

Lane Positioning

Riding on roads with cars scares some cyclists, even though every cyclist has the same right to the road and travel lane as motorists. But both the law and prudent safety techniques can make you safer—and make you feel safer. But to some it's counterintuitive.

Many cyclists (and motorists) know only part of the law. They think a cyclist should be as far to the right as possible to allow cars to squeeze by. Indeed, the law does state a cyclist “shall ride in the lane marked for bicycle use or, if no lane is marked for bicycle use, as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway....” What most folks don't know are the exceptions that follow—and they are significant and important:

...except under any of the following situations:

1. When overtaking and passing another bicycle or vehicle proceeding in the same direction.
2. When preparing for a left turn at an intersection or into a private road or driveway.
3. When reasonably necessary to avoid any condition or potential conflict, including, but not limited to, a fixed or moving object, parked or moving vehicle, bicycle, pedestrian, animal, surface hazard, turn lane, or **substandard-width lane, which makes it unsafe to continue along the right-hand curb or edge or within a bicycle lane. For the purposes of this subsection, a “substandard-width lane” is a lane that is too narrow for a bicycle and another vehicle to travel safely side by side within the lane.** [emphasis added]

The highlighted portion is critical because the vast majority of lanes in Pinellas County are too narrow to share being 10-12 feet wide. The law does not define substandard. The only guidance we have comes from the *Florida Greenbook*, which is the Florida Department of Transportation's highway design manual. It states that a lane should be 14 feet wide to accommodate both a car and bicycle. That determination is a matter of math. A bicycle needs four feet of operating space. The law requires motorists give cyclists three feet clearance when passing. And the average car is about seven feet wide. $4+3+7=14$.

This means that to pass a cyclist a car must move into the adjacent lane.

Minimize bad decisions

When cyclists hug the right-hand portion of the lane, they are inviting poor decisions by motorists who might think they can squeeze by even though a car is oncoming in the adjacent lane. If motorists miscalculate or that oncoming car moves toward the center line, they must decide, do they risk a head-on collision or swerve toward the cyclist and hope they don't hit her, or if they do, they won't cause serious injury. What decision do you think they will make in that moment of panic?

Because the law allows you to take the full lane when it is too narrow to share, you should. And you'll be shocked at the results. This video demonstrates what happens.

When you ride in the middle of the lane, all motorists can see you better. Those entering the roadway from a driveway or side street look for vehicles in the middle of the road, not on the

extreme right-hand side, perhaps obscured by parked cars. Motorists approaching from behind have plenty of advanced warning that they must move into the adjacent lane and make the same calculations they would if the bicycle were a car. They slow down and wait until it's clear to pass. What you'll find is that they then move over entirely into the adjacent lane, giving cyclists more passing clearance than if they were on the right edge of the road.

A few cyclists, especially inexperienced ones, argue that taking the full lane can aggravate motorists and thus endanger cyclists. Does that happen? Yes, but only rarely. And if it enrages them, you know at least they see you.

The greater danger is the motorist who makes an ill-advised decision to try to pass in a manner they shouldn't. That decision may not be an enraged one, but it is a more common one and just as potentially deadly.

Control what you can

Riding in the middle of a lane, or as many road signs say, "Bicyclists may use full lane," is part of a general safety principal: Control the lane and take responsibility for yourself. To that we add, control other road users by letting them know what you plan to do and what you'd like them to do.

When approaching an intersection, take the full lane so other road users can see you. If you stay to the right, other cars in your lane might try to make a right turn in front of you and those turning from the opposite direction might not see you.

While taking the full lane is smart, common courtesy can win you friends. If you see the road is clear ahead, you might move to the right and wave a driver behind you to pass. When approaching an intersection where a car wants to turn left in front of you, if there is no one behind you and you have the time and space, slow down wave them to make the turn. If there is any doubt about who has the right of way at stop signs, yield it and wave them through.

And remember, when there is a bike lane, which must be marked as such, you are required to use it unless there are obstacles or debris that make it unsafe. But be aware that there are quite a few substandard bike lanes that are unsafe to use. A couple of examples are portions along Snell Isle Blvd. and 4th St./Pinellas Point Dr., as well as the very narrow bike lanes on Gulf Blvd./Pass-a-Grille Way in St. Pete Beach.

Be proactive, courteous and predictable, and you can navigate traffic lanes safely. And remember, the signs say, "share the road." They don't say, "share the lane."