

E-bikes put the “easy” in riding but conflict where the rubber meets the road

By STEVE LIPSHER

March 2, 2018 at 12:00 pm



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver PostA woman rides an e-bike on a paved trail near Boulder.

There was no way — no way — the paunchy elderly man in warmup pants was passing me, barely breaking a sweat and chirping out a cheerful, possibly condescending “Hello there!”

I was huffing and puffing on my road bike, headed toward Vail Pass last fall, when I suffered this wound to my ego, only to spy with some relief the bulge on his bike frame that indicated he was on a battery-powered electric bike.

His pedal strokes were being magnified two or three times by the power pack, and he was maintaining a pace uphill noticeably faster than my hard-earned 10 mph.

To me, it seemed like he was cheating in the always competitive human race; to him, it was a way merely to enjoy leisurely bike ride on a pleasant afternoon.

Technically, we were on a paved bike path designated for non-motorized use, although the increasing popularity of e-bikes is now blurring that line.

Statewide, communities have grappled with where to allow e-bikes after a 2017 law gave local governments that control.

Vail allows pedal-assisted e-bikes on its paved bike paths; Grand Junction and Colorado Springs let them on “urban trails,” including paved and hardened-dirt bike paths. Broomfield opted to allow them on paths open to traditional bicycles, while Jefferson County opened the gates to e-bikes on all of its trails, including its popular open-space parks, as a year-long pilot program. Boulder County and Summit County have been considering the issue just this week.

(Interestingly, the state law requires helmets for riding the most powerful e-bikes, which have a maximum speed of 28 mph, even though that requirement inexplicably doesn’t exist in Colorado for motorcycles that travel at highway speeds and faster.)

The debate over whether to allow e-bikes on recreational paths and trails has created some strange bedfellows.

Bike manufacturers and shop owners, sensing an untapped market, eagerly are promoting them, even as their loyal pedal-pushing customers express skepticism if not outright disdain. Environmentalists and traffic managers see them as a possible relief for congestion on the roads and reduce pollution. Recreationalists fear they will be incompatible with existing uses, while seniors and tourists view them as the key to enjoying riding — especially in the mountains.

Everyone, it seems, is at least somewhat torn over where they should be allowed.

For me, a bright line exists on the dirt trails: Given that e-bikes are motorized, I would like to see them confined to routes that allow motorcycles and ATVs, not the single-track trails popular among hikers, horseback riders and mountain bikers.

Of course, I also hold views contrary to many of my mountain-biking friends when I say there are trails where we should be prohibited, too, and, quite frankly, I’m in favor of “use segregation,” such as how land managers keep snowmobilers and backcountry skiers in different areas on Vail Pass and Rabbit Ears Pass. (I’d love to see skier-only and snowboarder-only trails at the ski resorts, too.)

Quite frankly, illegal user-created trails have become a major headache for the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, and motorcycles and mountain bikers — and, mark my words, someday it will be e-bikers — are the primary culprits in these abuses.

As for pavement, Colorado boasts some of the best dedicated bike paths in the world, linking towns and providing safe routes through densely congested urban areas.

Unfortunately, many of the most popular ones already attract such crowds of bicyclists, walkers, parents with strollers, joggers and skateboarders — of all abilities — that they already can be dangerous.

Thousands of tourists annually pay to ride shuttles up to the top of Vail Pass and coast on rental bikes downhill on the bike path to Frisco, often only on the edge of control and seemingly unaware of the strict need to ride single-file and keep right on blind curves.

There are those who, when I call out a courtesy “on your left” as I’m overtaking them, immediately look to the left — and then, invariably, swerve left into my path — as if wanting to verify that I am really there.

I’ve seen clueless riders stopped with their bikes parked sideways across the path, as well as people walking dogs on leashes, pushing prams while walking dogs on leashes and even roller-skating while walking dogs on leashes.

I know at least two people who have been injured in hit-and-run collisions on the bike paths, including one who sparked a countywide vigilante manhunt last fall via social media, ultimately resulting in the culprit’s apprehension on a bus by a sheriff’s deputy.

Adding e-bikes, with their effortless speed, to this mix only will create more mayhem on the bike paths already packed with the unaware, the inconsiderate and the distracted.

But, come to think of it, I don’t want these people on the roads, either.

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