



No one expected scooter-style e-bikes to get in the way when the province started its pilot project.
Photo By PAUL Terefenko

News

Whose lane is it anyway?

Effin' e-scooters clogging up bike lanes, and here comes the Segway

| PAUL TEREFENKO

When is a bicycle no longer a bicycle? When it's equipped with a motor, right? But it's not that simple, as a provincial electric bike pilot project is making clear.

Skyrocketing fuel prices and the gradual realization that even a Cadillac Escalade can't (legally) plow through gridlock has been sending people to two-wheeled solutions.

Some have opted for standard human-powered bicycles, while others have sprung for swanky Vespas. And then there are the e-bikers.

Rewind to 2001. Transport Canada published a definition of "e-bike," but the Ontario Highway Traffic Act deemed e-bikes, aka power-assisted/electric bicycles, "motor vehicles." Since e-bikes don't conform to equipment and safety requirements for highway vehicles, they were banned.

Then, in October 2006, according to an e-mail from Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO) spokesperson Bob Nichols, "Support for legalizing e-bikes from Ontario's cycling community" prompted a three-year pilot program to evaluate the vehicles.

The MTO website says the power-assisted bike project aims to promote e-bikes as a "safe, healthy and environmentally friendly alternative to current transportation modes."

The province envisions e-bikes as regular-looking bicycles with handlebars and pedals. They should be "propelled primarily by muscular power." The attached electric motor should not exceed 500W power output so that the bike can't travel faster than 32 km/h.

Not a bad idea. But then electric scooters masquerading as bicycles rolled onto the scene.

They technically conform to the rules for power-assisted bikes, right down to the token pedals. But as any cyclist who's had the misfortune to encounter one in a bike lane knows, they're causing confusion on the roads because there are as yet no clear rules for them.

It doesn't help bike activists concerned about safety that scooters can be modified to exceed the 32-km/h limit

with some capacitor fiddling or a battery swap.

“There are so many different things that can qualify as e-bikes,” says Toronto Cyclists Union spokesperson Yvonne Bambrick. She says the union recognizes that e-bikes make active transport feasible for some segments of the population, but “it’s a slippery slope.”

“The power-assisted bicycle is one thing, but I don’t think scooters have any place in bike lanes or using biking infrastructure,” says Bambrick.

A concerned Fred Sztabinski of the Toronto Coalition for Active Transportation worries about safety.

“This is a bigger piece of metal that can do more damage,” he says. “I imagine they’re not as manoeuvrable [as bicycles], with their smaller wheels.”

Already, he’s seen a few using paths in city parks and on the Martin Goodman trail.

“Right now you see one or two of them [in parks], but if you start seeing 30 or 40 in a short stretch every weekend, that’s a lot of real estate you’re losing.”

Vince Balatbat owns Blue Avenue on Queen West, where an e-bike can run from \$800 to over \$1,500. He says Ontario is behind on the e-bike movement. BC now has 20,000 e-bikers thanks to a regulatory head start. He admits that people are unfamiliar with the vehicles, but predicts that they’ll eventually realize these scooters are not the same as gas-powered Vespas.

“They do look like gas scooters. They look formidable and harmful if they hit something, but little do [people] know, they only go 32 km/h,” says Balatbat.

He adds that e-bikes are an easily accessible, cheap and environmentally friendly way to commute. “You don’t need a licence, insurance or plates.”

Balatbat says this year’s sales are twice last year’s, and he estimates that there will be at least 5,000 e-bike riders in Ontario by year’s end.

Why not throw Segways into the mix, then? They have a maximum speed of 20 km/h, and Councillor Bill Saundercook, who couldn’t get the city to allow the things on sidewalks, thinks it might be time to give them a shot in bike lanes.

“I think it makes good sense to allow them on bicycle paths,” says Saundercook.

MTO hasn’t fully stuck its head in the sand on the scooter-style e-bikes.

Nichols says, “We have received some negative anecdotal feedback re-garding larger, heavier e-bikes that resemble scooters.”

No decisions have been made yet, but Nichols says future legislation will clarify what is and is not an e-bike. Balatbat, who hopes the pilot program gives the okay to bigger scooters, says the government should “consult all e-bike riders, the general public and the companies selling e-bikes before making any decisions.”

He stresses that regs must include scooter-type bikes “because they’re the ones that can carry a heavier weight, and many heavy people cannot ride the bicycle types because they won’t go as far or it’s too dangerous because when they go up a hill, it doesn’t have the power.”

Of course, heavy riders could always try working out on a regular bike.

Bambrick figures that if cyclists are going to have to deal with all kinds of encroaching e-vehicles, the city will need to step up its Bike Plan.

“We’ll need proper infrastructure across the city – in the suburbs as well. Not only paint, but separated bike lanes and contra-flow lanes to make this a proper cycling city,” she maintains.

Ultimately, if e-scooter users feel uncomfortable being limited to lower speeds and actually pedalling most of the time, they’ll have to accept licensing, stick to the big lanes, and leave bike lanes for pedal-powered rides.

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