for stop or yield, fluorescent pink for incident management, and fluorescent yellow-green for bicycle, pedestrian, and school warning.*

Standard:

16 If a green background is used for a guide message on a CMS or if a blue background is used for a motorist services message on a CMS, the background color shall be provided by green or blue lighted pixels such that the entire CMS would be lighted, not just the white legend.

Support:

17 Some CMS that employ newer technologies have the capability to display an exact duplicate of a standard sign or other sign legend using standard symbols, the Standard Alphabets and letter forms, route shields, and other typical sign legend elements with no apparent loss of resolution or recognition to the road user when compared with a static version of the same sign legend. Such signs are of the full-matrix type and can typically display full-color legends. Use of such technologies for new CMS is encouraged for greater legibility of their displays and enhanced recognition of the message as it pertains to regulatory, warning, or guidance information.

Guidance:

18 *If used, the CMS described in the preceding paragraph should not display symbols or route shields unless they can do so in the appropriate color combinations. For a single-phase message where the Standard Alphabets and other legend elements of standard designs are used, the lettering style, size, and line spacing should comply with the applicable provisions for the type of message displayed as provided elsewhere in this Manual. For two-phase messages, larger legend heights should be used as described previously in this Section because of the need for such messages to be legible at a greater distance. Regardless of the number of phases, the CMS should comply with the legibility and visibility provisions of Section 2L.03.*

Section 2L.05 Message Length and Units of Information

Guidance:

01 The maximum length of a message should be dictated by the number of units of information contained in the message, in addition to the size of the CMS. A unit of information, which is a single answer to a single question that a driver can use to make a decision, should not be more than four words.

Support:

02 In order to illustrate the concept of units of information, Table 2L-1 shows an example message that is comprised of four units of information.

03 The maximum allowable number of units of information in a CMS message is based on the principles described in this Section, the current highway operating speed, the legibility characteristics of the CMS, and the lighting conditions.

Standard:

04 Each message shall consist of no more than two phases. A phase shall consist of no more than three lines of text. Each phase shall be understood by itself regardless of the sequence in which it is read. Messages shall be centered within each line of legend. Except for signs located on toll plaza structures or other facilities with a similar booth-lane arrangement, if more than one CMS is visible to road users, then only one sign shall display a sequential message at any given time.

05 Techniques of message display such as fading, rapid flashing, exploding, dissolving, or moving messages shall not be used. The text of the message shall not scroll or travel horizontally or vertically across the face of the sign.

Guidance:

06 When designing and displaying messages on changeable message signs, the following principles relative to message design should be used:

- A. The minimum time that an individual phase is displayed should be based on 1 second per word or 2 seconds per unit of information, whichever produces a lesser value. The display time for a phase should never be less than 2 seconds.*
- B. The maximum cycle time of a two-phase message should be 8 seconds.*
- C. The duration between the display of two phases should not exceed 0.3 seconds.*
- D. No more than three units of information should be displayed on a phase of a message.*
- E. No more than four units of information should be in a message when the traffic operating speeds are 35 mph or more.*
- F. No more than five units of information should be in a message when the traffic operating speeds are less than 35 mph.*
- G. Only one unit of information should appear on each line of the CMS.*
- H. Compatible units of information should be displayed on the same message phase.*

Option:

07 A unit of information consisting of more than one word may be displayed on more than one line. An additional changeable message sign at a downstream location may be used for the purpose of allowing the entire message to be read twice.

Guidance:

08 If more than two phases would be needed to display the necessary information, additional changeable message signs should be used to display this information as a series of two distinct, independent messages with a maximum of two phases at each location, in accordance with the provisions of Paragraph 4.

09 When the message on a CMS includes an abbreviation, the provisions of Section 1A.15 should be used.

Section 2L.06 Installation of Permanent Changeable Message Signs

Guidance:

01 A CMS that is used in place of a static sign (such as a blank-out or variable legend regulatory sign) should be located in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 2A. The following factors should be considered when installing other permanent changeable message signs:

- A. Changeable message signs should be located sufficiently upstream of known bottlenecks and high crash locations to enable road users to select an alternate route or take other appropriate action in response to a recurring condition.
- B. Changeable message signs should be located sufficiently upstream of major diversion decision points, such as interchanges, to provide adequate distance over which road users can change lanes to reach one destination or the other.
- C. Changeable message signs should not be located within an interchange except for toll plazas or managed lanes.
- D. Changeable message signs should not be positioned at locations where the information load on drivers is already high because of guide signs and other types of information.
- E. Changeable message signs should not be located in areas where drivers frequently perform lane-changing maneuvers in response to static guide sign information, or because of merging or weaving conditions.

Support:

02 Information regarding the design and application of portable changeable message signs in temporary traffic control zones is contained in Section 6F.60.

Section 2L.101(CA) Extinguishable Message Signs

Support:

01 Extinguishable message signs are designed to have one or more messages that can be displayed or deleted as required. Such a sign can be changed manually, by remote control, or by automatic controls that can “sense” the conditions that require special sign messages.

02 It is recognized that due to technological limitations, many extinguishable message signs cannot conform to the exact sign shape, color, and dimensions specified in these standards. Nevertheless, it is essential that extinguishable message signs ascribe to the principles established in this California MUTCD, and to the extent practicable, with the design and applications prescribed herein.

Table 2L-1. Example of Units of Information

Question	Answer	Number of Information Units
What happened?	MAJOR CRASH	1
Where?	AT EXIT 12	1
Who is the advisory for?	Drivers Heading TO NEW YORK	1
What is advised?	USE ROUTE 46	1

Note: The following is an example of a two-phase message that could be developed from the four information units shown in this table:

