

# HOW WE ROLL

It's not always a smooth ride, but cars and bikes are learning to get along

BY KRISTYNA LAGOWSKI

When Toronto Police Constable Hugh Smith first took to the streets on bicycle patrol, most drivers thought he was a courier because of the yellow jacket. They didn't notice the word "police" on the back. Although he was technically on patrol, he still "had to deal with a lot of driver attitude and behaviour. It was crazy."

That was in 1989, and since then the boom in bicycle traffic means there are thousands of cyclists vying for valuable road space alongside motor vehicles all over Canada. It also means that as the number of cyclists on the road rises, so do the tensions, as drivers and cyclists learn how to coexist.

Within Toronto's 2.5 million people, Smith guesses there are about one million bicycles in Toronto, most commuting alongside motor vehicles. The heat is definitely on in the city, with bylaws being updated to protect Toronto cyclists, including Chapter 886 of the municipal code. This bylaw pulls no punches—the City of Toronto's website declares "blocking the bike lane with your car, even for a minute, is illegal." The fine of \$60 is set to be increased to \$150.

Bylaws will help the situation, no doubt, but there's still room for improvement. While on his bike patrol, Smith learned the importance of communication. "You need to have eye contact, signal your intentions and be predictable in your behaviour," he stresses. "That applies to everyone using the road—motorists, cyclists, pedestrians and anyone in a wheelchair or on a scooter."

And while good communication is key, Smith says the biggest challenge for both drivers and cyclists is treating the bicycle as a commuter vehicle, not a recreational toy. "We were given bicycles when we were five years old," he says. "That wasn't our first toy—it was our first vehicle."

Smith puts more of an onus on motorists, who have taken a driver's test that includes learning the law about bicycles. Ontario's *Driver's Handbook* is being revamped >>



to include more of the current Ministry of Transportation's legislation about cycling, which will be rolled into driver training and testing.

One of the forces behind the *Driver's Handbook* revamp is Eleanor McMahon, a sane and savvy voice in an often emotional dialogue. She's behind Ontario's Share the Road Cycling Coalition, which is devoted to making Ontario "the most bicycle-friendly place in Canada." McMahon embarked on her mission after the death of her husband, Ontario Provincial Police Sergeant Greg Stobbart, who was struck while cycling in Milton, Ont.

At a bike conference in Toronto, McMahon presented awards to bicycle-friendly communities Toronto, Guelph, Mississauga, Oakville, Peterborough, Richmond Hill and Welland. "These communities have distinguished themselves in a number of areas—encouragement, education, enforcement, environment and evaluation," she says. "They've not only put out bicycle-friendly plans, they're funding them, monitoring them and keeping the public informed."

While more is being done to educate and inform cyclists and drivers, there are often deeper attitudes at play when people get in, or on, their vehicles. When environmental policy advisor Paul Smith moved to Guelph from Toronto 12 years ago, he noticed there was more civility in the relationship between drivers and cyclists. "You would never blow your horn at a cyclist," he says. "People [in Guelph] have more patience with each other." He recalls swearing and screaming matches between cyclists and drivers in Toronto but has

never experienced that in Guelph.

In Napanee, Ont., Christine and Jim Peets say that even though it's a small town, the driver-cyclist rapport isn't always rosy. Jim says that while cycling is quite good on most of the roads he uses, he sees a lot of annoying practices, such as drivers going into his lane to pass. Jim goes out of his way to be visible, wearing a red helmet and a fluorescent green vest and has flashing lights on the front and back of his bike. He also uses a loud air horn. "If it scares drivers, perhaps they'll learn to pay better attention to cyclists," says Christine.

Driver Alan Gelman finds driving around cyclists to sometimes be nerve rattling. "I don't always know that cyclists are following the rules of the road—drivers don't know what to do and are afraid to get too close," says Gelman, co-host of Dave's Corner Garage on Toronto radio station AM740.

But the relationship may not be quite as he said/she said or cyclist vs. motorist for long. In McMahon's Share the Road surveys, she found that 93% of participants endorse the need to "share the road" and find solutions to "improve safety for cyclists and motorists alike." Participants also point to an enhanced cycling infrastructure to balance the rights of cyclists and motorists. People want and understand the importance of coexisting on the road, but most recognize that some provincial and municipal support is necessary to create and enforce helpful strategies.

In Nova Scotia, this was part of the impetus behind Bill 93, which last June amended the province's Motor Vehicle Act to change inter-



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## ROAD RULES

Although laws vary in each province, motorists and cyclists should follow these guidelines when on the road.

### CYCLISTS

- Learn and use proper hand signals when turning, changing lanes and stopping.
- Along with wearing bright or reflective clothing, your bike should have a white front light or reflector and a red rear light or reflector switched on when riding between dusk and dawn. It also should have white reflective tape on the front forks and red reflective tape on the rear forks or fenders, plus a bell or horn.
- It's highly recommended that all cyclists wear a helmet that's approved by Canadian or U.S. standards. In some provinces you are required by law to wear a helmet, regardless of age.
- Stay one metre from the curb or edge of the road and parked cars. Always ride in a straight line and don't weave between parked cars.
- Be prepared to stop for pedestrians at crosswalks and always walk your bike at a crosswalk.

### MOTORISTS

- Bicycle lanes are reserved for cyclists, so avoid driving or parking in bike lanes.
- When driving beside or passing a cyclist, leave at least one metre between you.
- Check for cyclists before opening your car door.
- Signal lane changes and check over your shoulder before changing lanes or making a turn.
- Scan the road for cyclists and be aware of their speed.

actions between bicycles and cars. One of the big changes was the introduction of the one-metre rule, which specifies that motorists in that province are required to leave a minimum of one metre between their vehicle and a cyclist while driving beside or passing. Nova Scotia was the first province in Canada to pass such a law.

"This bill also makes it illegal to park a motor vehicle in a bicycle lane, and while motorists can drive in a bike lane temporarily [to avoid hazards, for example], they have to yield to bicycles," says Lawrence Plug, a board member of Bicycle Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia Attorney General and Justice Minister Ross Landry says the law fits into a vision of making Nova Scotia a world cycling destination. An avid cyclist himself, he bikes the 25 km to his office in New Glasgow during the warm months. "I noticed a difference on the road after we put the law in—more co-operation from motorists," he says.



A "complete street" is one that is constructed for all road users

This particular kind of co-operation has also moved to Waterloo, Ont., where councillor Diane Freeman promotes "complete streets" in the city's transportation plan. She defines a complete street as one that is constructed for all road users, including pedestrians, bicycles, automobiles, buses and wheelchairs.

Freeman was involved in creating a "road diet" for her constituency's Davenport Road, a four-lane street that was car-centric and dangerous. "We dieted it down to two lanes, landscaped the centre median with trees and installed on-street bike lanes and proper pedestrian crossings," she says. "Now it's safer, cars slow down and there are more pedestrians and cyclists using the road."

Slowly but surely, more of these positive changes are happening on streets across Canada. Better education, better roads and better attitudes are combining to make our roads safer for both two wheels and four. **CAA**