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Change Lanes to Pass: Protecting Vulnerable Road Users and Slow-Moving Vehicles

The safest way for vehicles to pass vulnerable road users such as bicyclists, and farm equipment, is to change lanes, making sure the path is clear of oncoming traffic. Vehicles should not return to the right side of the roadway until they have safely passed. Increasing the lateral distance between drivers and these vulnerable road users reduces crash risk.¹ Passing too closely can cause distress, especially to bicyclists, and compromise everyone's safety.

Iowa currently lacks a specific law that defines the minimum distance motorists should give when overtaking bicyclists and slow-moving vehicles, such as farm equipment.

- While Iowa Code 321.281² requires drivers to maintain a 'safe and reasonable' distance from bicyclists, it does not specify a measurement—such minimum number of feet.
- Iowa Code 321.306³ states that drivers may change lanes to pass or pass slow-moving vehicles when it is safe to do so but does not specify a minimum passing distance.
- Iowa Code 321.1(90)(a)⁴ defines a 'vehicle' as excluding any device moved by human power, which creates ambiguity about whether standard vehicle passing laws apply to bicycles or horse-drawn carriages.

Changing lanes to pass may be easier to enforce.⁵ Changing lanes increases objectiveness for enforcement, rather than having to subjectively assess a 'safe distance' or a measurement in feet.¹

The majority of states have a safe passing law for bicyclists.

Bicycle fatalities in the U.S. rose by 53% between 2014 and 2023⁶—and the trend continues upward. **In Iowa, there were 1,500 bicycle-related crashes from 2020 to 2024, including 34 that resulted in fatalities.**⁷ Bicyclists are often killed by being sideswiped by a vehicle, hit from behind, or destabilized after a vehicle passes too close.¹



‘Safe passing’ by drivers means giving bicyclists ample space when overtaking them on the road. ‘Safe passing laws,’ enacted in a majority of states,⁸ create buffer zones between a bicyclists and vehicles by requiring drivers to maintain a minimum distance when passing bicyclists (e.g., 3 feet, change lanes).

Iowa is one of six states that do not have any safe passing law as it relates to bicyclists (along with AK, ID, IN, NM, and TX). Every state bordering Iowa has a law requiring motorists to maintain a safe passing distance when overtaking bicyclists. South Dakota’s law, which is two-tiered, requires 3 feet on roads 35 miles per hour (mph) or less, and 6 feet on roads greater than 35 mph.

- 35 states and Washington D.C. require at least 3 feet.
- 6 states (DE, GA, OK, KY, NE, and WA) require drivers to completely change lanes when passing bicyclists, if there is more than one lane proceeding in the same direction. If there is no such lane, drivers must pass to the left with a minimum distance (usually 3 feet) if conditions allow (e.g., no oncoming traffic in the other lane).
- 8 states require “a safe distance” but do not specify how many feet.

Changing lanes to pass may be easier to enforce.⁵

While the commonly enacted three-foot passing distance may offer some protection, **it may be difficult for drivers and law enforcement to accurately estimate, making enforcement challenging.** This concern applies not only to bicyclists but also to other vulnerable road users such as slow-moving vehicles (e.g., farm equipment) and horse-drawn carriages.

The gold standard for both safety and enforceability is requiring drivers to change lanes when passing these road users, as it **eliminates the need to judge exact distances and provides clearer, more consistent protection.**

Protecting operators of farm equipment

As urban and suburban development continues to expand into rural areas, farmers are increasingly using public roads to transport farm equipment such as tractors to access their fields or carry goods to market. In addition, horse-drawn carriages, still used in some rural communities, are also sharing these roads, adding to the diversity of slow-moving vehicles encountered by motorists.



Iowa law does **not explicitly require a lane change** when passing slow-moving vehicles such as farm equipment.³

One study of 7,000 crashes across nine Midwestern states from 2005 to 2010 found that **crashes involving farm equipment were more likely to occur on roads with small lanes/ without wide lanes**, among other characteristics.⁹

Another study found **drivers of motor vehicles were more often at fault in collisions with farm equipment that resulted in injury in Iowa**.¹⁰ Among farm equipment crashes that led to injury (1995 to 2004), 22% involved non-farm vehicles attempting to pass the equipment.¹⁰

Protecting vulnerable road users: One approach

The following approach in Oklahoma¹¹, Kentucky¹², and Georgia¹³ offers a model for protecting vulnerable road users. How it generally works:



- **Multi-lane roads:** Drivers must **change lanes** when overtaking slow-moving vehicles such as bicycles or farm equipment, if it is safe and legal to do so.
- **Single-lane roads** - Drivers may pass by moving into the opposite lane **only when**:
 - The **left side of the road is clearly visible and unobstructed**.
 - There is **no oncoming traffic** within a safe distance.
 - The pass can be completed **without interfering** with approaching vehicles.
- **When lane change is unsafe or impossible:** Drivers may pass within the same lane **only if**:
 - The lane is **wide enough** to safely share side-by-side.
 - A **minimum of three feet** of clearance can be maintained.
 - The driver **reduces speed** and passes cautiously.
- **Honking:** Prohibited unless necessary to avoid an **immediate hazard**.
- **Slow-moving vehicles:** Must **keep right** and **yield** when five or more vehicles are lined up behind them.

References

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<https://policy.uiowa.edu/community-policies/nondiscrimination-statement>