

# Non-Traditional Motor Vehicles and DC Law

## Legal requirements to Register and Operate a Motor Vehicle



In the D.C. Code, motor vehicles are defined as vehicles propelled by an internal-combustion engine, electricity, or steam. [1] This definition encompasses non-traditional motor vehicles. Therefore, the four main requirements for the operation of motor vehicles all apply: registration, driver's license, inspection, and insurance. [2] All traffic laws, such as reckless driving, also apply,[3] except as discussed below.

## Safety Requirements

All motor vehicles in the District of Columbia must have a certification label that identifies the manufacturer, the date of manufacture, and the statement: "This vehicle conforms to all applicable Federal motor vehicle safety standards (FMVSS) in effect on the date of manufacture shown above." [3A]

## Motorcycles vs. Motorized Bicycles




If the non-traditional vehicle has two or three wheels, it falls under one of two subcategories of motor vehicle: motorcycle or motorized bicycle.

Vehicle Type	Definition	Inspection Required	License Required	Insurance Required	Registration Required	Helmet Required	Permitted on Sidewalk	Permitted on Bike Lanes	Parking
Motorcycle (may include some mopeds and scooters)	A motorcycle is a two or three wheeled vehicle that has <b>one or more of the following characteristics</b> : 1) piston displacement of more than fifty (50) cubic centimeters, 2) capable of traveling over 35 miles per hour on level ground, 3) more than one and one-half (1.5) brake horsepower (S.A.E. rating), 4) wheels under 16 inches in diameter, or 5) manual transmission.[4], [5]	Yes, must be inspected for safety and emissions every two (2) years. [6]	Yes, operator must pass motorcycle demonstration test in DC or motorcycle demonstration course in VA or MD, and have an "M" endorsement on operator's license. [8]	Yes, must meet the Compulsory No-Fault Motor Vehicle Insurance Act limits. [11]	Yes; \$52. [9] Non-DC vehicles must meet their state's registration requirements.	Yes. [14]	No	No	Motor vehicles rules apply, except that some areas are reserved for motorcycles only
									
Motorized Bicycle (includes most mopeds and scooters)	A motorized bicycle is a two or three wheeled vehicle with <b>all of the following characteristics</b> : 1) wheels more than 16 inches in diameter, 2) automatic transmission, 3) piston displacement of not more than fifty (50) cubic centimeters, 4) incapable of maximum speed of over 35 miles per hour on level ground, and 5) not more than one and one-half (1.5) brake horsepower (S.A.E. rating). If the two or three wheeled motor vehicle does not meet one or more of these characteristics, it is a motorcycle. [4]	Yes, must be inspected for safety and emissions every two (2) years. [6]	Yes, operator must have a driver license, but does not need an "M" endorsement. Operator must be 18 years of age or older. [10]	Yes, must meet the Compulsory No-Fault Motor Vehicle Insurance Act limits. [11]	Yes; \$30. [9] Non-DC vehicles must meet their state's registration requirements.	No.	No.	Yes. [17]	May be parked in a bike rack or on a curb so as not to impede pedestrian traffic.
									

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## Additional Vehicles

If the non-traditional vehicle has two or three wheels, it falls under one of two subcategories of motor vehicle: motorcycle or motorized bicycle.

Vehicle Type	Definition	Inspection Required	License Required	Insurance Required	Registration Required	Helmet Required	Permitted on Sidewalk	Permitted on Bike Lanes	Parking
All-Terrain Vehicles and Dirt Bikes	An all-terrain vehicle ("ATV") is defined as any motor vehicle with not less than three low pressure tires, but not more than six low pressure tires, designed primarily for off-road use and which has a seat or saddle designed to be straddled by the operator. A dirt bike is defined as any motorcycle designed primarily for off-road use. [11A]	N/A. It is a criminal offense to operate an ATV or a dirt bike on any public property in the District. ATVs and dirt bikes are not permitted to be registered in the District. [12]							
									
Low Speed Vehicles	Low speed vehicle means any four wheeled motor vehicle whose top speed is greater than 20 miles per hour, but not greater than 25 miles per hour. [17]	Yes [6]	Yes [10]	Yes [11]	Yes; \$72 [9] Non-DC vehicles must meet their state's registration requirements.	No	No	No	Motor vehicle rules apply.
									
Personal Mobility Devices (PMD)	Personal Mobility Devices ("PMD") means a motorized propulsion device designed to transport one person or a self-balancing, two non-tandem wheeled device, designed to transport only one person with an electric propulsion system. [13]	No. By definition, PMDs are not considered motor vehicles. [14]				No	Yes, except PMDs are generally not permitted on sidewalk space in the Central Business District. [7]	Yes	PMDs may be parked in a bike rack or on a curb so as not to impede pedestrian traffic.
									

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## Notes

[1] D.C. Official Code § 50-1501.01; Not included in this definition are traction engines, road rollers, vehicles propelled only upon rails or tracks, electric personal assistive mobility devices (e.g. Segway), and battery-operated wheelchairs.

[2] D.C. Official Code §§ 50-1501.02, 50-1401.01 et seq., 50-1101; and 31-2403, respectively. Even when the vehicle is operated without turning on the engine, as can be done with some mopeds, the vehicle nevertheless is regulated as a motor vehicle.

[3] See, e.g., United States v. Stancil 422 A.2d 1285 (D.C. 1980).

[3A] 18 DMCR §700.9.

[4] 18 DMCR § 9901.

[5] For example, a moped can be regulated as a motorcycle. United States v. Stancil, 422 A.2d 1285 (D.C. 1980); 18 DCMR 9901.

[11A] D.C. Official Code § 50-2201.02.

[6] 18 DCMR § 601 et seq.

[7] 18 DCMR § 1201.9

[8] 18 DCMR 107.13

[9] D.C. Official Code § 50-1501.03.

[10] See D.C. Official Code § 50-1401.01.

[11] See D.C. Official Code 31-2401 et seq.

[12] D.C. Official Code § 50-2201.04b.

[13] D.C. Official Code § 50-1501.02(g).

[14] 18 DCMR § 2215.

[15] 18 DCMR §§ 1201 & 1209.

[16] D.C. Official Code § 50-1401.02.

[17] 18 DCMR §§ 1201.17 and 1209.

Pictures of motorcycles courtesy of American Honda Motor Company, Inc. and Yamaha Motor Corporation; pictures of motorized bicycles courtesy of Piaggio USA, Inc. and the California Highway Patrol; picture of dirt bike courtesy of American Honda Motor Company, Inc.; picture of off-road vehicle courtesy of Yamaha Motor Corporation; picture of Gem Car courtesy of Global Electric Motorcars; Picture of Segway courtesy of Segway Inc.