



STAYING SAFE IN PROTECTED LANES

By Carolyn Szczepanski • Illustrations by Stephen Haynes

One minute, I was cruising down 15th Street in Washington D.C. The next, I was sprawled on the pavement, four cops peering down at me.

It was a rainy Wednesday night in February and, as always, I hopped into the 15th Street cycle track to head home from yoga. Just south of the White House, the protected lane follows a gentle descent and I started to coast downhill.

Suddenly, just inches in front of me, a pedestrian stepped into the lane. I didn't have time to swerve or stop or even slow down. All I remember is going airborne. Next thing I knew, I was on my back, helmet broken, glasses smashed, police officers corralling my bike and belongings scattered in the street.

Connecting the three places I ride on a near-daily basis—work, yoga, home—15th Street is my main north-south travel corridor, so I'm no stranger to protected bike lanes and the ease of riding in them. Research shows that these facilities are safer than riding in the street and reduce crashes for all road users, not just bicyclists. But, as my concussion clearly underlined, riding in a cycle track isn't a license for complacency.

Washington, D.C. is just one of many cities investing in cycle tracks, which are bike lanes separated from motor vehicles by curbs, planters, posts or parked cars. In Europe the availability of these lanes are among the reasons far more people—and a wider diversity of folks—ride. Here in the States, though, we're still at the start of the protected-lane learning curve.

"The designs are new in the U.S.," says Martha Roskowski, Director for the Green Lane Project, which is working with six specific cities to advance protected infrastructure. "So drivers, walkers and people on bikes are still getting used to them."

You probably would have guessed that watching out for walkers has become my number one priority—and Roskowski concurs.

"Watch for pedestrians stepping into the lanes, either from parked cars or off the curb," she says.

For me, that means slowing way down at particular spots along my route: the mid-block crosswalks near Massachusetts Avenue, the Department of Veterans Affairs where homeless vets often camp out, and the valet parking stand at Georgia Browns, where hungry lawyers are far more focused on their power lunches than bicyclists in the cycle track.

Reducing speed is especially important at intersections.



In a separated bike lane, watch out for:

- Drivers turning right from the opposing car lane (as with the red car)
- Drivers traveling the same direction as you and turning left (as with the blue car)
- Pedestrians stepping off the sidewalk or from parked cars

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Because it's a two-way lane, when I'm in the cycle track, I'm often outside the position cars might expect me on the road.

For example, at the intersection of 15th and K, which is a busy thoroughfare for all modes, I often surprise right-turning motorists who aren't anticipating someone traveling toward them from the left side of the road. On the other side of the coin, left-turning cars are looking ahead at oncoming traffic and may not predict me coming up their left flank. This means extra caution—and sometimes a hand wave—to make sure motorists see me.

"Be aware that, in a protected bike lane, you're often in the far periphery of a driver's field of vision," says Jason Jenkins, Education Specialist for the Active Transportation Alliance in Chicago. "Use bright colors, lights and reflective materials to make yourself as visible as possible."

As you approach an intersection, Jenkins adds, cover your brakes so you're ready to react.

"Check over your left shoulder for possible right-turning drivers, and be prepared to stop," he says. "Look ahead for possible left-turning drivers, too, and be prepared to stop—but keep pedaling to indicate that you aren't yielding."

And always—always!—obey the signals. It's always risky to run the light, but it's particularly dangerous when special facilities are in play.

"Some lanes have special signals for bikes, while some expect riders to use the regular traffic signals," Roskowski says. "A few expect people on bikes to use the pedestrian signals. If it's not obvious, a sign will tell you what to do."

Never doubt that those bike-specific signs and signals are in place to keep you safe.

"Often there are things happening that each individual may not realize from their perspective," says Greg Billing, Advocacy Coordinator for the Washington Area Bicyclist Association. So if the light turns green for motorists, but the bike signal is still red—there's a good reason, even if the coast looks clear.

Pedestrian and bike signals will sometimes dictate your turning, too. When I'm heading to yoga, I need to turn right onto P Street from the 15th Street cycle track—which is on the left side of the road. Luckily, at that intersection there's a small bulb-out in the cycle track, giving me an extra berth to signal I'm slowing to riders behind and shift over to wait for the light to turn red. Then, being very mindful of cars and pedestrians, I turn onto P.

For left turns from the right side of the road, box turns are often easiest. Just continue through the light to the right corner of the intersection—where the stopped cars are heading in your intended direction—and wait until that light turns green.

Whether signaling turns or indicating a slowing pace, remember you're sharing the lane with other cyclists, too. Just like a trail, ride to the right and pass on the left, giving fellow cyclists a safe berth. And, if you're intent on racing home as quickly as possible, choose a different route. Cycle tracks are not express lanes.

As I learned the hard way, if you're racing down the protected lane the clueless pedestrian just might win.

Carolyn Szczepanski is the Communications Director for the League of American Bicyclists, which represents the interests of the nation's 57 million cyclists. League Cycling Instructors across the nation offer classes in safe cycling; find a class near you at bikeleague.org/programs/education. 

In 2009, women accounted for just 24% of bike trips in the U.S. It's time for that to change.



photo by John Luton

The League of American Bicyclists created the Women Bike program to engage, empower and elevate more women in the bicycle movement. Join our community, attend our next event and help us close the gender gap in American bicycling.

bikeleague.org/womenbike



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