

When the Traffic Lights Go Out on Main Street

We lost electricity during a Thursday evening thunderstorm last summer. The next morning, Friday, I realized that the traffic lights on the main road below me were malfunctioning and blinking yellow for every direction.

Now, I live in an area that would be familiar to most people. The four-lane road below me runs alongside a mall. On the opposite side of the road are shopping plazas. During the week, traffic runs smoothly, except for a brief hour or so at rush hour. Friday evening is generally tolerable, while traffic late Saturday afternoon is the most congested. Sunday afternoon traffic is slow but acceptable.

There are four main entrances on my side of the mall. With the lights malfunctioning, my neighbors and I feared the traffic accidents that were sure to follow.

On Friday, many drivers did not anticipate the blinking yellow lights, and sped right through them. Others came to a complete stop and apprehensively inched forward. There was some congestion, but no more than usual.

However, Saturday and Sunday were enlightening. As the weekend progressed, the lights remained inoperable. Yet, drivers learned to negotiate their way through the intersections. They put down their cell phones, stopped gulping their large drinks and munching their favorite snacks, and paid attention to other driver's actions. They took turns advancing through the intersections much like a 4-way stop sign. No one had to hurry a turn or drive through a red light to keep moving. No one was stuck in the middle of a dangerous intersection, blocking other lanes. Instead, traffic flowed quickly and efficiently.

The lights were not fixed until Tuesday morning. I asked my neighbors if they had witnessed or heard of any accidents the previous weekend. None had. I remarked that I had never seen traffic move so well during a weekend. They agreed it was surprising. Indeed, traffic had not backed up at all on Saturday, even during the end of the afternoon shopping.

I commented to a neighbor, a nice elderly woman who had been anxious all weekend, that perhaps those lights were unnecessary, and that it was actually safer and quicker if drivers knew they had to pay attention more as they drove, and not rely on the lights to direct them. Despite what we had all surprisingly observed during the previous few days, she disagreed, believing it would be too dangerous

and would cause heavy congestion.

There are signs, rules, regulations, ordinances, and laws preventing all types of activity. Most are necessary. Yet, you just have to wonder if our society is moving in the wrong direction by over-regulating every day actions. We seem to be so determined to remove all and any risk in our lives, yet accidents and tragedies happen anyway. This inclination to err on the side of safety can sometimes be counterproductive.

It is counterintuitive to believe that traffic lights in an area of moderate congestion would actually hinder the flow of traffic, and potentially compromise safety. Yet considering what transpired that weekend last summer, it is something that government officials should research. I am sure that many drivers, the elderly and beginners in particular, would reluctantly accept changes that would force them to be even more attentive behind the wheel.

However, in this particular case, when each driver is responsible for their own decisions and actions, it is actually as safe – if not safer – than when they are mindlessly instructed what to do. Finally, you have to wonder what other aspects of our lives for which this lesson can apply.

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