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IMPROVING DRIVER EDUCATION

A number of years ago I received a speeding ticket and spent some time at "driver's school" to keep points off my license. The instructor lectured us about the evils of bad driving and droned on about aspects of driving that probably everyone in the room knew by heart when they were 14. While listening to this, I realized that the State of Florida was missing a golden opportunity to actually educate people during this "school".

While sitting in that class, I also thought about the driver's test that every person takes before getting their license and how many of the questions seem a little irrelevant. It appears that many of the existing questions could be replaced by questions dealing with much more important items. For example, do any of you still remember the distance you must keep from a stopped school bus? Is it 200 feet, 300 feet, or 400 feet? Who knows and who cares; the truth is most people can't accurately gauge these distances anyway and I've never heard of a police officer ticketing someone for stopping 145 feet from a school bus instead of 300 feet. If you can get people to stop, that's the big accomplishment!

Wouldn't it be better to have a more practical question such as: "Who has the right-of-way at an intersection, a pedestrian in a marked crosswalk or a motorist turning right across that crosswalk? Knowing this is an important item that could save someone's life.

Here are a few other subject areas that we should probably cover on the test, or that an instructor we may want to talk about at one of these driver schools:

1. **Actuated signals and detection placement** - Those of us in the traffic industry are surprised to discover the large number of people who don't know how actuated signals work. Specifically, many motorists do not realize that you may not receive a green indication if you don't stop **behind** the stop bar.
2. **Pedestrian button operation** - Many individuals (including some school crossing guards) don't know how pedestrian buttons work. They think the more you "mash the button" the quicker you get the WALK indication, or they think that the signal isn't working right if the WALK indication does not appear as soon as they push the button. When you explain to these people that the pedestrian button works like an elevator, you only need to push it once and you are served when it is your turn, most of them are then able to grasp how the system operates. (Education with respect to pedestrian features needs to start as early as elementary school. It also needs to occur at senior citizen centers.)
3. **Right-Turn-On-Red versus U-turns** - It is interesting to watch what occurs when a motorist making a U-turn on the main street (whether on a green ball or an arrow) encounters a motorist making a conflicting right-turn-on-red from the side street. Both motorists look at the other as if they were from mars and sometimes expletive deletives (along with the one finger salute) result. It is clear that both motorists think they have the right-of-way. Here is another fruitful area for driver education. (By the way, the motorist making the U-turn has the right of way.)

4. **Left turn sneakers** - A left turn vehicle that is waiting in the intersection when the signal turns yellow has the right to complete the left turn movement. Vehicles entering on green must allow the "sneaker" to complete the left turn movement. Here is a case where the vehicle with the green indication does not have the right-of-way. Some motorists do not understand this.
5. **Flashing DON'T WALK** - As I have discussed in previous articles, many individuals think the WALK indication should provide enough time for them to fully cross the street. They are confused when a flashing DON'T WALK indication appears just a few seconds after they leave the curb. The fact that, during coordination, the main street WALK indication often stays up for a long time further confuses the issue in their mind. They logically ask: "Why does the walk stay up for over a minute when I cross the side street yet only a few seconds when I cross the busier main street?"
6. **Lead-lag phasing** - The use of lead-lag left turn phasing can be very beneficial in certain situations. Some agencies even switch the direction of lead-lag phasing by time-of-day in order to maximize progression opportunities. This confuses some motorists who expect the signal phasing to remain the same at all times, or who expect the left turn movement to always precede the thru movement. It would be beneficial to educate motorists on how lead-lag phasing works so that they will follow the phasing, not anticipate it.
7. **Signal preemption** - Unusual phasing sequences and timings can occur when traffic signals come under the control of railroad or emergency vehicle preemption. A safer traffic environment would exist if the average motorist understood how signal preemption works and the type of signal behavior that results.

These subjects are just the tip of the iceberg. Productive time could also be spent exposing motorists to new or recent trends in the traffic industry. Topics could include red-light running cameras, transponder use, HOT lanes, in-vehicle navigation, variable message signs, Highway Advisory Radio, advanced cruise control, back-up warning systems, and so on.

With so many motorists ignorant of the finer points of driving, and with so many new traffic items coming on-line every month, shouldn't we be spending more of our driver education resources on exposing drivers to relevant issues? Education is as important as engineering when it comes to traffic safety and we certainly have much room for improvement in this important area.