



CONTROVERSIES IN TSE

By JC Fawcett (Owner Defensive Driving School & President PDSA)

ISSUE: Unprotected Left Turns

Moving into the intersection and waiting to turn left is a controversial and ambiguous law. DOL examiners and law enforcement have given different opinions about this issue. Joann Ryan (a former DOL supervisor and auditor) stated that during the drive test, if you are in the intersection waiting to turn left and the light turns red before you have the opportunity to go, you will get sited for running a red light. However, if you wait behind the line, waiting for an opening, and the light cycles through without an opening, you will lose points for causing congestion.

Here are the laws that appear to refer to this situation.

RCW 46.61.202

Stopping when traffic is obstructed.

No driver shall enter an intersection or a marked crosswalk or drive onto any railroad grade crossing **unless there is sufficient space on the other side** of the intersection, crosswalk, or railroad grade crossing to accommodate the vehicle he or she is operating without obstructing the passage of other vehicles, pedestrians, or railroad trains notwithstanding any traffic control signal indications to proceed.

So now the question is, how do we interpret this law? This law appears to be addressing the issue of entering the intersection when you have nowhere to go, usually because of blocked traffic on the other side. When your light turns red, you are now stuck obstructing the cross traffic and still have no place to go. When turning left, there would need to be sufficient room on the other side of the intersection before entering the intersection. Waiting in the middle of the intersection for oncoming traffic would not be obstructing passage of other vehicles until the light turned red. However, once the light is red and the oncoming traffic is stopped, you would be able to complete the turn without creating congestion.

RCW 46.61.055

Traffic control signal legend.

Whenever traffic is controlled by traffic control signals exhibiting different colored lights, or colored lighted arrows, successively one at a time or in combination, only the colors green, red and yellow shall be used, except for special pedestrian signals carrying a word or legend, and said lights shall indicate and apply to drivers of vehicles and pedestrians as follows:

(1) Green indication

(a) Vehicle operators facing a circular green signal may proceed straight through or turn right or left unless a sign at such place prohibits either such turn. **Vehicle operators turning right or left shall stop to allow other vehicles lawfully within the intersection control area to complete their movements.** Vehicle operators turning right or left shall also stop for pedestrians who are lawfully within the intersection control area as required by RCW 46.61.235(1).

Here is where the ambiguity begins. The law states first to proceed through the intersection. Then it states to stop and yield to others within the intersection. So do you stop in the intersection or do you stop before the intersection? It is not clear in this law where you should stop.

Our driving school has a location in the Seattle's U-District (50th and Brookly) that is a very congested intersection which makes it very difficult to turning left. If you wait behind the line for an opening to turn left, you most likely will not be able to complete your turn. Letting the light cycle through several times will create more congestion than what is already there.

It is agreed that turning left at an unprotected green light is considered a high risk maneuver.

My recommendations:

These are the conditions that instructors should be teaching considering this maneuver.

1. Wait behind the stop line until it is clear on the other side of the intersection of your intended path of travel.
2. Wait behind the stop line until all pedestrians have cleared the crosswalk of your intended path of travel.
3. Wait behind the stop line until you are the first car waiting to turn left at the intersection.
4. If the conditions of the 3 steps above are clear, and the light is still green, you may enter the intersection and stop to wait for oncoming traffic.
5. As soon as there is a sufficient and safe opening, you must complete the turn.
6. If the light turns yellow (or red) before there is an opening, wait until you know the oncoming traffic is stopping to complete the turn (cross traffic is required to wait until the intersection is clear before proceeding).