

Willing to Lose Another Privilege

The column I wrote last month in support of installing red light cameras in Iowa City evidently succeeded in irritating all the people I enjoy irritating, so we may as well keep the good times rolling.

Today's topic is Iowa's helmet laws (or lack thereof). Currently, only Illinois, Iowa and New Hampshire have no motorcycle helmet laws whatsoever. Iowa is also one of 29 states with no bicycle helmet laws whatsoever.

There are a lot of reasons for states not to be legislating personal choices like this, none of which I find persuasive. There's also a larger principle involved that many people may not be aware of – namely I'm not allowed to ride my motorcycle without a helmet and it's screwing with my self-image of a risk-taking rugged individualist.

My angst would be relieved if everybody was required to wear one. The way it is now, I have to putter around town viewing the world through the visor of a hot brain bucket while I watch badass biker guys my own age motoring topless with what's left of their hair fluttering in the wind.

I bought a Harley a few years ago thinking that it would compensate for my dweeby hat, but I think it makes me look even dorkier. I still feel like an urban Hell's Angel wannabe bobble-head.

No, it's not an option for me to lose the lid. When LuAnn reluctantly allowed me to buy a motorcycle about eight years ago it was with the understanding that I would always wear a helmet. She's a transplant nurse at UIHC and has seen more than her share of incoming organs through the involuntary courtesy of unlucky "donorcycle" riders

To get serious for a minute, the helmet issue probably resonates in our community more than most others due to the August 2011 death of 17-year-old Caroline Found. Last month a group of her fellow Iowa City West High School students lobbied the Senate Transportation Subcommittee to encourage Iowa to

join 22 other states in requiring moped riders to wear helmets. The pesky civil libertarians and ABATE (motorcycle rights organization) won out again so nothing will change, at least this year.

Not that there is anything wrong with protecting our civil liberties. The problem is that there are so many laws already on the books that were designed to protect us from ourselves that many legislators are reluctant to add any more. Even ones that seem to make sense.

Those of you who are of roughly my vintage may recall that Iowa did indeed once have a universal motorcycle helmet law that was implemented on Sept. 1, 1975. The federal government had been pressuring states to pass helmet laws or risk losing highway construction funds and not qualifying for certain federal safety programs.

The following year, states successfully lobbied Congress to stop the Department of Transportation from assessing financial penalties on states without helmet laws, which allowed Iowa to repeal its law effective July 1, 1976. During the ten months it was in effect, motorcycle fatality rates in Iowa were 30 percent lower than in the same time period the following year according to the Iowa Governor's Traffic Safety Bureau and the Iowa DOT.

Nobody is arguing that the lack of helmet laws saves lives. It seems to be more important that we all maintain our God-given right to unnecessarily risk adding our names to the list of 4,000 or so other Americans who die each year on motorcycles.

I'm willing to forego this particular one of my precious liberties in exchange for an unknown number of living, breathing fellow motorcyclists. And I'm looking forward to the day that I'm just another bobble-head.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons commutes cautiously on his Hog (weather permitting) between his home in Iowa City and the business he co-owns on the Coralville strip.