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Sharing the Road this Fall

Clarification of existing traffic laws for motorists and bicyclists

With fall nearly upon us, bicycles are appearing in greater numbers on our streets and highways. Annually, there are more than 500 bicycling fatalities and 45,000 bicycling injuries resulting from traffic crashes in the United States. In 2002, three of those fatalities were in Tennessee. Research into hospital records shows that only a fraction of bicycle crashes causing injury are ever reported to the police. One reason for conflicts between bicyclists and motor vehicle drivers is that many citizens do not understand that the same traffic laws apply to bicyclists and motorists.

Bicycles are vehicles, according to state law, and have all the rights and duties of any other driver of a vehicle on Tennessee roads. Those duties include obeying stop signs and traffic lights, using lights at night, signaling turns and yielding to other traffic when entering the roadway. The law also gives cyclists rights. These rights include equal status with other vehicle drivers, the right to use the road responsibly and legal protection in court. A motorist is required by law to yield right-of-way to a bicyclist just as he or she would to another motorist. Motorists should look for bicyclists to be on all roadways, and give the same respect they would to another motorist.

Road Position: Cyclists are required to ride as close as practical to the right hand curb or edge of the roadway. There are exceptions. If the bicyclist intends to make a left turn, he/she can move left and do so just like a car. When going the speed of traffic or when a lane is too narrow to safely share, the bicyclist can move to the middle of the lane. If the surface near the right edge is hazardous (e.g. covered with gravel and broken glass), the cyclist can ride far enough to the left to avoid the hazard.

Riding side-by-side: In most situations, it is illegal for bicyclists to ride more than two abreast. If cyclists are riding two abreast, they cannot impede the normal and reasonable movement of traffic.

Lights at night: It is required by law that bicyclists have a headlight when riding at night. A rear light is a very good idea too, although the law only requires a red reflector.

A majority of fatalities in bicycle/motor vehicle crashes results from head injuries, so it is important that bicyclists wear helmets. Helmets are required by Tennessee law for bicyclists under the age of 16.

Despite the numbers of crashes, bicycling remains a healthful, inherently safe activity for tens of millions of people every year. Recent numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics reveal that more than 40 million adults rode a bicycle within the past 30 days. The public health community is now recognizing that lack of physical activity is a major contributor to the more than 300,000 premature deaths caused by heart attacks and strokes—this number dwarfs the 40,000 annual deaths due to motor vehicle crashes and the relatively small 728 bicyclist deaths.