

City of Madison

Traffic Engineering Division

SHARROWS

Sharrows are pavement markings installed in travel lanes, reminding motorists that they should expect to see and share the road with bicyclists by slowing down and passing only when safe, giving at least three feet of clearance when passing.

Sharrows can be used on a variety of street types. They may be used on busier streets where we would prefer to have bicycle lanes but do not have the space for these, or they can be used on lower volume streets where we are encouraging bicycle traffic (bicycle boulevards).

In areas with on-street parking, sharrows help bicyclists position themselves within the lane so as to avoid being hit by a suddenly opened car door. Although it is the motorist's responsibility to check for bicyclists or other traffic before opening their door, riding too close to parked cars is still a common mistake that can lead to serious injury.

Sharrows are also used to help bicyclists position themselves in a lane near an intersection to avoid turning movement crashes such as the "right hook".

What do sharrows mean for bicyclists and drivers?

Bicyclists:

Use the sharrow to guide where you ride within the lane—generally through the center of the sharrow.

Remember not to ride too close to parked cars—watch for opening doors.

Be aware of your surroundings and follow the rules of the road.

Drivers:

Expect to see bicyclists on the street.

Remember to give bicyclists space when passing. At least three feet of clearance is required.

Be aware of your surroundings and follow the rules of the road.

For more information: email traffic@cityofmadison.com or visit our website at www.cityofmadison.com



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Shared Lane Markings (aka “SHARROWS”)

Q. I’ve seen new pavement markings on streets in Madison. The marking is a bicycle with two arrows above it. What does it mean?

A. What you’re seeing is a shared lane pavement marking, also known as a “sharrow”, a new pavement marking now in use throughout the country.



Q. So, if I don’t see sharrows, then it’s not a shared lane and bicyclists aren’t supposed to be there?

A. No. Bicyclists can ride on any street in Madison except for Interstates and other highways with signs specifically prohibiting bicyclists.

Q. Why is the purpose of these markings on the street?

A. The purpose of the markings is to create improved conditions for bicycling, by clarifying where bicyclists are expected to ride and to remind motorists to expect bicyclists on the road. In the absence of bicycle lanes, motorists often pass too closely to bicyclists, and bicyclists feel compelled to ride closer to parked cars. If somebody were to open a car door as a bicyclist passed, the bicyclist could get “doored,” and possibly get injured.

Q. Why not just stripe bike lanes?

A. Our preference on busier streets is to stripe bike lanes. We’re using the sharrows on some streets because there isn’t currently enough room on the street for bike lanes. This is typically because of a combination of a high demand for on-street parking, the inability to either eliminate a travel lane or narrow the existing travel lanes, or widen the roadway.

On quieter streets, bike lanes are not necessary. Some quieter streets are being designated as “bicycle boulevards” to encourage bicycling. We are using sharrows on these streets as an encouragement to bicyclists and as a reminder to motorists to be courteous to bicyclists.

Q. As a bicyclist, what should I do when I see these markings?

A. The markings are placed where bicyclists should be riding. Bicyclists should generally ride through the center of the sharrow.

Q. But on some streets, bicyclists riding over this marking will take the entire lane. Aren’t they supposed to move to the right?

A. Not always. Bicyclists are required to ride as far to the right as “practicable”, according to Wisconsin State Statutes Section 346.80. They are permitted to ride further to the left to avoid surface hazards, to prepare for a left turn, to move out of a right-turn-only lane, or to pass slower moving traffic including other bicycles. These markings will be used in situations where the lane is too narrow for a bicycle and an overtaking motor vehicle to travel safely side by side, another situation where bicyclists can ride further left. This means they will take the entire lane to avoid car doors or to prevent motorists from passing unsafely. Drivers of slower moving vehicles are not required to compromise their safety in order to allow a faster vehicle to pass. Passing drivers need to follow at a safe distance and speed and only pass when safe, allowing at least three feet of clearance when passing.

Q. As a motorist, what should I do when I see sharrows?

A. Slow down and drive carefully. Because the travel lane is too narrow for safe side-by-side travel by motorists and bicyclists, motorists should slow down and either wait for the bicyclist to turn off the roadway, or wait until you can move into an adjacent travel lane to pass safely.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with the sharrows?

A. We want to create safer conditions for bicyclists on busy streets where we don’t have room for bicycle lanes, and to encourage more bicycling on quieter bicycle boulevard streets. We hope to do this by moving bicyclists a little further away from parked cars than they would normally ride in the absence of sharrows, and creating a little more separation between passing motorists and bicyclists than would normally exist.

Q. Do the sharrows work?

A. A 2003 study in San Francisco showed that in the presence of the markings, bicyclists moved further away from parked cars, and passing motorists moved further away from bicyclists than in similar situations without the sharrows.

