Reforming Bicycle Traffic Laws

by Fred Oswald, LCI #947

Traffic laws are similar throughout the 50 states. A motorist traveling from state to state need not learn a new set of laws with each border crossing. Likewise, within each state, local authorities have only limited powers to enact local ordinances.

Uniform traffic laws that apply to all drivers promote safe, orderly and efficient travel for all, a significant benefit to cyclists. However, in some states there is another layer of laws applying only to bicycle drivers that discourage the best and safest practices.

Bicycle traffic laws are important because they shape

1. Cyclists safety
2. Police treatment
3. What the motoring public expects
4. Who is legally responsible for a collision

Bike ban on Main St.

Some states allow local discriminatory regulation of cycling, and some have statewide discriminatory legislation. The solution to these problems is twofold: (1) Ensure uniform bicycle traffic laws; (2) Purge discriminatory laws from state vehicle codes.

State cycling organizations must be involved in traffic legislation: by fighting ill-advised proposals, such as a Montana "ride the wrong way" bill introduced in 2001, or by enacting reforms, as the Ohio Bicycle Federation did in 2006. To learn more about various law reform projects, including background, ratings, methodology and model municipal laws, please visit: http://bikelaws.org/.

Cycling Laws award presented to Brook Park, OH

Ultimately, bad laws and improper enforcement result from misinformation about bicycle traffic. We must educate state advocates, and those with professional responsibilities in traffic law and engineering about best bicycling practices and enlist their assistance in stopping the misinformation. This requires cycling education and training at all levels, including driver's license exam questions and real cycling education in schools, youth groups, cycling organizations, engineering professional societies and universities.