

Dear Road Wizard: During the power outage last Sunday, I was on State Street at the Veteran's Memorial Parkway intersection, where the signal was dark. I had the impression that everyone wanted to do the right thing, but with left turns in all directions, it was hard to know what kind of rhythm to get going. We didn't do too well. When one left-turner grabbed a chance, the six cars behind followed! So much for taking turns. Perplexed@

The Thunderhead Days of August are now upon us. It could happen again... Unfortunately, no budding traffic engineer seems to have made this a PhD study. There's no "best" recommendation from the experts. The law says everyone must stop. After that, anti-chaos authorities get vague.

Perhaps the simplest thing to strive for at such a complicated intersection, where each leg has two thru lanes plus left-turn lanes, is to go around the circle in a counter-clockwise direction, each lane sending one car at a time.

This means that each leg would take its own turn. The two thru lanes that face each other (i.e., east- and westbound on State) wouldn't try to go together, but hold back so left-turners can make their moves confidently.

Simple maybe, but that model is excruciatingly slo-mo. I'd go for this idea: The westbound left-turn drivers, let's say, move out with their fellow westbound thru mates, sort of using them as protection. Once out in the intersection, they are easily visible and can complete their left-turn move safely. Then the northbound cohort would go, and so on around the circle. This model moves three cars at a time, not just one -- and gives left-turners full citizenship status.

In actual practice, an oscillation among various models seems to occur, as people do their best to be fair and read each other's minds, changing for no obvious reasons. Accidents are rare because drivers tend to be extremely present in the moment. Take comfort in that! We can be grateful for our typically stable power supply. If things degrade, ACHD may need to invest in emergency generators and back-up batteries.

Dear Road Wizard: During rush hour, I exit westbound from the freeway onto the Orchard Street exit. If I miss the light, it seems to take forever before it changes again -- even though no one is coming either way on Orchard. Yet during off hours, the light senses my car and changes appropriately. What's wrong? D.W., Boise

You are a perfect witness for two things: ACHD's policy to speed up the commuter trip when possible and the potential of modern electronics to aid this mission.

The evening rush is deemed to occur between 3:30 pm and 6:30 pm. The signal provides minimum green times for Orchard in coordination with other Orchard signals. If you just miss the light, you will wait at least 80 seconds and sometimes longer.

For off hours, the order is "full actuation." The signal is free to respond to cars as they show up. Without heavy commuter counts on Orchard, the signal doesn't care about coordinating with other nearby signals.

Dear Road Wizard: People driving west on Mountain View Drive and turning left onto Cole Road often wait through two light cycles because there is NO LEFT-TURN ARROW. Could this problem be corrected? C.H., Boise

There has to be a certain amount of demand for that left-turn move to justify stopping eastbound traffic for it. ACHD has agreed to do some counts for us. I'll report later.