Same Roads, Same Rights, Same Rules

Both WV (17C-11-2) and Morgantown (373.02(a)) laws grant bicyclists the same rights to the roads as motorists. These laws also subject bicyclists to the same duties.

When bicyclists operate their bicycles as vehicles: drive with traffic, stop for stop signs, signal turns and merges, yield right of way, and choose appropriate lane position, they make themselves most visible and predictable. When cyclists are most visible and predictable, motorists are more likely to treat them as drivers of vehicles and not run into them.

Bicycles are narrower and usually slower than motor vehicles. Usually that’s an advantage but 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) for motor vehicles to pass bicycles without crossing the center line, we could all get around together as fast as we can. 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 or our community who have families, jobs and other commitments and must get around just as motorists.