

New bicycle safety law goes into effect today: Share the road

JOE STAFFORD *York Daily Record/Sunday News*

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Effective today, Pennsylvanians will have several new rules of the road affecting how motor vehicle drivers interact with bicyclists on the roadways.

The benefit of the new bicycle safety law is not only to increase the margin of safety for bicyclists, but also for law enforcement officers who must interpret the Vehicle Code as it applies to all vehicles - bicycles have always been included as legitimate vehicles on the road. Now, motor vehicle drivers will also benefit by having defined standards for passing and interacting with bicyclists. The statutes regarding how to share the road are more clear and understandable than previously under Act 3 of 2012.

The new provisions of the bicycle safety law couldn't come at a better time. With local gasoline prices at or topping \$4 per gallon, more drivers may be ready to leave their gas-guzzler cars at home and mount a bicycle for commuting and many short errands, which statistically are 2 miles or less.

Think about it - do you really need to drive to that convenience store for a handful of items? How about that short trip to the bank or post office? Many of those short trips by car are the most polluting additions to the environment before engines reach running temperatures. Bicycles don't require any warm up time - well, maybe just those pedaling do.

The intent of the new law is pretty clear. Recognize bicyclists as part of the transportation mix and follow some basic rules of the road to ensure the safety for all.

So what's in the new bicycle safety law? Here are the few key elements that will stand out and reinforce good driver behavior:

- Bicyclists shall keep to the right unless it's unsafe to do so for certain conditions.

Those conditions could include road hazards, such as broken edge pavement, sewer grates, glass and debris. This has always been a provision of the law. It's now repeated in another section for emphasis.

- The new law also allows bicyclists to take any lane position deemed to be safe by the cyclist when there is only one travel lane in one direction. Since roadways vary in width, from 8 to 14 feet, it may not be possible to pass by a bicyclist safely within the lane, which also depends on the speeds of each. Now, bicyclists may "control the lane" while maintaining whatever speed is appropriate for that bicycle and terrain. Reasons to stay well into the lane may be for allowing a safety area from the "door zone" of parked cars or other fixed objects.
- Any motor vehicle overtaking a bicyclist properly on the left shall allow at least 4 feet distance from the bicyclist. This is a sufficient minimum margin of safety to ensure a bicyclist won't be affected by passing so close as to be struck by a vehicle, or a vehicle mirror. Trucks, especially large trucks, create an unsafe draft that easily can cause a bicyclist to lose balance. The old sport rule "no harm, no foul" does not apply here when it comes to roadway safety.
- To achieve the minimum 4 feet overtaking distance, motorists may now legally cross a center line when safe to do so - even in a no-passing zone. All other existing rules of the road must be followed regarding overtaking vehicles: not to be done on the crest of a hill, or on a curve; not within 100 feet of an intersection or bridge; and not if it interferes with oncoming traffic in the next lane.
- The new law includes a provision to prohibit a motor vehicle from making turns abruptly into or across the path of a bicyclist proceeding straight - this is known to bicyclists as a "right hook" that usually occurs when a motor vehicle operator misjudges the speed of a bicyclist or assumes the bicyclist must yield. To comply, motorists should stay well behind a bicyclist going forward and make turning movements into driveways or alleys once the bicyclist has passed that point.

- Bicyclists do not have to move off the roadway if going "slower than prevailing" speed if traveling at a reasonable speed for a bicycle under the conditions. All traffic law is based on "first come, first served." That bicyclist in front of you is not taking up your space.
- Bicyclists also need to be reminded that the law is for all. Follow all traffic laws and obey all traffic control devices - don't ignore red lights or blow through stop signs. Take your turn in lines of traffic and ride predictably. And parents, check to see if your youngsters have a legal white front light and rear red lights or reflectors that show up in the dark - that's always been in the law and needs compliance as much as any other statute.

Bicyclists should also read and educate themselves about skills needed to be a competent cyclist found in the Pennsylvania Bicycle Driver's Manual (PennDOT pub 380), which may be obtained free at driver license centers and legislators' offices. It's also available online at the PennDOT website. Bicycling is more than balancing on two wheels. Don't assume you know how to ride if you're self-taught!

The Pennsylvania Driver Manual will soon be revised to reflect the Bicycle Safety Law, as well as the recent laws on texting bans and new requirements for teen driving. That driver manual has a thoughtful reminder inside the cover - driving is a privilege, not a right.

Sharing the road with all vehicles should be considered part of that privilege, and when we bear that in mind, the new bicycle safety law is an easy act to follow.

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