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Roadshow: Just in time for Bike to Work Day, some etiquette lessons

By Gary Richards
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Q As summer approaches, people are taking their bikes out of their garages and riding them unsafely. Could you please do a column on bike etiquette, such as riding single file and not all bunched up, riding in the bike lane and going the proper direction? I have witnessed several near accidents and I think bike riders as well as myself need a refresher course on the rules of the road.

Josh Hess

San Jose

A Some bicyclists agree.

Q As an avid bicycle rider I continue to be dismayed by my brethren who disregard most traffic laws. Riding in packs, running stop signs and red lights, blocking traffic and, it seems, intentionally angering car drivers. Why? Anytime I mention this to a bicyclist I get a vicious response. When I have riders behind me and am stopped at an intersection, I'm nearly rear-ended and called names, none I care to repeat. Car drivers are equally astonished to see a bicycle rider obey a stop sign. When I wave a car through, I frequently get a smile and a wave. Bicycles are vehicles and have rights and responsibilities. When bicycle riders begin to understand this, we'll all be better off.

Jim Thurber

Mountain View

A Yes, indeed. Thursday is Bike to Work Day, and it's a good time to remind bicyclists that they should think like they are driving a car. Ride in the direction of traffic, stop at red lights and stop signs, change lanes safely, yield to pedestrians and to traffic having the right of way.

If riding slower than traffic, a bicyclist should ride as far to the right as practicable where it is safe to do so.

However, when a lane is too narrow for a bicycle and vehicle to travel safely side by side, a cyclist is legally allowed to use the full lane. Many people are unaware of this exception. It is generally safer to ride a few feet away from the curb than to hug the curb and encourage drivers to squeeze past you.

If you notice cars stacking up behind your bike, you may want to pull over every now and then to let them pass. But there is no law stating that bicyclists must ride single file. Go to bikesiliconvalley.org for more.

Q You say riding a bike against traffic is more dangerous than riding in the same direction but didn't elaborate. I understand that's the rule. However, if I'm going to be run over by a jerk on a cell phone, I'd rather see it coming than not. Your comments?

Allan MacLaren

San Jose

A Bicycling against traffic is illegal and is the leading cause of car-bike collisions in San Jose, based on a three-year review of 1,000 bike

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collisions. A study in the Institute of Transportation Engineers' ITE Journal several years ago found that bicyclists riding against traffic are nearly four times more likely to collide with an automobile at an intersection as those riding with traffic. Bicyclists can travel at speeds of 25 mph, so there's usually not enough time for a wrong-way bicyclist to turn and avoid an oncoming motorist. Additionally, motorists turning onto or off of a street are generally looking in the opposite direction and may not see bicyclists riding against traffic.

Q Since it's illegal to ride the wrong direction in a bike lane, what is the rule when there is a bike lane on only one side of the road?

Richard Wooden

Campbell

A The rule is the same. Bicyclists must ride in the same direction as traffic even when there is a bike lane on only one side of a street.

Q I bought a new bike recently and the bike shop guy told me that if I ride at night, I need to have a red back light (not a reflector). Is that true?

Keith Ambrose

San Jose

A Wise, but not true. Bicyclists need a red reflector mounted on the rear, visible from 500 feet away. A white or yellow reflector also needs to be mounted on each pedal, plus you need a white or red reflector on each side to the rear of the center of the bicycle. A front white light is required, visible 300 feet to the front and the sides of a bicycle.

Coming Thursday: etiquette when walking, jogging or biking on park trails. Contact Gary Richards at mrroadshow@mercurynews.com or 408-920-5335.

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