

Why do you need 60 feet of right-of-way? The road is only about 20 feet wide!

County Engineers often are asked this question. While it may seem like a 60 foot right-of-way is too wide for some of the roads, it is used for many things. This is accepted in state law, which sets 60 feet as the standard right-of-way width.

The most obvious use of right-of-way is for the travel lanes you drive on. These differ in width, usually from 9 to 12 feet each. Shoulders outside the travel lanes are also important. They are used for evasive maneuvers, and breakdowns, and by pedestrians and cyclists. Together, the lanes and shoulders often need to be 20 to 40 feet wide. Wider roads are more important in higher traffic areas.

There are usually ditches along rural roads to drain storm water. Ditches work best, from both a safety and a water filtration standpoint, if the slopes are fairly flat. Ditches often need 10 to 20 feet on each side of the road. Biofiltration systems are frequently built in the roadside to reduce the storm water going straight into streams. They help return the water to the ground water instead. These systems also help clean sediments and pollutants from the storm water.

Even without ditches, the road has roadside slopes. "Fill slopes" slope down to the original ground where the road has been built up. "Cut slopes" rise back up to the original ground where the road was built lower. These slopes sometimes need even more than the standard 60-foot width so that they can be kept in good condition.

For safety reasons "Clear Zones", are provided. These roadside areas are kept free of items that may harm a motorist who runs off the road. These zones, based largely on the speed limit, are usually at least 10 feet wide and are wider on faster roads.

Also, pedestrian ways such as sidewalks, paths, and trails are often built beside roads so that pedestrians and cyclists can separate themselves from the motorized traffic.

Other major users of right-of-way are utility companies. Power, telephone, optical fiber, water, sewer, and gas utilities are common users. These utilities are usually spaced a few feet apart so that they can be dug up for maintenance with less danger of damaging another during the digging. Utilities are often found on both sides of the road.

Roads are expensive and take a lot of time to build. In addition, more land is developed over time, with more demand for using the right-of-way. Even if a wider right-of-way isn't needed today, County Engineers need to plan for more traffic and utilities well into the future.

So your 20-foot road shares space with drainage-ways, cut and fill slopes, clear zones, and utilities. It is common for a 60-foot right-of-way to be crowded with these uses, and sometimes more is needed.

Don McInnes, P.E., Clallam County Engineer

Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at AI@CRAB.Wa.Gov.