



Oregon

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DATE: March 30, 2015

TO: House Committee on Transportation and Economic Development

FROM: Amy Joyce, Legislative Liaison

SUBJECT: SB 533A, motorcyclists and bicyclists proceeding on red light

INTRODUCTION

The bill allows a motorcycle rider or bicycle rider to proceed through a signaled intersection if the signal fails to detect the presence of that vehicle. The department has safety concerns.

DISCUSSION

Senate Bill 533A would allow motorcyclists and bicyclists to proceed through a traffic signal on a red light if the signal does not activate (commonly called a dead red). The motorcyclist or bicyclist may proceed straight ahead or turn once they have waited through one full cycle.

ODOT has concerns about the safety of the practice proposed in the bill. The purpose of traffic engineering and traffic law is to keep people from being in the same place at the same time. The “behavior” of vehicles needs to be predictable to all highway users. The more gray area created in law – less predictability – introduces a higher level of risk. Allowing motorcyclists and bicyclists to continue on at a red light will create unpredictability for those on the green light segment of the intersection, whether motor vehicle operators, bicyclists, or pedestrians.

The bill’s specification that the person on the motorcycle or bicycle must wait through “one full cycle” of traffic control lights is problematic. Many controlled intersections have turn lanes and complex software that phases lights based on traffic volume, giving green lights in different sequences during some cycles. Drivers may believe they’ve been skipped, when in fact their light is coming soon, though not in the sequence the driver expected. This will lead to confusion and illegal light running for the motorcyclist and bicyclist. Another portion of the bill allows a motorcyclist to go through a red bicycle signal after stopping and obeying the other terms of the bill. But existing law does not compel a motorcyclist to obey a red bicycle signal at all. So does the bill by implication impose that rule of the road on motorcyclists, or is the language superfluous? Again, this creates confusion.

Like most other jurisdictions Oregon is dealing with varying configurations of what is legally a “motorcycle” (ORS 801.365). Unconventional vehicles such as the Polaris Slingshot and T-Rex would be allowed to proceed through the intersection under this bill. These vehicles look much like passenger automobiles (attached) but are motorcycles by law because they have only three wheels. Consequently, other traffic users may be confused when they observe these vehicles proceeding through a traffic signal.

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Rather than changing the rules of the road, the department suggests riders follow the instruction received through formal education and guidance in the Motorcycle Manual from DMV. Oregon law requires all motorcyclists to take an approved motorcycle safety training course (TEAM OREGON) to be issued an endorsement to legally ride. Motorcyclists are instructed in both the training curriculum and the Oregon Motorcycle Manual on how to position their motorcycle over a traffic loop / sensor. Proper handling of the motorcycle should result in the sensor being activated. In the rare case that the sensor is malfunctioning or mis-calibrated, the most important result would be for the person encountering that to notify the responsible jurisdiction so it can be fixed. Traffic control detection failures are already listed as one of the highest priorities for repair (response time required within hours, regardless of the day or time, as it can be a safety issue).

In addition, traffic signal technology is improving the detection of motorcycles and even bicycles. ODOT has had good results with traffic loop detection buried in pavement that use magnetism, video detection and radar-based detection. Although a long-standing myth, weight has not been used for detection for decades.

SUMMARY

Even though currently illegal, ODOT believes this is a practice among motorcyclists. There are ways to correct the problem rather than simply making the behavior legal. Allowing a motorcyclist or bicyclist to proceed through a signal on red reduces predictability and therefore may increase the crash risk. Unconventional vehicles, and language of the bill itself, add to the confusion. ODOT sees benefit, instead, in continuing to educate motorcycle riders about proper positioning the motorcycle on traffic loops and sensors rather than granting special privileges. Updated technology may help with this issue.

Attachment: Photos of unconventional “motorcycles

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Polaris Slingshot



T-Rex