

Local Groups Propose Changes to Rhode Island Driver's Manual

Bicycle use on Rhode Island's streets and highways is growing daily, both for exercise and transportation. As the number of bicyclists increases on our roads, so do incidents of bicycle-automobile conflicts. With the growing presence of bicyclists on the streets, the need for appropriate instruction for new driver's becomes more critical.

The *Ocean State Driver's Manual*, published by the RI Department of Motor Vehicles, is meant to communicate the laws and safety issues that driver's of automobiles must learn before receiving a driver's license. Yet the section on bicycles in the driver's manual is directed to bicyclists, not operators of automobiles.

To correct this oversight, members from the Greenways Alliance of Rhode Island, Narragansett Bay Wheelmen, Sierra Club, and Providence Bicycle Coalition compiled a comprehensive set of guidelines for motorists. The purpose was to redirect the emphasis of that section of the manual to include appropriate driver behavior and increase cyclists' safety. The completed guidelines, included below, were submitted to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Sharing the Road with Bicyclists

By Rhode Island law, (RIGL § 31-19-6 **Bicycles to right of road**) – *Every person operating a bicycle upon a roadway shall ride as near to the right side of the roadway as practicable, exercising due care when passing a standing vehicle or one proceeding in the same direction except where official traffic control devices (signs or pavement markings) specifically direct bicyclists to do otherwise.*

Road hazards not easily seen by automobile drivers or trucks may hamper a bicyclist or cause them to crash. These hazards could include potholes, glass, litter, storm grates, and railroad crossings, as well as opened doors of parked vehicles. Any of these items could cause a bicyclist to move into your path or to slow down. Give bicyclists plenty of clearance on the street so they will have room to move around these hazards.

Bicyclists should travel in the same direction as the rest of traffic. Automobiles must yield to bicyclists in the same way as for other types of vehicles. Look for signs that a bicyclist is inexperienced such as whether the bicyclist is riding in a smooth and straight manner or weaving, wobbling, and riding against traffic without a helmet,. Give such bicyclists plenty of room.

Approaching and Passing Bicyclists

When approaching or passing a bicycle keep on the lookout. Allow as much clearance as possible (3-5 feet) when passing to prevent contact with the bicyclist and be prepared to stop suddenly if the person were to fall into the driver's lane.

A major problem for driver's is the ability to see bicyclists, especially at night. Sometimes they may be in the blind spot of your vehicle. Be careful to look for a cyclist approaching your parked car before you open the door into a traffic lane.

Do not lean on your horn when approaching a bicyclist from behind. The loud noise will startle the rider who may be riding in the travel lane to avoid roadway hazards you may not see. When you have good cause to warn the bicyclist or must do so to avoid a crash, a quick sound will be adequate warning and will not alarm the cyclist.

After you have passed a bicyclist, do not slow down or stop quickly. Motor vehicle brakes are more powerful than a bicycle's and you could cause the bicyclist to crash.

Driving on Roads with Bicycle Lanes

In RI bicycle lanes on the road are marked with a solid white line, the words "Bicycle Lane" and bicycle icons.

Do not drive in a bicycle lane. You may cross a bicycle lane when you are turning a corner or entering or leaving an alley, private road or driveway.

Yield to bicyclists in a bicycle lane or on a sidewalk, before you turn across the lane or sidewalk.

Watching for Children on Bicycles

Children on bicycles should be given extra consideration. Always reduce speed and use extra caution when children are in the vicinity. They cannot see things out of the corner of their eyes as well as adults, so they may not see you even when they glance back before pulling out in front of you. They also have trouble judging the speed and distance of oncoming vehicles. They believe adults will look out for them, and lack a sense of danger. Be aware that their actions can be very unpredictable. Particularly in school zones, watch for children on bicycles in or turning into the street.

Avoiding Collisions with Bicyclists

Seven common errors can cause you to strike a bicyclist:

- Turning left without noticing a bicyclist;
- Turning right at an intersection or driveway without checking for a bicyclist on the right who is continuing straight ahead or a bicyclist coming in the wrong direction from in front of you;
- Talking on a cell phone or text messaging when approaching or passing a bicyclist;
- Entering or crossing a street without checking for a bicyclist in the street or on the sidewalk;
- Opening a parked vehicle door into the path of a bicyclist;
- Swerving into a bicycle lane; and
- Passing too close to a bicyclist in a vehicle with wide side mirrors.

Submitted by the *Greenways Alliance of Rhode Island*, the *Narragansett Bay Wheelmen*, the *Sierra Club*, and the *Providence Bicycle Coalition*, to encourage understanding of bicyclists' rights to Rhode Island's roads