

The proper way to ride a bicycle on Arizona roadways

I've adopted a style of riding my bicycle in Arizona on roads without shoulders. I ride right down the center of the lane. Why you might ask? Isn't that dangerous and illegal? Actually, there is a greater danger from being side swiped than being run over from behind. And this practice is quite within the law.

First of all, one must realize that bicycles have the right to use the roadways that are also used by motor vehicles. Arizona statute 28-812 states: **A person riding a bicycle on a roadway or on a shoulder adjoining a roadway is granted all the rights and is subject to all of the duties applicable to the driver of a vehicle by this chapter and chapters 4 and 5 of this title, except special rules in this article and except provisions of this chapter and chapters 4 and 5 of this title that by their nature can have no application.**

When it comes to bicycles specifically, most people only remember the beginning part of Arizona statute 28-815.A which states: **A person riding a bicycle on a roadway at less than the normal speed of traffic at the time and place and under the conditions then existing shall ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway, except under any of the following situations:**

where the exception in section 4 states: **If the lane in which the person is operating the bicycle is too narrow for a bicycle and a vehicle to travel safely side by side within the lane.**

It is this exception that most motorists would choose to ignore when venting their anger at a bicycle that causes them to alter their path because they are not hugging the edge. Let's look into the detail of what is considered safe.

Statute 28-735.A states: **When overtaking and passing a bicycle proceeding in the same direction, a person driving a motor vehicle shall exercise due care by leaving a safe distance between the motor vehicle and the bicycle of not less than three feet until the motor vehicle is safely past the overtaken bicycle.**

So let's look at a road I travel almost every day, the four lane roadway of Kolb road between Valencia and I-10. It is considered to be 28 feet wide in each direction, with a striping at 14 feet from each side. The right lane of Kolb road has 12 feet of asphalt and 2 feet of concrete gutter (actual measurements of the asphalt between the gutter and center line result in 11-11 being the widest discovered, with 11-9 being more typical and some sections less than 11-0). Since there is a curb in the gutter high enough to hit a bicycle pedal, there is only about one foot of usable riding space in the gutter. Since the left side of the gutter can be missing the filler to the asphalt, leaving a gap large enough to capture a bicycle tire, there is a danger on the left as well, requiring the rider to maintain an extremely straight path to avoid danger. A strong gust of wind from either side, produced by mother nature or a large vehicle, or any debris in the gutter will quickly make traveling in the gutter a very unsafe option. Thus the asphalt is the only practical pathway for a bicycle rider.

A bicycle rider usually needs to maintain a minimum of a foot of clearance from the gutter. Since a gust can still push a rider quite a bit, 18 inches is a more typical shy distance. Since the bicycle rider is about 2 feet wide, there is a theoretical 9-6 feet of asphalt left to the center line. 28-735.A states that a vehicle must give 3 feet of that up, leaving 6.5 feet to the center line. If there is any traffic in the left lane, then vehicles will not move left all the way to the center line, but often leave at least a foot of shy distance from the center line. Thus there is only 5-6 feet of safe asphalt for vehicles that are 6 to 9 feet wide (a typical SUV is 6-6 wide, commercial trucks will never be able to coexist safely). Therefore, it is mandated by law that bicycles ride towards the center of the lane so as to avoid a side swipe situation by uneducated and aggressive motorists.

One may argue that a bicycle can not impede traffic, which would nullify the previous argument. However, statute 28-704.A states: **A person shall not drive a motor vehicle at such a slow speed as to impede or block the normal and reasonable movement of traffic except when reduced speed is necessary for safe operation or in compliance with law.**

It's the second half of that law which includes the exception concerning safety, where previously it has been demonstrated that an unsafe situation exists, and thus the impediment is allowable.

Furthermore, section C of 28-704 states: **If a person is driving a vehicle at a speed less than the normal flow of traffic at the particular time and place on a two-lane highway where passing is unsafe, and if five or more vehicles are formed in a line behind the vehicle, the person shall turn the vehicle off the roadway at the nearest place designated as a turnout by signs erected by the director or a local authority, or wherever sufficient area for a safe turnout exists, in order to permit vehicles following to proceed.**

Thus, impediment is basically defined as the detaining of five or more vehicles on a two lane road, not a few seconds of slowing of a vehicle in a four lane road in order to merge into the left lane.

The Result:

It used to be that every time I traveled this section of roadway, I would survive a near side swipe miss on this 2.5 mile stretch of road that has a 55 mph speed limit for 1.7 miles of it. This not only frightened me, but made me angry that motorists would put so little value on my life when they broke the law and passed very close to me. By riding in the center of the lane, it is the ignorant motorist that becomes angry after they give me ample room by properly moving to the left lane. My nerves and blood pressure are much more relaxed now.

So now that you are aware of the laws and situation, I hope that as a motorist, you will properly obey the "Share the road" signs posted on such roads and be more polite to the cyclist that is riding within the law.