

## **Point of View :: Bicycles are Vehicles, Too :: George R. Hess :: 2006 Aug 16**

Every weekend and whenever I have a day off, I saddle up and ride my bicycle on the rural roads of Wake and Johnston Counties. It's great exercise and a wonderful way to see, hear, smell, and "feel" our beautiful and changing countryside. During the ten years I've been riding, the numbers of cars and bicycles on the road have increased. These trends lead to more interactions between motorists and cyclists, highlighting the need to ensure understanding among them.

Most motorists I encounter are unfailingly polite. They slow down, wait until it is safe to pass, and give plenty of room as they do so (far more than the legally required two feet). Yet, some impatient motorists pass at hillcrests and blind curves – places where they wouldn't dream of passing another motor vehicle – or whiz by at 55mph with nary a foot of clearance. These motorists are in the minority, but their numbers seem to be rising.

North Carolina's General Statute 20-4.01(49) defines a bicycle as a vehicle, which means that, for the most part, cyclists have the same rights and responsibilities as motorists. Many conflicts would be avoided if motorists treated bicycles as if they were motor vehicles, and cyclists acted as though they were driving motor vehicles.

What does this mean in practice?

For motorists, it means that all vehicles – including bicycles – are entitled to the use of a full lane. North Carolina's Driver Handbook states clearly and succinctly: "Bicyclists usually ride on the right side of the lane, but are entitled to use of a full lane." The act of a cyclist moving to the far right to allow a motor vehicle to pass within the same lane is a courtesy, not a legal requirement. It is a courtesy that most cyclists extend gladly, when it is safe to do so. When it is not safe – such as near the crest of a hill or a blind curve, or on a narrow road with oncoming traffic – an experienced cyclist will position his or her vehicle in the center or left portion of the lane. The cyclist is not being uppity, but is making himself more visible and signaling that it is unsafe to pass. Please, slow down and wait. Think about the choice you would have to make if an oncoming motor vehicle appeared on the hillcrest or around the curve.

Near intersections, motorists should also expect to see cyclists in the portion of the lane most appropriate to their destination. An experienced cyclist will move to the left part of the lane as he or she approaches an intersection before making a left turn; and stay in the rightmost through lane when going straight through an intersection with a right-turn-only lane. The cyclist is not "hogging the road," but is taking a position that avoids surprising motorists by suddenly turning left from the right side of the road or continuing straight while in a right-turn-only lane.

For cyclists, it means it is illegal to ride on the wrong side of the road or against one-way traffic, ignore stop signs and properly functioning traffic signals, and travel at night without lights. Drive your bicycle as you would lawfully drive a motor vehicle. When motorists see cyclists violating traffic regulations it reinforces the notion that bicycles are toys that need not be treated with the same respect as motor vehicles.

Also, fellow cyclists, let's get in line when traffic stops rather than passing and moving to the front of the line – forcing all of those motorists who just passed us to pass us again. Think about how irritating that must be.

For law enforcement officers, please cite motorists who drive dangerously around cyclists, as well as cyclists who blatantly disobey traffic regulations. One important exception to the concept of bicycles and motor vehicles being equal, however, is that the statute regarding impeding traffic applies only to motor vehicles (NCGS 20-141(h)). A cyclist is not impeding traffic simply by being on the road and using a full lane.

For roadway and traffic engineers, it means creating wide outside lanes so that cyclists can extend the courtesy of same-lane-passing to motor vehicles in more places. Sensors at traffic signals should be installed and tuned to detect bicycles.

For everyone, it means being courteous and accepting the rights and responsibilities of all vehicles sharing the road.

And please, let's all be careful out there.

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