

# Lights, sirens don't always stop traffic

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You're driving along, maybe talking on the car phone, maybe listening to the radio or maybe just trying to cool off with your air conditioner blowing full blast. Faintly you hear the wail of a siren. In the rear-view mirror you see flashing lights.

What do you do?

According to those who know — drivers of ambulances, fire trucks and police cars — you should slow down, pull off to the right, and stop. But the same authorities say Columbia drivers don't always follow the rules.

An unscientific poll reveals that drivers who don't comply with regulations choose one of three options:

■ They stop dead in their tracks.

"People react very funny to the shock of a 36,000-pound piece of fire equipment coming up behind them," said Steven Kirkland, Columbia Fire Department's equipment operator who drives Engine 2. "When you go by them, they have a glassy look in their eyes."

■ They pull to the left or in front of the emergency vehicle.

"They're like squirrels caught in the headlights," said David Shull, a paramedic who drives an ambulance for the Lexington County EMS. "They zigzag across the road."

■ They ignore the siren and flashing lights.

"Drivers flip us off every now and then," for getting in the way, said Jackie Fink, a Lexington County emergency medical technician.

Sometimes drivers just don't hear the siren with the windows rolled up and the stereo on.

But for emergency drivers, slowing for a motorist in the wrong lane, or hitting the brakes behind a driver who stops, regardless of the reason, can make a big difference in fighting a fire or saving a life.

"Those trucks are very heavy and it takes time to get them stopped and time to get them back up to speed," Kirkland said. "Every minute a fire burns, it doubles itself."

Today, the Columbia Fire and Police Departments and Richland County Emergency Services are unveiling a public service announcement to educate drivers on proper emergency etiquette.