

From: Michael Jackson [mailto:mjackson3@mdot.state.md.us]
Sent: Monday, April 18, 2011 12:48 PM
To: [Name Withheld]
Cc: Jack Cochrane
Subject: RE: Jones Mill Road Issue!

Dear Dr. [Name Withheld by Jack Cochrane].

Thanks for taking the time to share your concerns about bicycling on Jones Mill Road and by extension why do bicyclists use roadways adjacent to bicycle paths. Your concerns are commonly shared by many members of the public. However bicycling has a lot of counterintuitive truths.

Bicyclists right to use roadways

Under Maryland law bicycles are vehicles and bicycle vehicle operators have generally the same rights and responsibilities as motor vehicle operators. Bicyclists are legally entitled to use most roadways in Maryland including Jones Mill Road. Toll roads, interstate highways and travel lanes with posted speed limits of 55 mph or higher are places where bicycling is prohibited. Maryland law is generally consistent with federal policies, particularly policies promoting increased use of bicycling for transportation and public health purposes.

Why Do Bicyclists Insist on Exercising Their Legal Right to Use Roadways Adjacent To Trails?

Another counterintuitive truth is that generally roadways are safer than trails. Trails have higher crash rates than roadways. While certainly a car/bike collision can lead to serious injuries and fatalities, unfortunately serious injuries and fatalities occur on trails. Bicyclists run into each other, run into fixed objects or simply lose control and fall.

Trails often cannot safely accommodate the speeds that skilled bicyclists can achieve due to relatively narrow widths, tight curves, limited sight distances and sometimes worse overall pavement conditions than adjacent roadways. Another complicating factor are the presence of pedestrians, including children, dog walkers, and less skilled bicyclists. Often these folks are less predictable in their movements than motorists. Common speed limits on trails are 15 mph, a speed easily exceeded by skilled bicyclists. However a cyclist rarely exceeds the legal speed limit on a roadway.

Finally roadways often provide a more direct route than the adjacent trails which have a tendency to meander. So due to improved safety, less hassle with pedestrian conflicts, higher speed limits and directness often bicyclists prefer roadways over adjacent trails. At least a decade or so ago, the City of Seattle actively encouraged faster riders to use adjacent streets instead of the popular Burke-Gilman Trail in a campaign titled, "Have You Outgrown The Burke-Gilman Trail?". An alternative route for high speed bicyclists was designated on adjacent streets in order to improve safety and reduce conflicts among trail users.

Jones Mill Road Safety

You mentioned that you've seen two car/bike crashes (presumably on Jones Mill Road) in three years and that even one is too much. I assume the argument is that bicyclists should be banned from Jones Mill Road because of these crashes. If true than we would have to ban motoring as well, considering the 32,000 motor vehicle fatalities occurring annually, let alone the hundreds of thousands of injuries and collisions that occur nationally. Instead of taking that extreme step as a society we determine if motoring and bicycling are reasonable risks while we continue to work on improving safety.

Bicyclist Arrogance, Motorist Inattention and Road Rage

It is true that bicyclists often aggravate motorists by violating traffic laws, including unnecessarily impeding traffic when riding in groups. As you noticed motorists often engage in distracted driving and occasionally can be prone to fits of road rage. The common factor is that both bicyclists and motorists are human beings with all the faults that come with being human. A less formal way of expressing this thought is that there are jerks behind the handlebars, jerks being the steering wheels and jerks afoot. However this does not raise the danger level to such a degree that we should ban bicycling or motoring.

Often the public believes that bicyclists are mere trespassers on public highways who deserve whatever abuse they receive from motorists. This is not the case. Motorists have to understand that bicyclists have as much right to use Jones Mill Road as motorists have. Bicyclists must travel in a lawful and courteous manner in the name of roadway safety and reinforcing the image of bicyclists as legitimate roadway users.

I will take the opportunity to mail you a copy of our Safe Bicycling in Maryland brochure, aimed at adult bicyclists, for your information. I hope my reply has addressed your concerns. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Michael E. Jackson

Director of Bicycle and Pedestrian Access

Maryland Department of Transportation