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Ride Illinois White Paper: Law Enforcement and Cyclist Safety

Bicyclists rely on law enforcement to improve their safety when riding on roads and trails. As an organization, Ride Illinois has long partnered with law enforcement in a number of ways to assist their work to protect cyclists. The end goal is safe use of Illinois roadways by all users.

Recent national events have led to a broader examination of enforcement issues – and abuses – by the public at large and various organizations including those in bicycle advocacy. As such, Ride Illinois has prepared this white paper to outline our position as it relates to enforcement.

Bicyclist Actions Violating the Law

1. When a bicyclist breaks the law and their actions are egregious, force evasive actions by others, and/or create a high safety risk to themselves or others, we support enforcement against the bicyclist. In addition to the danger, such actions create and increase public resentment toward cyclists. This, in turn, increases the chances of negative and dangerous interactions with motorists and could endanger cyclists' rights on roads.
2. When bicyclist actions violating the law are less serious, and do not pose an imminent danger, we support enforcement against the bicyclist only if consistent with how motorist actions of similar risk are enforced. An example of inconsistent and disproportionate enforcement against cyclists is the ticketing of very minor infractions for which motorists are not ticketed, in response to complaints by members of the public who simply do not like having to share the roads with bicyclists.
3. More importantly: stops for minor infractions can be used as a pretext to search for more serious crimes. Racially-biased abuse by enforcement is a documented issue in modern society and has serious implications. Also, unfair policing increases reluctance by Black and Latinx people to ride a bicycle. We strongly oppose such abuse by law enforcement.

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Motorist Actions Violating the Law

We support the same enforcement approach against motorists as is stated for bicyclists above. However, the higher weight and speed of motor vehicles inherently leads to greater risk to vulnerable users such as bicyclists. Thus, a greater percentage of motorist infractions fall into the more serious category (1). When a motorist's action results in danger or injury to a bicyclist, we urge an appropriate level of enforcement. We oppose inadequate enforcement due to either:

1. A "blaming the victim" bias against bicyclists being on the road
2. Acceptance of motorist excuses (e.g., "I didn't see the cyclist") that would not have been accepted in crashes involving only motor vehicles.
3. When motorists harass bicyclists, either with words, objects, or with a motor vehicle itself, motorists should be cited and punished per statutory or regulatory laws. Jurisdictions are encouraged to implement and use diversion programs as described below for lower level offenses and first-time offenders. Repeat offenders should be tracked and face increased scrutiny.

Levels of Enforcement

For both bicyclists and motorists, while we support ticketing of more dangerous or egregious infractions, we encourage the use of soft enforcement options such as ticket diversion programs. It is important that the goal of creating a safe environment for all roadway users be the focus of enforcement, not the strict interpretation of the law without consideration for the context of minor violations. This can still serve to deliver the message that laws governing the actions and interactions of each user type will not be ignored, while educating those involved on topics that may not have been covered in the motorists' or cyclist's education. For example, Ride Illinois has collaborated with local communities on ticket diversion programs using our BikeSafetyQuiz.com resource. In these programs, the guilty party completes the quiz and their ticket is reduced to a warning. This effort has been well-received by local elected officials, police, offenders, and the general public.

Police Training

Occasionally, there have been incidents of lack of knowledge of or inaccurate police interpretation of the laws. Recognizing that there are nuances to these laws, as well as certain safety-minded bicycling practices, we have partnered with police on training to increase knowledge and understanding. Most recently, the Adult Bicyclist and Motorist modules of BikeSafetyQuiz.com have been used for officer training.

Please contact Ride Illinois at info@rideillinois.org to discuss the information included in this white paper.

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