

## **DID YOU KNOW???**

### **LEGALLY DRIVING LEFT OF THE ROAD CENTERLINE CLARIFIED**

Vehicles normally shall be driven upon the right half of the roadway as mandated by section 1120 (a) of NYS Vehicle and Traffic Law (VTL). However, there are several exceptions to this requirement. A common one we are all aware of is when overtaking and passing another vehicle proceeding in the same direction on a two lane road – we know we must drive to the left of the centerline to do this. However, I want to elaborate on one of the exceptions not so well known, one that became effective in November, 2010, which amended VTL section 1120 (a) (2) to include bicycles in addition to pedestrians, animals, or obstructions on the right half of the roadway.

As a bicyclist, I find many motorists are apparently unaware of this law. While biking on state highways, which have painted lines showing not only the centerline but also the white “fog line”, separating the driving lane from the shoulder, a significant percentage of drivers will not move slightly into the oncoming lane when passing bicycles riding on the shoulder of these roads, even if there are no oncoming vehicles. Although the “bicycle” part of the law is only slightly over five years old, moving over to pass pedestrians, animals or obstructions has been in place for decades.

Another relatively new (effective November 1, 2010) VTL that also pertains to bicycles is section 1122-a. This says “The operator of a vehicle overtaking, from behind, a bicycle proceeding on the same side of a roadway shall pass to the left of such bicycle at a safe distance until safely clear thereof.” Although a safe distance is not specifically defined, a good rule of thumb is AT LEAST three feet, and more if the speed limit is greater than 30 mph.

The intent of these laws is to give space between vehicles and bicyclists because of the large difference in speed. The same goes for vehicles versus pedestrians and animals. If there is oncoming traffic, vehicles obviously cannot enter the oncoming lane, and thus should move to the left part of their drive lane, giving as much space as possible to pedestrians and cyclists. What is puzzling here is why motorists don’t swing over the centerline when there is no oncoming traffic. Do so many drivers not understand that it is perfectly legal to drive to the left of the centerline under the circumstances previously described?

Of interest is my observation that motorists actually give bicyclists more space on much narrower town roads, which normally do not have painted lines, than on state highways. This leads to my belief that too many drivers are not aware of the laws pertaining. If that is the case, hopefully this article will clarify the issue.

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