



more, better & safer bicycling

February 14, 2024
Re: H7321

Dear members of the Rhode Island House Municipal Government and Housing Committee,

My name is Tommie Harrell, and I am writing on behalf of Bike Newport, where I work in the role of Advocacy Associate. First, I would like to thank Representative Carson for introducing this act at the request of the Newport City Council. I apologize for not being able to attend in person today, but I thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony.

At the Newport City Council meeting on December 13, the Council asked Bike Newport's Executive Director, Bari Freeman, to share information on an issue present in Newport and the country at large: the unsafe riding of electric bicycles. E-bikes are increasingly present in our communities, and Newport has seen a sharp increase of instances where riders, often young teenagers, operate e-bikes in a manner that endangers both themselves and others. The remainder of this letter consists of the main points Bari shared with the Council.

Newport is not the only community experiencing a sharp increase in e-bike riding, nor is this a bad thing. We want more people riding and out of cars, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, alleviating Newport's seasonal traffic congestion, and improving the overall experience of exploring Newport.

The issue of unsafe e-bike riding is a matter of education. Many of those riding unsafely are too young to have a driver's license and have not learned the rules of the road. Drivers are taught to operate their vehicles at a speed that does not threaten the safety of other road-users, pedestrian traffic, or themselves; they are taught to moderate their behavior for safety. The same approach should be applied to e-bike riders. We need to invest energy and resources into rider education, rather than restrictions. We need to change rider behavior, not limit where people can ride – especially given the inherent difficulty Newport would face trying to enforce e-bike restrictions, as it is often difficult to differentiate between e-bikes and traditional bikes.

Bike Newport is working with Newport schools and the YMCA to design a 5-part e-bike safety program to teach students how to ride their e-bikes safely. Other cities across the country, including Encinitas, Irvine and San Clemente, CA, are working on creating easily accessible e-bike education programs for kids and adults. We can learn from these models.

The popularity of e-bikes continues to grow. We look forward to working together to provide education programs that engage community members in the right way to ride, so that everyone in Newport – residents and visitors alike – can explore and move about safely and freely.

Sincerely,

Tommie Harrell, Advocacy Associate