

Frustrated by ignorance, Salem cyclist posts bike safety signs

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David Fox was fed up.

A nasty altercation with a motorist during his evening bicycle commute had him thinking about the law, and the rights of cyclists outlined in it. There should be some kind of educational outreach, he thought.

So Fox decided to take action and installed two homemade signs along State Street, alerting passers-by that cyclists are allowed to use the full traffic lane.

It's probably against the rules, he acknowledges. But if it prompts a public discussion about the law and about cyclist safety, it's worth it.

Last week, Fox was on his bicycle, taking the same commute he takes every day from his downtown business to his home in northeast Salem. He was riding on State Street in the right-most lane when a car came up behind him and the driver honked its horn.

"I kept my lane, and he pulled up next to me and yelled, 'Get in the bleeping bike lane, ***hole,'" Fox said. "And then he sped off."

At the next red light, however, Fox confronted the driver.

"The first thing I said was, 'Did you see a bike lane?' " Fox said. "He said if I was impeding traffic, then I had to pull to the side. But I told him he had plenty of room to go around. The last thing he said was: 'I hope you are killed by a car.'

"I just thought, man, that's just heinous," he continued. "How could somebody say that to someone?"

These kinds of incidents are rare, Fox admitted. He rides every day, but only gets harassed about once every six months. But that doesn't make it any less frustrating.

"I think people misinterpret the law, if they even know what the law is," Fox said. "It's not just drivers, it's cyclists, too. I think the majority of cyclists believe they're supposed to ride next to all the parked cars, which is really dangerous."

Under Oregon law, bicyclists are supposed to ride "as close as practicable" to the right curb or edge of the roadway.



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A sign greets motorist along State Street. Cyclist David Fox placed the sign on a light post to generate awareness of cyclist rights. Photo taken on Monday, April 6, 2015, in Salem, Ore. (Photo: ASHLEY SMITH / STATESMAN JOURNAL)

However, the law does specify certain exceptions. One of those exceptions states that if there are hazardous conditions — such as parked cars — that make it unsafe to ride close to the edge of the road, a bicyclist is allowed to take up the entire lane of traffic (without, of course, impeding the regular flow of traffic).

But even the phrase "impeding the flow of traffic" can be a source of confusion, Fox argued.

"I think people believe that impeding traffic means not going the speed limit," he said. "But in this case, there are three lanes and I was in the right lane. I'm not impeding traffic because there are two other lanes and State Street is never really that busy."

So Fox, who owns Fox Blue Printing & Graphics at 141 Commercial St. NE, printed two signs. Both showed the same thing: A simple bicycle outline accompanied by the words, "May use full lane," and the citation to the pertaining Oregon statute.

He posted them on two lamp posts along State Street, right across from the Capitol, around noon Monday.

"I'm putting the signs up because I want a discussion to be started," Fox said. "I want the discussion to be taken seriously ... I think the city talks a good game in terms of their commitment to transportation, but when it comes right down to it, we have the tools and the ability and policies in place to allow these changes to happen more quickly than they're actually happening."

But according to officials with the city of Salem, the signs will have to be taken down for public safety reasons.

"We follow what is called a manual of uniform traffic control devices," said Robert Chandler, assistant public works director with the city. "The intention of the manual and the reason we follow it is so there's standardized signage across the country. So whatever he has put up ... it really cannot resemble a regular traffic control sign because that would confuse drivers. We would either remove it or ask him to remove it."

Fox said he was expecting as much.

"I don't know if it's illegal to put them there," he said. "I couldn't find anything that made it sound like that would be harmful."

Chandler said city crews were planning to take a look at the signs in the coming days.

"Our big picture is safety," he said. "For the gentleman who had the problem, drivers should understand the rules and should follow them and be respectful for other users of the roadway. But we discourage people putting up their own traffic signs."

Doug Parrow said he's been actively riding his bike in the Salem area, as a vehicle for commuting and just for fun, for 25 years. Fox's self-initiated effort to spread public awareness was the first he was aware of among Salem's cyclists.

"Well it certainly can help, I would hope," he said. "But I think the message I'm hearing is he thinks the city has done an inadequate job of educating motorists and I would extend that further. In my mind, the state traffic safety people have done an abysmal job of educating motorists about the necessity of leaving a safe distance between themselves."

The problem, Parrow said, is one of perspective. Motorists should view bicycles as another vehicle and treat them as they would with other cars.

"There really seems to be this mindset among many people ignoring the fact that the bicycle is a vehicle," he said. "They don't have the perspective that they need to maintain control of vehicles and wait until it's safe to pass to do so."

Fox said all he's trying to do is get the public's attention on bicycle safety issues.

"I want people getting involved," he said. "It's important to get involved, not out of anger, but respect for the community ... In terms of education about cycling rights, I'm so frustrated it's an us-against-them thing. Education needs to be equally to the rider and not just the driver ... they need to be made aware of their rights."

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