

Version 4 - last updated 12/28/2020:

Intro

Bicycling is a popular activity in Virginia for transportation, recreation, tourism, and healthy exercise. 2020 has seen a bicycling boom during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the bike industry reporting 120% increase in sales and shops selling out of bikes. Virginians working from home or unfortunately out of work have taken to the pleasant escape from cabin fever as gyms and other indoor destinations have closed.

In Virginia, 12 - 15* people die while riding a bike in traffic each year, and 700 - 850 are injured. Improving bicyclist safety with tools effectively used by peer states could save several lives every year while also increasing riding enjoyment and comfort for both experienced and new riders, including families, commuters, and hobbyists.

What is the Bicyclist Safety Act (BSA)?

The Bicyclist Safety Act is a three-part bill to be considered in the 2021 Virginia General Assembly Session.

- Require Drivers to Change Lanes to Pass a Bicyclist
- Allow Bicyclists to Ride Two-Abreast at Any Time
- Require Bicyclists to Yield at a Stop Sign, i.e. the “Safety Stop”

Why do we need a Bicyclist Safety Act?

States with these laws have reduced their bike crashes and injuries and bicyclists report more enjoyment and comfort.

- Delaware State Police found **23% reduction in bicyclist injuries in crashes with cars at stop signs and 11% reduction in bike injuries total** in the [30 months after the Bicycle Friendly Delaware Act was passed compared to the 30 months before](#).
- [Idaho saw](#) a **14% reduction in bike crashes** after implementing the Safety Stop. Idaho cities are **30% safer for bicyclists** [compared to peer cities](#).

Isn't the 3-foot passing law enough?

The 3-foot passing law enacted in 2014 was an important step in the incremental improvement to bicyclist safety. Several states around the country have 4-foot or 5-foot passing laws. Few bicyclists, drivers, or law enforcement officers can determine at a glance if there is three feet between a passing motor vehicle and a bicyclist. [Police use radar](#) and [bicyclists use pool noodles](#) to make the point.

The League of American Bicyclists reports that [45% of fatal bicyclist crashes happen while being overtaken \(passed\) by drivers, quoting the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#). It is the most common cause of bicyclist fatalities. Furthermore, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration reports 39% of bicyclists feel threatened by motorist passing. This includes failing to provide enough space to safely pass, passing within a shared lane that is too narrow, failing to pass when clear of oncoming traffic, and reentering the lane too abruptly.

Changing lanes to pass, like how one would pass another car, is easy to understand, educate, practice, and enforce, and is easier for the driver and safer and more comfortable for the bicyclist.

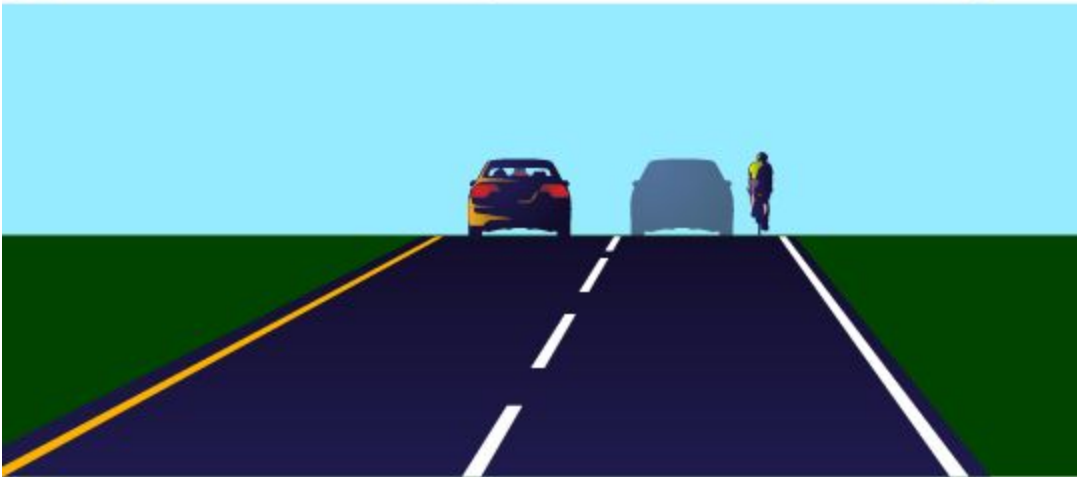
Why is two-abreast riding safer?

Riding two abreast is legal in many places already.

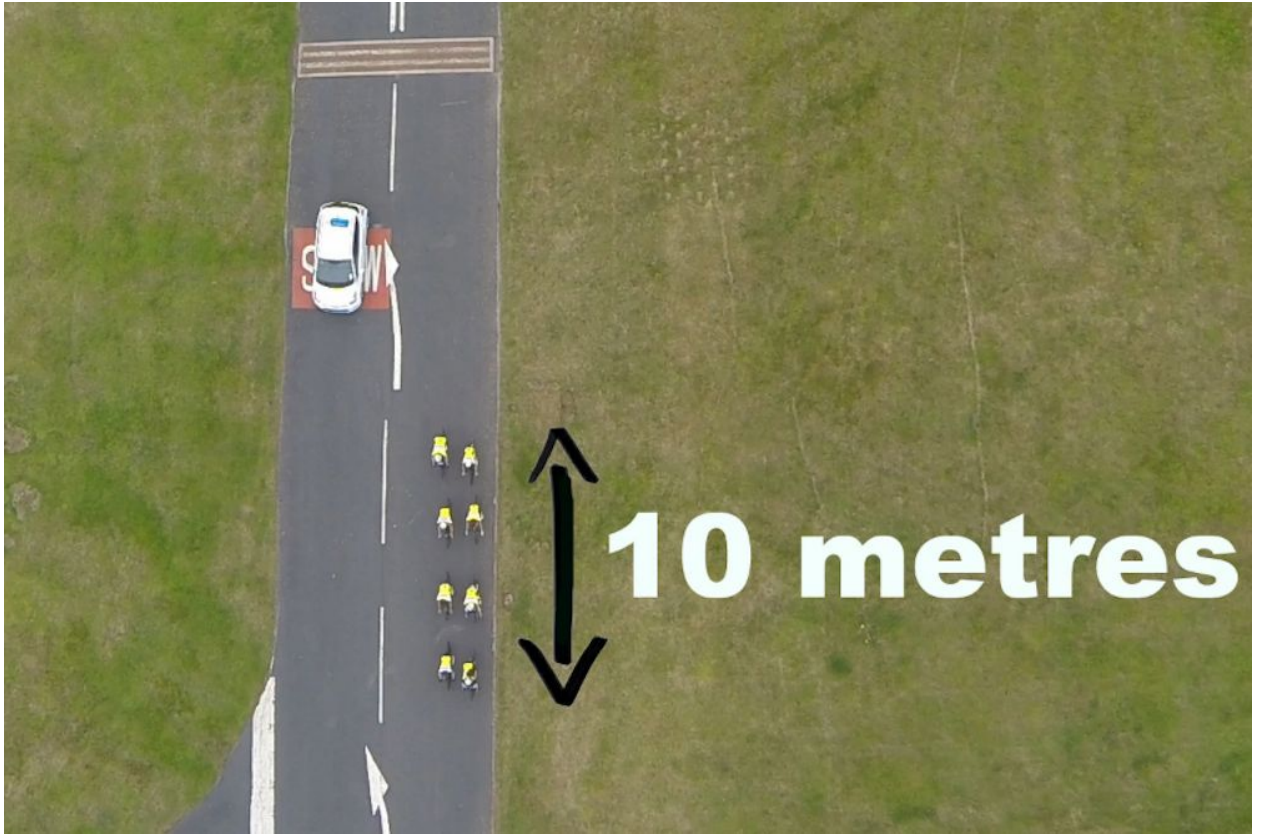
Bicyclists riding two-abreast are more compact, so it takes the driver less time to pass them, and it minimizes cases wherein a driver reenters the center of the lane too soon after overtaking bicyclists. Riding two-abreast physically discourages drivers from passing bicyclists in the same lane, which is often too narrow for that.

This is especially important for families biking together when a parent must ride to the outside of their child to maintain control, visibility, and spatial separation from cars.

Here are images to help illustrate some scenarios:



<https://www.bikewalknc.org/2015/04/why-cyclists-ride-two-abreast/>



<https://www.cyclingweekly.com/news/latest-news/chris-boardman-explains-why-cyclists-ride-two-abreast-in-new-safety-video-187215>



Video: Youtube. [This is why cyclists ride two abreast.](#) 2015

What about passing on rural roads?

Among the primary benefits of bicyclists riding two-abreast is increased visibility and to dissuade drivers from passing where it wouldn't be safe. Many of these places include windy and hilly rural roads where passing even one cyclist would be dangerous. When sight lines are clear, passes can be made more expeditiously and safely because of a shorter length of the group.

What is a Safety Stop?

Drivers and bicyclists often disregard stop signs entirely. For drivers, failing to stop at a stop sign can seriously injure other drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians. For bicyclists, disregarding a stop sign entirely is dangerous to themselves.

Repetitive 4-way stop signs have been used for traffic calming. [Studies](#) have shown that this traffic calming treatment actually encourages drivers to not come to a complete stop at such stop signs, and this is no longer a preferred traffic calming strategy.

Like drivers, bicyclists will often roll through an intersection without coming to a complete stop, which is inefficient and unnecessary at the slow speed of bicyclists. The Safety Stop requires bicyclists to yield the right-of-way at a stop sign without requiring a complete stop. This is already common practice among bicyclists and puts the emphasis on what matters - avoiding a collision.

Video. Youtube. [Idaho “Rolling” Stops for Bicycles in Oregon](#). 2009.

Would this allow bicyclists to blow red lights?

NO! It would not change the requirements of a bicyclist to stop at a red light at all. It also does not allow bicyclists to blow through stop signs, only to properly yield to oncoming traffic with due care.

How does this law affect scooters? What about motorcyclists?

The Bicyclist Safety Act would not change legal requirements for motorcyclists. The current code section that defines riding two-abreast includes scooters and e-bikes, but the other applicable sections do not.

Note: the official language of the BSA is pending drafting by the Dept. of Legislative Services, and the exact proposed code change will not be known until the start of session around January 13, 2021.

What do the police say where these laws have been passed?

Captain Whitmarsh – Delaware State Police, involved in the 2017 Bike Friendly Delaware Act, provided these quotes:

1. Requiring drivers to change lanes to pass- “This was a common sense approach to be implemented that looked at best practices in other areas of motoring already in place. i.e., the requirement for a driver to change lanes when

approaching and passing a first responder, construction worker, etc. We know that in many cases, time and distance are crucial in reducing collisions. Changing lanes gives both the cyclist and motorist the aforementioned needed elements to react in time.”

2. Allowing bicyclists to ride two abreast: “In speaking with a vast number of motorists over the years, a common phrase heard by investigators in traffic crashes is: ‘I just didn’t see them.’ By allowing cyclists to ride two-by-two, the motoring public is provided with a different, and frankly larger visual. We felt that when motorists are visually drawn to the larger image of subjects cycling sooner, they have the opportunity to react sooner too; and in turn take appropriate action, such as change lanes as mentioned above.”

3. Bicyclists required to yield at stop signs. During an interview provided when Delaware’s bicycle friendly laws went into effect, it was noted that roadways are safer when traffic laws better reflect the way and manner that motorists and cyclists actually behave. It speaks to a level of expectation that everyone has while traveling on our roadways, and we are better off, and safer, when those expectations are regularly practiced.

*Virginia DMV Data