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Freeway messages stir outrage in some drivers

Sign of trouble: Request to share the road with motorcyclists

BY JANET LAVELLE, UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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A message appearing on electronic freeway signs around the county in the past week wasn't supposed to cause road rage.

To the state agencies that posted the message, its suggestion "Share the road. Look twice for motorcyclists" seemed helpful, especially with spring weather bringing out more bikers.

Some drivers apparently saw red.

"None of the calls we've gotten have been positive," said Edward Cartagena, spokesman for the San Diego Caltrans office. "One call was a 20-minute rant."

About a dozen callers angrily complained that it wasn't their job to watch out for motorcyclists who speed, double up in lanes with cars or otherwise ride aggressively.

"Wow, I didn't know there was a sentiment like that out there on the roadways," Cartagena said.

Since the electronic message was posted statewide Feb. 11, Caltrans has received about 800 phone calls, mostly positive. "Except for here. I don't know why," Cartagena said.

Some calls in other counties came from motorcyclists who appreciated the state looking out for their safety, officials said. Some bikers yesterday said that they're too often at the mercy of distracted drivers oblivious to smaller vehicles.

The signs, which are due to go dark today, were a joint effort between



NELVIN C. CEPEDA / UNION-TRIBUNE

Traveling south on Interstate 805 yesterday, motorcyclists threaded between car lanes during the evening commute. Motorcyclists have welcomed the state's effort to look out for their safety.



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A message displayed yesterday on an electronic sign along westbound Interstate 8.

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Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol and the state Office of Transportation Safety and had been in the works for a year, CHP spokeswoman Jaime Coffee said.

The CHP also is in the midst of a two-year "Look Twice, Save a Life" campaign to reduce the escalating number of motorcyclist deaths and injuries in the four counties with the worst accident rates.

San Diego County ranks No. 2 — behind Los Angeles County — with 52 motorcycle deaths and 1,134 injuries in 2008, the most recent figures available.

"This (sign) is a good way to get the message out that we share the road and need to look out for each other," Coffee said.

At least, the signs have been noticed.

Outside Costco in Carlsbad yesterday, Bud Lory said he thought they were a good warning for drivers. Lory, who lives in Mexico, said he gets steamed while inching his car toward the border crossing and motorcycles thread between cars to the front of the long line, a maneuver some call "lane splitting."

The sign "is good advice because you don't see motorcyclists when they go crazy, zipping in and out of lanes," he said. "If I were to hit one, someone would probably say I was to blame."

Carlsbad resident Elaine Cosby said the problem is drivers who don't want to share the road with motorcycles. "Everyone has a right to the highway," she said. "A lot of (motorcyclists) get killed because drivers in cars don't have enough respect for them."

Stanley Kling of Encinitas said he thought the signs didn't make sense.

"What's to share? You don't have any choice about that," he said. "The sign says look twice, but I have enough to look at. There's no problem seeing motorcycles unless they're dashing in and out of lanes."

Gary Meads, president of San Diego-based MeadsDurket advertising agency, said the message was clear enough and hit the industry standard of seven words or fewer for drive-by signs.

Considering that some drivers wish they didn't have to share the road with motorcyclists who weave between lanes or cut ahead in traffic, the message could be tweaked, he said.

"It might be better to lose the 'share' and just stick with the 'look twice for motorcyclists,'" Meads said.

Motorcyclists said they welcomed the campaign because they're vulnerable on the road with inattentive drivers chatting on cell phones, adjusting radios or switching lanes without watching for smaller vehicles.

Although drivers may complain about motorcyclists lane splitting, it's legal if done safely, bikers said.



PHOTO BY NELVIN C. CEPEDA - UNION-TRIBUNE

Although drivers may complain about motorcyclists' lane splitting — threading their way through traffic, as this rider did on Interstate 805 in San Diego — it's legal if done safely, bikers said.

MOTORCYCLE DEATHS, SELECTED COUNTIES

County	1999	2008	Increase
Los Angeles	44	111	152%
San Diego	16	52	225%
San Bernardino	15	34	127%
Orange	8	33	313%
Statewide	230	529	130%
Licensed motorcyclists in state	844,011	1,211,848	44%

SOURCE: California Highway Patrol SHAFER GRUBB / Union-Tribune

LANE-SPLITTING LEGAL, BUT IS IT SAFE?

Since my story has generated so many comments on the practice of lane-splitting — riding a motorcycle between lanes to pass slower-moving cars — here's some more information.

According to law enforcement agencies, the California Vehicle Code doesn't specifically say that lane-splitting is illegal. That doesn't mean a motorcyclist might not get ticketed for it, though.

Motorcyclists could still be cited for unsafe driving and it's up to the discretion of the ticketing officer and the court to determine what's safe.

The California Highway Patrol's Web site says lane splitting "is permissible but must be done in a safe and prudent manner," while the DMV's Motorcycle Handbook warns that lane sharing is dangerous.

San Diego police Lt. Tim Saelens, who works in the traffic division, said motorcyclists who split lanes are sometimes cited under three sections of the state Vehicle Code: Section 22350, the basic speed law; Section 21658, which governs lane changes; and Section 21755, that allows passing on the right only under safe conditions.

Unless the Legislature specifically outlaws lane-splitting, the bottom line is: drive safely and watch out for the other guy. We all learned that in driver education class.

— Janet Lavelle

ONLINE

View the California Motorcycle Handbook (PDF).

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