



Other Viewpoints

Motorcycle law may add danger

Bikers are getting a free pass to run red lights in some situations under a new law signed by Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback. It might add convenience to a motorcyclist's day, but it also could add another layer of danger for a vehicle that is far less safe than the average automobile.

Under the new law, bikers can drive through a "dead red," a traffic light that does not cycle to green because a sensor below the street does not register the motorcycle, which is lighter than cars and trucks. Sometimes, bikers have said, they get stuck waiting at an intersection even though there is no traffic coming. That can be frustrating, especially for those drivers who are impatient with stoplights in the first place.

But to make it law for bikers to drive through the red light is not the best solution. Motorcycles tend to be less visible to other drivers because of their size. Signs already are posted along highways asking others to be aware and look out for bikers, who too often are hit by drivers who did not notice them on the road. This "dead red" law only would increase that danger. Other drivers going through a green light are not going to be looking for a biker who might be running a red light. One misjudgment on the biker's part could result in a tragic accident.

The "dead red" was included with a number of other traffic changes in the law changing the speed limit to 75. Would it have passed without the appeal of the other changes to which it was attached? It is hard to say. But lawmakers misjudged when they gave bikers free license to drive through red lights they view to be taking too long to change.

Law enforcement has raised questions about judging when a biker has not waited long enough to drive through an intersection. The law says only that they should wait a "reasonable" amount of time, and that is a subjective term.

And likely people will begin treating red lights like stop signs, stopping only long enough to glance both ways and proceed. Even the American Motorcycle Association reportedly expressed concern that some riders might take the new law as license to stop and go without giving a traffic light time to cycle. But stoplights are not stop signs, and traffic lights are chosen for intersections for a reason. It generally has to do with visibility, traffic volume and sometimes the number of accidents that have occurred there.

It might be inconvenient to wait for an indeterminate time for a traffic light to change, but bikers can avoid it. They can take a route that avoids the lights that prove to be a nuisance. They can turn right and go a block out of their way so that they may proceed without a long wait. They can lobby their cities for traffic lights that use cameras rather than in-ground sensors to trigger light changes.

But what is done is done, and the law is in place. We now can hope it does not end in tragedy or lead to a culture in which everyone takes liberties to proceed through long red lights.

- The Hutchinson News, via The Associated Press

Write us

The Colby Free Press encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise.

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor @ nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Sharon Friedlander - Publisher
sfriedlander @ nwkansas.com

NEWS

Kevin Bottrell - News Editor
kbottrell @ nwkansas.com

Sports

colby.sports @ nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard @ nwkansas.com

Shelby Pulkrabek, Tomi Miller - Society Reporters
colby.society @ nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

colby.ads @ nwkansas.com

Andrea Bowers, Kathryn Ballard

Advertising Representatives
abowers @ nwkansas.com kb Ballard @ nwkansas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter @ nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Robin Tubbs - Office Manager
rtubbs @ nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support @ nwkansas.com

NOR/WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager
Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, Jim Bowker,
Judy McKnight, Kris McCool

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by NorWest Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72

OBAMA BIRTH CERTIFICATE

THREE DOLLAR BILL

Time keeps rolling, welcome or not

It's the last weekday in April, and time flows on, inexorably pulling the anticipated into the permanent past.

In the news: another royal wedding I didn't bother to watch, another round of killer tornadoes, another federal disaster declaration or two, another budget cut.

In my life this month: a granddaughter's birthday; her father's birthday - my baby, no less; and the memory of my parents, long gone, now, who would have been 99 and 95 this year and had their 67th anniversary.

On the radio this morning, Garrison Keillor read a poem with a line that struck me, a reference to iris transplanted from the garden of a long-departed mother. And a chance conversation in the newsroom reminded me of a long-ago childhood game played in my mother's flower garden.

It's a long string of memories, really, and once I grasp the end it's tempting to keep pulling and see what comes past. Climbing the apple tree, picking a tiny bouquet of grape hyacinth to fill a tiny ceramic pitcher, riding the old hand-me-down tricycle up and down the block until my growth and its decrepitude met somewhere in the middle.

At the *Free Press*, we notice the passage of time more acutely than some others might.

Deadlines are constant and unremitting. There are ad deadlines and story deadlines and press deadlines and section deadlines.

Living with deadlines - and getting information from people with different deadlines (and, let's face it, different priorities for their time) can be high-stress to say the least.

The good news/bad news is that deadlines pass, whether they are met or not. Time passes,



Marian Ballard

• Collection Connections

right on schedule, just as it always has. The stream of time flows past, and the occasional attempt to reach out and grasp it leaves nothing but a wet memory in your hand.

If you are older than three, you probably know what I'm talking about. Here's hoping you have lived some memories along the way that are worth hanging on to. There are also memories you would just as soon wave goodbye to, so I guess it's a blessing that time keeps moving without requiring input from us.

We feel the pressures of time here at the paper. The flow of events has moved some people away from our staff, especially Andy Heintz and Vera Sloan. We wish them well, but time is still rolling and they leave a big hole in our workforce.

We try to stay on top of the news but we're spread pretty thin on the ground. And time keeps rolling. Your story is important to us, but there's only so much we can do.

We have a new publisher this week, Sharon Friedlander, who is a welcome addition to the team. Some other new faces will be on the scene in a few weeks, thankfully, but meanwhile we're still scrambling.

You can help by doing your part. Let us know what's happening, don't think we have some magical means of knowing without be-

ing told. It's been said that news is what happens near an editor; you can bring your news "near" to us.

When something will be happening that's newsworthy, don't wait to tell us about it. It needs a place on our calendar as well as on yours. It's OK to give us a date, a time and a phone number six months ahead of time. That's far better than getting a call two days before with the insistence that the information has to be printed immediately.

Understand that, even if you write well and hand us a story that's perfect in every way, it will be edited and quite probably rewritten. We have a style of writing that is standard to newspapers and standard to this paper. We follow rules for writing that you have probably never heard of. (We occasionally ignore rules for writing, too, like the dangling participle just past - a rule I'm free to ignore since I do most of the editing.) Editing takes time. At the moment, there are 132 stories which need my attention. It's enough to give me a lot of sympathy for teachers with essay tests to grade. The differences - deciphering high schooler's penmanship versus all those daily deadlines - seem to balance out.

Meanwhile, time rolls on. Another week, another month is winding up. Another May is on deck, with all its reminders of the past and graduations launching futures.

Add a memory to your collection this weekend.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

Spring fires part of ecology, too

"Green up" occurs on the prairies this time each year. With prairie fire season mostly between March 15 and April 15, we can now see the effects of grass fires.

As you drive across Kansas, look for a fence where the field on one side has been burned and the field on the other side hasn't.

The burned side rapidly "greens up." Dead grass has been reduced to black ash. Those nutrients wash into the ground. The black surface absorbs more sunlight, and the ground is warmer. Grass plants, their living crowns undamaged, grow rapidly in the warmer soil. But tree or shrub saplings, from sumac to red cedar, had the growing tissues at the end of stems and were burned and killed. This leaves the grass in full sunlight.

But the unburned side of the fence, plenty of dead grass stems wave in the air. Not only are their nutrients not accessible to new plant growth, the dead grass intercepts the sunlight, keeping the soil cooler. It shades any young grass trying to grow.

Unburned trees and shrubs soon tower too high for their growing stem tips to be reached by flames. They shade out much of the grass underneath.

It is startling to look at photos of eastern Kansas taken in the mid 1800s. The countryside around Lawrence was prairie; now there are trees. Pioneer settlement across Kansas created islands of trees. In each small town, we planted trees for shade and to shelter us from Kansas winds. Sporadic natural fires kept Kansas in the grassland stage well before any



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

Native Americans or pioneers came to this region.

In central and western Kansas, any tree-filled land is unnatural. It exists because we protect it.

Today, ranchers conduct annual burns to maintain that natural environment. With annual burning, the small accumulation of dead grass makes for a cooler burn that carries less heat.

A person can step over a fire line if there is only a thin layer of dead grass as fuel. But let it accumulate many years, and the fire, whether set by lightning or man made, will burn much hotter and the heat will penetrate deeper.

Animals vary in their responses to prairie fires. The larger white-tailed deer, bison and antelope merely run away. Other animals may be "fire positive" and benefit from the burning, "fire negative" with populations declining after burning or "fire neutral." Prairie voles and the hispid cotton rat decline with burning while the deer mouse, meadow jumping mouse and 13-lined ground squirrel nest in burrows under the ground; they mainly eat seeds and insects that thrive from the green up.

But drive along the Interstates in Kansas, and you will see country plots that are no longer burned. The fields rapidly fill with trees and shrubs. The most dominant of these is red cedar. From aerial photography, we know that Kansas has more red cedar than it has ever had in recorded history.

Far too many Kansas citizens are unaware that prairie fires are "natural" and that suppression of prairie fires is "unnatural." Just as the artificial suppression of forest fires in our western National Forests led to massive and damaging forest fires over a decade ago, the accumulation of dead grass fuel would likewise be disastrous.

Nor will the next generation of Kansas students learn the science. The concepts of fire positive and fire negative species are not part of the assessed science standards being taught.

If we do not get the science of prairie burning right in the future, we will have to change our state bird from the meadowlark to the cedar waxwing.

Readers who want to learn more about the importance of burning the prairie can request a free copy of the 16-page Kansas School Naturalist booklet "Prairie Fires" from the Department of Biological Sciences at Emporia State University (also available online).

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

