

Section IX. Appendices

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Helmets On in Montgomery

IN THEORY, the helmet law for bicyclists that was passed last week by the Montgomery County Council might be considered an over-dose of good government. It requires that helmets be worn by all cyclists 17 and younger, and it sets fines for the families of those who don't comply, including even kids on bikes with training wheels. In practice, however, it's the enforcement of the law that counts, and indications are that in this regard, it will prove to be a useful, sensible measure that will save some young people's lives.

The fine for noncompliance (\$25 now, possibly rising to \$50) will not be imposed for 90 days after the law takes effect this fall, and after that it will still be waived for people who buy helmets. Moreover, county police officials make it clear that this is one area where they're not going to be conducting any crusades. "I do not envision the police officers aggressively enforcing the law," Police Chief Donald E. Brooks told the council earlier this year.

So why bother even enacting a law that isn't likely to be strictly enforced? Primarily because of the impetus it gives to wearing helmets, even

if not by everybody. A good many parents will buy helmets and order their kids to wear them simply because it's the law. Others will do so because the law has made them aware of the head-injury dangers of bicycling. In addition, passage of the law has already spurred efforts to find ways for making helmets available to those who may not be able to afford them.

Maryland is proving to be something of a pioneer in this area. Montgomery's helmet law follows close on one in Howard County that applies to riders 15 and younger. The effort to get a law in Howard was backed by young people motivated by the sort of incident that takes these matters out of the realm of theory: Two boys who had attended Glenwood Middle School were killed in separate cycling incidents. In all, there are more than 1,000 such deaths each year in this country, and more than half of them are children. Head injuries account for some three-quarters of the deaths and for a great deal more truly awful suffering and permanent disability. Any law that can reduce this toll at so little cost is welcome.

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