

# A Sign of the Times

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When I was a kid, I loved going to Madison. We went to tour the state capitol, to watch Matt Vandenboom play for the Badgers and especially to go to STATE STREET.

We used to love to walk from the library on LAKE STREET up to the capitol at the intersection of CARROLL STREET and MIFFLIN STREET. Growing up in Kimberly, I never saw a man standing on a corner wearing nothing but a loincloth and playing the bongos, but that was commonplace on STATE STREET.

We would walk by all the stores and shop for Badger gear, drop some coins into the guitar case of a street musician and grab some cheeseburgers at STATE STREET Brat.

Now thanks to the Federal Highway Administration, the next time I visit Madison I'm going to stroll down State Street, not STATE STREET.

In the FHA's updated Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, the Administration is now requiring all street signs across the country to use lower case letters, only capitalizing the first letter of each word. The traditional all capital letter street signs had been in use for over 100 years. In today's technological world, the use of all capital letters in an email is the equivalent of shouting. The government, however, asserts that's just a coincidence, as they're not simply trying to mellow out our current street signs.

Citing several studies, the Administration made the move to lower case letters because they are easier to read, especially for older drivers. The feds claim the less time drivers need to read signs, the more they are able to focus on driving, making our roads safer for other drivers, bicyclists, pedestrians and construction workers.

Federal Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood supports the new guidelines, claiming, "Safety is this department's top priority."

The new regulations also require the signs to have a reflective sheeting and change fonts from the standard highway typeface to Clearview, which was developed specifically for these new signs. Therefore, even signs for numbered streets will need to be replaced.

Many states have opposed the new signs, claiming the exorbitant cost of replacing them outweighs the marginal improvement in safety they'll bring. For example, there are 250,900 street signs in the city of New York alone. To replace them will cost the state \$110 per sign, or \$27.6 million.

Milwaukee estimates that it will cost \$1.4 million to replace all the street signs within Cream City. Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner is purportedly drafting legislation to revoke the Federal Highway Administration's changes. If he is unsuccessful, many states may have to raise taxes to make the capital, I mean lower case, investment. At least municipalities will have until 2018 to comply with the new rules.

So it will be a bit strange the next time I'm on State Street and the street signs will have lower case letters. I'm sure they will look a little out of place. And that's saying something, because hardly anything looks out of place on State Street.