

Spreading holiday cheer at four-way stop signs

By Rick Maier

It's that time of year to be extra nice to everyone, and what better way to express peace and goodwill to your fellow man than at four-way stop intersections?

Four-way stops, at least when congested, present a unique driving experience. Anyone can navigate a stoplight or regular ol' stop sign, but multi-way stops (as GDOT calls them) require skill and judgement.

Just for a moment, drivers need to stop talking on the phone, stop yelling at the kids, face front and put down that eyelash curler to pay full attention to the task at hand.

I encounter two four-way stop intersections on Bass Road every day that I take my kids to school. Most days everything is pretty routine, but sometimes, when the traffic is heavy at about 7:30 a.m., you can feel a little bah-humbug in the air. Tension builds as the otherwise kind citizens of Bibb County inch up to the white line to face off against three challengers to their individual sense of justice and fair play.

One big problem with four-way stops is that few people actually come to a clear standstill - some roll through the intersection while others stop more than once. Another problem is that many drivers don't signal, leaving one to guess which of the 256 permutations will occur next (each of four cars able to go straight, left, right or stay put).

Four-way stops serve to control intersections where traffic is too heavy for a two-way stop and too light for a traffic signal. The disadvantage of four-ways is that "rolling stops" present a serious hazard to pedestrians and cyclists, and the stop-and-go driving frustrates many people. However, four-ways can actually be more efficient and safer than traffic signals.

While most drivers perform just fine, there are a few character types whose personality issues can short circuit the mission of moving traffic safely through intersections:

Big shot – the need to control others is so strong that he will give up his turn just for the opportunity to command others with his traffic-cop-wannabe hand motions.

Ditz – so busy doing everything other than driving that when he gets to the front of the line he has no clue what's going on. He loses three or four turns before jerking out into the intersection nearly causing an accident.

Too nice – lets others go before her out of genuine kindness, not understanding that being nice to one person confuses and angers a dozen other drivers.

Jerky – he starts, then hesitates, causing a starburst of simultaneous starts and stops by all cars at the intersection until they meet inches apart in the middle of the intersection.

Aggressor – gets to the front of the line, stops and goes, regardless of whether it's his turn. I'm... I mean... this character is tired of fooling around at four-way stops.

Some people think that each vehicle must clear the intersection before others can proceed. I believe that the objective should be to move as many cars through the intersection as quickly as possible.

Except for the occasional solo left turn, two or more cars can move safely at the same time. Even though it may take one car to go out of turn to get the rhythm going, multiple traverses really speed up traffic and make drivers feel like they received a gift.

The other day I saw two cars make a left and one a right at the same time – a virtual motorcar symphony.

Someday I hope to see four cars turn simultaneously – two lefts and two rights, four rights... it doesn't matter.

Join me next week at a four way stop. I may even wait for three others to show up if it's not busy, just so I can practice suppressing road rage with a little holiday cheer.