

Moving Together: Getting Around A-Town



Travel Nicely: Mind Your Transportation Manners

by Rachael Stark

You're tearing down Mass. Ave., sure that getting there super fast is super important. You swerve around some pesky travelers who have the nerve to be clocking well under 50 miles an hour. You do the Arlington Center lane switching contra dance. You practically leave a dust cloud and skid marks – only to meet at the next red light the same slowpokes you left in the dust at the last red light. Other than raising your blood pressure and lowering your life expectancy, what exactly have you gained from all this rushing?

Getting from here to there is a fact of life. You shouldn't have to risk your life to do so. Safe and pleasant travel in all modes should be something we can count on. So why does walking, driving, cycling, and taking the bus in Arlington sometimes feel like an obstacle course? Whether powered by muscle, battery or fossil fuel, and whether on wheels or on foot, all travelers have rights and responsibilities for good manners, sharing, taking turns, and following the rules. Most of this is stuff we already know. But sometimes we forget that our lives depend on it. A little humor can make a point, but this is serious stuff.

The street we now call Mass. Ave. was laid out by the 1630's. Almost 400 years later, we use roughly the same busy strip of ground, but now it's shared by thousands of people a day traveling by foot, bicycle, car, bus or truck. We want to be law abiding and polite as we travel - honest we do - but frustration and hurry can get the better of us.

Most of the same rules apply, no matter what your mode of travel. Stop signs and red lights mean stop, then proceed when it is safe. And that includes you. Yes, you. And you too. Emergency vehicles get to go first, and you really do have to wait. Very few work meetings or school homerooms are as important as a medical emergency, a crime in progress, or a fire. You're not the only person on the road. Yes, I know, getting to work or to school right-now-this-very-minute feels like the most important thing in the world. But getting there in one piece trumps getting there one minute faster.

Pay attention to your surroundings - always look all ways while crossing a street or an intersection. Hang up and drive or cycle or walk – no phone call or text on earth is worth risking your life or mine. Earphones off and earbuds out when in transit. You need all your senses available to perceive fellow travelers. Use the sections of infrastructure intended for your mode of travel – whether sidewalk, road, street or path. Watch and listen for other people using that section, and all the sections that intersect it. And don't take your half out of the middle, eh?

Generally, faster traffic left and slower traffic right. Don't be such a person of mystery – signal your intentions before passing slower traffic. Turn signals, blinkers, bike bells, “excuse me”, or “on your left” go a long way to letting the rest of us know what to expect. I know all the cool kids are wearing black, but can you please add some reflective clothing or lights when you travel at night? See and be seen, hear and be heard.

Cross at crosswalks and at walk signals if they are available. Look both ways. Twice. Be extra careful if you are crossing without a crosswalk, stop sign, street light, or walk light. Are you absolutely sure you can't walk the extra half block to reach a safer place to cross? If you can, please do. No safe way to cross the street nearby? Contact the Town and request one. Go to <http://www.arlingtonma.gov>, contact the Selectmen or click on Request/Answer Center, and state your case.

“Safety Tips for Pedestrians & Drivers” from Walking In Arlington says “Walkers, drivers, truckers, cyclists, motorcyclists, wheelchair users, stroller rollers, rollerskaters and animals all share the streets and all have the right to expect safe, fair and respectful travel conditions. Walkers and drivers have the responsibility to travel in ways that are safe, fair and respectful.”

Rights and responsibilities go together. With the right to travel comes the responsibility to travel safely. Please, be a credit to your Town, not a hazard to yourself and others. Your travel could be filled with rushing around, risky behavior, and cursing your fellow travelers. Or you could take a deep breath, and practice acts of kindness, safety and good travel manners. I bet you get there almost as fast. And I'm sure we'll all enjoy the trip more.

Rachael Stark is the Founder of Walking in Arlington.