

FEATURE ARTICLES



REPLACING VANDALIZED ROAD SIGNS COSTS FLORIDA \$335,000 ANNUALLY

Vandalism, as defined by Webster's dictionary, is "malicious or ignorant destruction."

Vandalism, as defined by the Florida Department of Transportation, is the scourge of the highway traffic sign.

Vandalism, as defined in dollars and cents, is costing Florida taxpayers approximately \$335,000 per year in highway sign replacement costs.

Traffic signs have a normal life of from six to seven years, barring extremes of weather, accidents, or changes in traffic regulations.

But each year, vandals cause the replacement of some 29,000 signs. This is approximately one-third of the annual production of 88,000 signs made and distributed from the Department of Transportation's sign shop in Lake City.

"Vandalism is by far our greatest enemy," says J. E. Rogers, sign shop superintendent, as he directs attention to a stack of battered and beaten signs returned to the shop for repair or discard.

Visible are signs that have been used for target practice and peppered with bullet holes or blown off posts with shotgun blasts. Paint has been used to destroy or alter messages. Adhesive stickers become bonded permanently when stuck across the face of a sign and allowed to bake in the Florida sun.

And if the highway sign vandal does not vent his feelings in any of these ways, he turns to knocking down the sign, driving over it, or beating on it.

Also, of course, there are the "ones that get away," taken as souvenirs or for future wall adornments, or possibly stolen just on a dare.

Whatever the method of "malicious or ignorant destruction," the Florida DOT salvages what it can.

Every two weeks, trucks from each of the DOT's five districts deliver stacks of damaged signs to Lake City and pick up replacements. The damaged signs then are separated, and those that can be salvaged are set aside for reclaiming.

The reclaiming process begins with straightening out any small dents, followed by a chemical bath that dissolves the paint and plastic coatings. Next is a pressurized water bath, and then air hoses for the final cleaning and drying.

Rogers estimates that the shop reclaims roughly two-thirds of the damaged signs returned. The reclaimed blanks then are processed as new blanks.

Unusable signs are consigned to a scrap heap and sold once a year as scrap metal at a fraction of the original cost.

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A sign blank is hard alloy aluminum, which will break before it will bend. The metal has been vapor degreased, etched to make it receptive to paint, and chemically coated to retard corrosion. The economy of reclaiming as many blanks as possible is evidenced in the fact the reclaimed metal cost is estimated at approximately 20 cents per square foot, whereas new metal runs about 60 cents per square foot.

Signs are produced in the Lake City facility at a cost of between \$1.60 and \$3.50 per square foot, depending on size, type of sign, and number of colors used. Painted messages are silk-screened; others are self-adhesive materials applied to the basic aluminum blank through heat or pressure.

The cost of replacing a vandalized sign is virtually unrecoverable. As Rogers points out, it is difficult to apprehend sign vandals and recover damages for their destructive acts. He does relate with satisfaction the case of three young men, caught while stealing a 4½ by 7½-foot county line sign from one of the Interstates. In addition to fining them, the judge made the youths re-erect the sign, a much more difficult job than removing it.

Two noticeable victims of vandalism have been Alligator Alley mileposts and route markers. Originally, these distinctive signs along the 78-mile stretch from Naples to Andytown featured a hitch-hiking alligator, painted in six bright colors. The signs proved too attractive. So many were stolen that the DOT resorted to plain black-and-white signs for the roadway.

Figures show the cost of replacing vandalized signs has almost tripled in the past five years, partially due to increased material costs. DOT economizes by reclaiming as much as possible.

However, there seems to be no way to economize on vandalism, which continues to cost Florida taxpayers thousands and thousands of dollars each year.



J. E. Rogers, superintendent of the Florida Department of Transportation sign shop in Lake City, Fla., shows one of the nearly 29,000 traffic signs vandalized in the state each year. Damaged signs from throughout the state are collected at the sign shop where they are scrapped or reclaimed for processing.



This bullet-riddled sign is one of many destroyed each year by vandalism, causing an estimated \$335,000 bill for replacements.