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EDITORIAL

OUR VIEW

Editorial: Give e-bike rules, regulations a jolt

Today

Hawaii government response to emerging transportation trends is generously described as lethargic. Speed limits ossified decades ago, bike lanes have required years of hard-fought advocacy to complete, and a once-promising rail project has morphed into a costly boondoggle — all evidence that conveyance concerns have not traditionally ranked high on the list of legislative priorities. So it is heartening to see the Honolulu City Council draft, discuss and adopt measures in a push to wrangle electric bikes.

A speedy, clean and relatively low-cost mode of transport, e-bike use is booming, especially in areas where commuters are constantly on the prowl for new opportunities to avoid traffic. Essentially a pedal-assisted electric scooter, the platform is optimized for ease of use and draws a wide range of riders, from first-timers to seasoned bicyclists. This level of accessibility enables those not versed in traffic laws or the handling of motorized vehicles to take to the streets and bike paths. Children, too, have become a target e-bike audience. Accidents can and will happen without the appropriate legislative guardrails, as the city is beginning to understand.

In 2022, a 13-year-old boy riding an e-bike died after he rear-ended an SUV on Waipahu Street, veered into opposing lanes and was struck by a truck. Months prior, a 53-year-old Mililani woman succumbed to injuries sustained from falling off an e-bike. More recently, a 12-year-old boy was critically injured in April when his e-bike was struck by a car near Ewa Beach, and this month a 14-year-old boy on an e-bike was left in critical condition after being run over and pinned under a pickup truck.

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There is an obvious need for clear, common-sense rules and regulations, and that starts with baseline classification of e-bike technology. The City Council agrees. Resolution 199, adopted on Sept. 4, urges the state Legislature to “update and clarify” Hawaii law to include a three-class system similar to those employed by other states. The resolution also calls for e-bike-specific registration and licensure, special consideration for “electric dirt bikes” (two-wheeled electric vehicles with beefed-up off-road capabilities, no pedals and maximum speeds that can hit 90 mph), penalties for use by minors, helmet requirements and rules on maintenance and storage.

Concurrently, City Council Bill 52, which is wending its way forward and passed an initial reading last week, proffers e-bike class designations accepted by many jurisdictions across the U.S.:

>> Class 1: An electric bicycle with a top assisted speed of 20 mph and a motor that switches on only when a rider is pedaling.

>> Class 2: An electric bicycle with a top assisted speed of 20 mph and a motor that can be operated with or without pedaling.

>> Class 3: An electric bicycle with a top assisted speed of 28 mph and a motor that switches on only when a rider is pedaling.

Further, under Bill 52, Class 3 e-bikes must be equipped with a speedometer and cannot be operated by riders under age 15.

Taken together, Resolution 199 and Bill 52, assuming the latter is adopted, sketch out a foundation on which lawmakers can craft meaningful legislation to protect riders, automobile drivers and pedestrians. Bikes and e-bikes are now prevalent on city streets as Honolulu and other counties move headlong

into a multimodal transportation era, and the state is obligated to provide safe avenues of travel for all vehicles. This should include basic safety and road traffic education programs, perhaps tied to e-bike registration or government subsidies and involving groups like the Hawaii Bicycling League, ensuring all riders are accountable and know the rules of the road. That includes staying off sidewalks in town, and limiting speeds to below 10 mph when in those areas.

High consumer demand means stakeholders must come together, and quickly, to codify e-bike rules and regulations. Only then will enforcement agencies have concrete legal backing to crack down on unsafe behavior and potentially save lives.

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