

Traffic Detectors are your Friend

By now most everyone has noticed circular or rectangular shapes in the road surface as they approach intersections. More specifically, intersections controlled with traffic signals. An example would look like photo 1.

Why are these used, and why should you care when riding a motorcycle, especially on group rides?

What you see in the photo is where small wires were placed into the road surface and were covered with some type of sealant. These wires, or loops, have a small electrical charge, and when ferrous metal (e.g. steel) comes near, the electrical charge is disrupted to tell the traffic light that someone is waiting for the light to change. If the light is already green, it tells the traffic light to remain green as more traffic is approaching.



Photo 1 - Typical traffic sensor

As you approach a red light, do your best to get your motorcycle to travel and rest above the line as illustrated with position A in the photo. There is risk in stopping at position A, as it puts you in a lane position that may be closer to other traffic and you may not be as visible to other traffic. While position B allows you to have a larger space cushion, you will be dependent on other vehicles to trigger the signal.

On group rides, as the head of the group travels through the green light, it is highly recommended that the following riders intentionally travel over these loops in hopes that the entire group can make it through the signal. If riders in the middle of the group avoid these loops, it tells the traffic signal that there is no more traffic approaching and the light can go red, which only separates the group as riders at the rear are forced to stop.

Not all traffic signals have these detector loops, and even those that do may have been paved over so you don't know where the loop is located. This requires trial and error if you regularly travel through the intersection to know where to position your bike. On the other hand, Washington does have a provision in state law that, after careful consideration, a motorcycle may enter an intersection on a red light after waiting a period of time. However, "running the red light" after waiting a long time can still result in a traffic citation if an officer of the law thinks you did it in an unsafe manner. Yes, open to interpretation, so take smart risks in such situations.



Bumps in the Road

You're in a group ride and the bike ahead of you seems to bounce up or down, perhaps making you realize the road ahead may not be as smooth as you think. Do you just accept the risk that there may be a pothole or bump in the road and continue to stay seated, or do you prepare for a rough road?

It doesn't matter whether the obstacle is a hole in the road or a log in the road, ideally, in a group ride the lead would be kind to point out the bumps. Sometimes those signals don't get passed along, or the lead didn't see it coming and had no time to warn you. Probably a good reason to stay alert, especially if the group is spread out and signals are lost between riders. And even if the lead misses the bump, could the second or third rider make the signal to warn other riders? (the answer is yes). Even if there is not a signal, the visual cue that riders ahead are bouncing up and down should tell you something. And the warning comes at no charge; that's right, it's free.

Should we do anything different when there's a bump in the road? Ideally, a rider should get his or her butt off the seat by pulling themselves up a bit using the handlebars and putting weight on the foot pegs/boards. This enables the rider's weight to be distributed across both axles and can help prevent tire and rim damage if the bump is a bad one. It allows the knees to act as shock absorbers to take some off the strain off the spine. It also helps prevent the rear suspension from bottoming out, thus saving you a hard jolt that just might disrupt your passenger or your load.

The rider should also shift his or her weight a bit toward the rear, which enables the front tire to get across the obstacle without a hard jolt. Books will also suggest to give the throttle a quick blip to help raise the front end of the bike, which again, helps the front tire get over the obstacle.

It's your comfort and bike maintenance that matter, so take the bumps as you like (and you can afford).