

People Angry at Traffic Tend to Forget That *They Are* Traffic

by Ross Heintzkill
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“We’re allowed a lot of leeway in traffic,” said the man whose job gives him — he admits — a pretty surprising amount of power over the daily lives of people all over Eugene. “The difference between letting that left turn arrow go for 10 seconds or 4 seconds? That’s all me. In that specific example -- I get to do whatever I want. It’s crazy. It’s crazy!”

Andrew Kading, or Andy when you meet him, is the City of Eugene’s Traffic Operations Engineer. “I’m the guy in charge of traffic signals and street lights,” said Kading. “Civil engineering is weird in a way because when it’s done right, you don’t notice it. So if we do our job well, it’s sort of frustrating in a way because people forget about it: they don’t realize how much actually goes into it.”

You don’t have to look far in Eugene for people who have opinions about traffic, but who — to use Kading’s perspective — might not realize how much goes into it. There are people like Eugene native Howard, who thinks politics, money and development are to blame for why he has to wait at traffic lights and spend thirty minutes getting across town.

According to Howard the traffic lights in town “weren’t the best money Kitty ever spent” (former Eugene mayor Kitty Piercy). While Howard might be quick to regale you with stories from his youth some 60 years past about how a body could catch four-pound bass and bluegill as big as his hand in the Willamette south of where Valley River Center is now, his views on traffic are less floral. “Traffic sucks.”

“People tend to drive a lot,” Kading said. He and his team of six city employees appreciate that fact, and want to get you to where you’re going as quickly as possible. But what’s even more important for them is getting you there safely. “In the U.S., we have somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 people die every year in traffic-related crashes,” Kading said. “Europe has a small fraction of what we do in traffic deaths per capita. Just to be clear - that’s just fatalities. You want to talk about life-changing injuries? That’s over 100,000.”

The effects of those 100,000 major injuries and fatalities grow as they ripple outward. In 2014, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration¹ totaled up all of the costs related to traffic accidents that occurred in one year. For 2010, the total impact for economic and societal

¹ <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812013.pdf>

harm from motor vehicle crashes that year came to \$871 billion. Divided amongst every citizen in the U.S., that's \$900 per person.

Traffic safety is a key concern for some Eugene drivers. If she had to choose between safety or efficiency, Michelle, a Eugene mother, said that she wants emphasis put on safety. That's where she wants the emphasis because, she said, it seems to her that many other drivers aren't paying attention as it is, so more needs to be done to keep everyone else safe from them. For her, keeping people safe is much more important than getting people to where they're going.

And there's controversy in the traffic planning world between those two competing impulses: efficiency or safety. Kading said that the decision-making process for how to get vehicles through a city is changing, and that "represents a sea change in the profession. There's a younger group of people coming in who are operating under a different way of thinking. We're saying you know there's other things besides how many cars can move through an intersection. There's bikes, there's pedestrians, there's safety. We want *everyone* to get there."

People who are preoccupied by that \$871 billion say that getting drivers where they're going safely should be a bigger priority than getting them there as fast as possible. "The old school way of doing things was to maximize traffic flow," said Kading. "That way is dying."

The question of whether to get cars to destinations quickly, or to keep pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists safe dictates all manner of decisions. Kading chooses how long a yellow light stays yellow or whether or not to offer a blinking yellow arrow at a left turn or only green and red left arrows.

Even how long the flashing orange *Don't Walk* signal stays orange is debatable. "Are we going to time that for old people who walk slower? Or children? Or healthy adults who walk at a certain speed?" Kading said. "If I choose 3 1/2 feet per second, or 4 feet per second, that's entire seconds that I'm taking out of the available green time for cars." But those decisions can't be made lightly. Because any decision like that — any time he prioritizes safety over the number of cars making it through an intersection — "causes the nemesis of all traffic engineers: delay."

But it's usually during those delays that we citizens finally take note of our traffic signals. Those largely innocuous ushers of our daily lives become noticeable generally when we're delayed by them. At least that's what Cottage Grove retiree Alan thinks of the "menagerie of turning lanes for one light." He resents being held up by traffic lights and would prefer "if there's

no traffic crossways, let me go.” If he’s at a left turn and he sees a red left arrow, he’s unhappy. “Those flashing yellows, those I like.”

So what’s a traffic engineer like Kading to do? He’s not an elected official, and he serves at the behest of the city. All he can do every day is make decisions with the data he has and the philosophy he was taught. For him, safety comes first. Preserving safe intersections isn’t just about saving lives, but also money. So try to think of him the next time you’re at a left turn with a green arrow and you see it switch from green to red too fast and you consider speeding through the intersection in spite of the danger.

He just wants you to make it home.