A debate over the rules of the road

Under proposed law, bicyclists would be allowed to roll past stop signs instead of braking completely.

JOSHUA STEWART

SAN DIEGO — Cyclists would be allowed to pedal past stop signs, without stopping, under legislation proposed by two lawmakers who say it would make the roads safer.

But the two-tiered approach to the rules of the road is unlikely to ease growing tensions over sharing California’s roadways.

Bike advocates have won such victories in the state as requiring drivers to yield a 3-foot radius of maneuvering room to cyclists or face fines, some motorists complain that they see cyclists flock and choose which laws to follow.

Assemblymen Jay Obernolte (R-Hugo) and Phil Ting (D-San Francisco) recently introduced a bill that would allow bicyclists to treat stop signs as yield signs — proceeding with caution if conditions are safe.

In effect, it would legalize the so-called California roll for bicyclists.

“It’s pretty compelling that the data supports this kind of change in the law,” said Obernolte, an avid bicyclist. “Their loss of momentum causes them to spend a substantially longer amount of time in the intersection.”

The longer it takes for bicyclists to pass through an intersection, the greater likelihood that they’ll get hit by an oncoming vehicle, he said.

Research of a similar policy in Idaho, the only state in which bicyclists are allowed such freedom, found a decline in bike-related injuries after the law was enacted.

Under the proposed law, bicyclists would still have to stop at red lights, which Obernolte said might motivate them to take less-traveled side roads and thus lighten congestion on main roads.

Of the 1,603 tickets given to bicyclists in San Diego from Jan. 1, 2015, to May 31, 2016, 926 were related to stopping and yielding, more than any other category. Seventy-nine were cited for not obeying a traffic device or sign, it was unclear whether those tickets involved a stop sign or a red light.

The legislation would break the “same road, same rights, same rules” philosophy endorsed by many bicyclists, which requires people on two wheels to follow the same traffic laws as drivers on four.

“Many cyclists endorse the “same road, same rights, same rules” philosophy, which requires people on two wheels to follow the same laws as drivers on four.”

WALLY REISS Los Angeles Times

The proposal is a bad idea because it could create uncertainty between motorists and bicyclists, particularly in more developed areas.

“It’s a bad idea, a safety hazard,” he said.

“In city areas, that’s going to be a problem. Everybody already knows the rules.”

It would be better if police officers enforced the current law in situations in which bicyclists ride dangerously rather than amending the current statute, he said.

The proposed California law to allow bicyclists to treat stop signs as yield signs is a great idea if we are serious about getting more bicyclists on the road.

The “yield” law has worked well in Idaho. We need to start giving some advantages to bicyclists and find fewer reasons to give them tickets. The old approach of bicyclists and drivers using the same rules and roadways does not work.

The way to reduce conflicts is to physically separate bicyclists and drivers whenever possible. Two good methods are protected bike paths and bike boulevards on low-traffic streets.

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