

New Bike Laws Might Make It Legal to Roll Through Stop Signs

San Francisco, Montreal, and Washington, DC, are all looking to adopt the Idaho Stop

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through stop signs plenty of times in your riding career. Unless you live in Idaho, that means you've broken state law and risked a fine of hundreds of dollars. But that could soon change as activists in San Francisco and Washington, DC, fight to make yielding at the signs, rather than stopping, legal for cyclists in more places throughout the country.

In 1982, Idaho passed the first law in North America allowing cyclists to roll through stop signs and red lights, so long as they yielded to traffic. Dubbed the Idaho Stop, the law reduced bike incidents in the state by 14.5 percent, according to Idaho's [Office of Highway and Traffic Safety](#). They've stayed that low ever since.

Opponents argue that changing the laws for bikes will make intersections and enforcement more complicated, but here's the thing: There's no data to back up that claim. The number of citations issued to cyclists went down after the 1982 law went into effect, which reduced cities' workloads. Critics also fear that the Idaho Stop harms pedestrians, who could get hit as riders roll through a stop. But in San Francisco, one city that's considering adoption of the Idaho Stop, 96 percent of pedestrian-related traffic incidents are caused by cars, not bikes, according to the city's police department.

Traffic laws were written for cars, not cyclists, and as more cities encourage people to ditch four wheels for two, those laws need to change. "I think that our traffic laws were generally written from the perspective of moving motor vehicles and having other vehicles behave like motor vehicles," says Ken McLeod, legal and policy specialist at the [League of American Bicyclists](#). "The Idaho Stop recognizes that bicycles are not motor vehicles and have different inherent abilities, much like when bicycles are allowed on sidewalks."

McLeod favors Idaho Stop legislation because bikers have better vision and travel at lower speeds than drivers, which make them less risky at intersections.

Since Idaho became the first state to adopt this law, other places have followed suit, including Dillon, Breckenridge, and Aspen, Colorado. In San Francisco, there's support to pass the law from the board of supervisors. Though [Mayor Ed Lee](#) says he'll veto any bill that gets to his desk on the grounds that he thinks it'll make traffic laws unnecessarily complicated, the board could still overrule his decision. In Montreal, [Mayor Denis Coderre](#) is in favor of legalizing the Idaho Stop, and in Washington, DC, [city council member Mary Cheh](#) is pushing a bill that would change the capitol's laws.

But San Francisco has become the focal point of this new push. The city's proposed ordinance to legalize the Idaho Stop comes up for a vote in December. If it passes, it could signal a real shift in the stop-as-yield movement, not only because the national media will pay attention, but also because the populous California city will be a better testing ground for the law than Idaho. At the moment, San Francisco cyclists make 70,000 bike trips each weekday—an enormous number compared to what you'd find in Boise or small-town Colorado. If accident stats among

those riders go down like they did in Idaho, that will be much better proof that the Idaho Stop really works.

We're still a ways off from countrywide adoption of the Idaho Stop, but cities in the United States and one in Canada are opening up the conversation about changing bike laws. This is the most attention the law has garnered in three decades, and it shows that cyclists are becoming a viable and significant percentage of traffic. The laws need to work with them, not around them.