Same Roads, Same Rights, Same Rules

Bicyclists have the same rights to the road as motorists and bicyclists must obey the same rules as motorists. Both WV (17C-11-2) and Morgantown (373.02(a)) laws state, “Every person riding a bicycle upon a roadway shall be granted all of the rights and shall be subject to all of the duties as the driver of a vehicle”.

When bicyclists operate their bicycles as vehicles, motorists are less likely to run into them. Operating a bicycle as a vehicle means obeying the rules of the road such as driving with traffic, stopping for stop signs, signaling turns and merges, yielding right of way, and choosing appropriate lane position. When bicyclists act as drivers of vehicles, they make themselves most visible and predictable. When cyclists are visible and predictable, motorists are more likely to treat them as drivers of vehicles and not run into them.

When bicyclists ride too far to the right, motorists may try to pass them when it is not safe to pass. Bicycles are narrower and usually slower than motor vehicles. While being narrow is often an advantage, sometimes being narrower can get a cyclist into trouble. On our narrow roads, cyclists sometimes ride too far to the right thus encouraging motorists to try to pass when it’s not safe to pass.

Some motorists will try to pass a cyclist even when they have to cross the center line and can’t see far enough ahead to ensure that the oncoming lane is clear. Consequently, they run the cyclist off the road, force on-coming traffic off the road or cause a collision. When we come up on a school bus, a construction vehicle or a farm tractor in the roadway, we usually wait until it’s clear to pass. We must do the same for bicycles.

WV law (17C-11-3(a)(1)) also requires drivers to pass at a safe distance. While WV doesn’t define how much distance is safe, many states specify that motorists must allow at least 3 feet space between their vehicle and a bicycle when passing.

Morgantown is hilly and our roads are narrow. If all our uphill lanes were wide enough (at least 14 feet) motor vehicles could pass bicycles without crossing the center line or without having to wait. Since our roads are narrow, we must remember not just that the law grants bicyclists the same rights to the road as motorists but that bicyclists are also citizens of our community who have families, jobs and other commitments and must get around for the exact same reasons as motorists.

Frank Gmeindl

Chairman, Morgantown Municipal Bicycle Board

League of American Bicyclists Certified Instructor #1703