Big Ideas: Idaho stop is one hot potato

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The Toronto Star: Big Ideas: 'Idaho stop' is one hot potato

A law to let cyclists treat stop signs as yields makes practical sense, cycling advocates say. But the idea has proven to be politically toxic.

Cyclists pass through an intersection on Beverley St., not necessarily coming to a full stop. In Idaho, cyclists are legally allowed to go through stop signs without stopping if it is safe to do so. The so-called Idaho stop has become something of a tourist attraction for out-of-state cyclists visiting the area.

Richard Lautens / Toronto Star File Photo

By: Tim Alamenciak, News reporter, Published on Fri Jun 13 2014

The rolling stop — it's an idea that cycling advocates say could encourage more riders, ease bicycle commuting and make riding more efficient. Besides, many riders already do it, much to the outrage of the public.

Among cyclists it's known as the "Idaho stop," after the state that first legalized the practice in 1982. Since then, bike riders in the potato state

have been told to treat stop signs as yields — allowing them to proceed without coming to a full stop if the way is clear. It's a policy that cycling advocates across North America and in Toronto have been eyeing enviously.

"Amongst the advocacy community and amongst cyclists, it's been talked about for years," said Jared Kolb, executive director of Cycle Toronto. "Very few cyclists that I know come to a complete stop at four-way stops when the coast is clear.

"There's good reason for that: Bicycles are propelled by momentum and much of the effort is at the start when you're just beginning to push off. This is one of those things where you've effectively got the rules of the road that were created for motor vehicles."

But there has been little crystallized effort to change the law in Ontario because bicycle lanes and other measures that increase the safety of cyclists come first, Kolb said.

"From the perspective of creating a really bicycle-friendly city, the Idaho stop fits into that. However in terms of creating the context of on-street safety, I think that creating a grid across the city is a much higher priority."

Elsewhere, the measure has run up against staunch political opposition. In Oregon, animosity stemming from a 2009 debate fouled relations between cyclists and the government for years, according to Rob Sadowsky, executive director of the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, a cycling advocacy group within the state.

"This is now five years later. It's taken us a good, solid four years of work to recover the political clout that we had before," said Sadowsky. "It can be a very sensitive subject. It can light the fire under people who get upset at cyclists running red lights."

The official rules in Idaho turn stop signs into yield signs for cyclists. Cyclists must still stop at red traffic lights but are allowed to proceed afterwards.

The change passed in Idaho not because of a particularly strong cycling community, but in an effort to stop courts from being flooded with cyclists on minor tickets. **According to Bob Mionske**, a Portland, Ore.-based lawyer who specializes in cycling, the Idaho stop law was a bid to remove a technicality that penalized cyclists for not putting their foot down at stop signs.

"The statistics, year after year, showed that it hadn't increased scofflaw riding, that it was easier for the court system . . . It made cycling more sensible and it didn't ruffle anybody's feathers," said Mionske.

A study of the law's effects done by Jason Meggs of the school of public health at the University of California, Berkeley, found a 14.5-per-cent reduction in bicycle injuries the year after it was adopted.

Adam Park, director of communication for David Bieter, mayor of Boise, Idaho, said the Idaho stop has become something of an attraction for cyclists touring the area.

“Bicyclists come here and they immediately are just overjoyed with the knowledge that something they’ve done illegally in other places is legal here,” Park said. “It allows them to flow more freely and still safely. It’s something that came about in a happenstance way but it’s worked for us in the end.”