

HAWAII NEWS

Honolulu's e-bike working group updates Council

By [Ian Bauer](#)

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Roger Morton

Following reports of the dangerous and unlawful operation of electric bicycles across Oahu, the City and County of Honolulu formed a working group to study how best to regulate the controversial machines and their often underage riders.

So far, the group — comprising the city Department of Transportation Services, Honolulu Police Department, state Department of Transportation as well as other city-level agencies and the advocacy group Hawaii Bicycling League — has begun its review of helmet rules, age restrictions and other legal issues pertaining to e-bikes, city officials say.

Having convened two of three nonpublic meetings in October, DTS Director Roger Morton asserts the working group understands troubling issues exist with e-bikes now being used on the island's roadways.

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And in the first nine months of 2024, he added, an alarming trend has appeared as well.

“We had 180 e-bikes crashes, which is a high number of crashes for nine months at a time,” he told the City Council’s Transportation Committee on Tuesday.

To decrease risks to younger e-bike riders and the public at large, Morton said the working group has six “top issues” to consider, including variable helmet laws.

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“Right now they vary from 16 to 18 years of age, when you have to wear a helmet,” he said. “The group is toying with the idea of making all devices uniform,” where all riders 18 or younger would require the use of a helmet.

The group also studied definitions of “classical e-bikes” connected to a three-class system — which classify e-bikes by speed and equipment components like throttles — adopted in other jurisdictions around the country, he said.

“But then there are other vehicles, too,” he said. “Some of them might be classified as electric dirt bikes or even electric motorcycles that frankly right now are not able to be licensed for use on roadways.”

He added, “These devices will go up to 70 mph, and are very different from the other types of e-bikes.”

“So one of the things that the working group will try to do is to try to define the different types of devices, including what we’re beginning to call the ‘out-of-class’ devices, the ones that are higher-speed,” Morton said. “And we’ll take a look at licensing requirements.”

Determining appropriate places to operate e-bikes is another issue, he said.

“They’re not allowed to be operated on sidewalks, under the current law,” Morton said. “But looking at whether a multiuse path is appropriate or whether a bike path or a bike lane is appropriate.”

“Those are issues that really aren’t defined, and we’re going to try to define them and make it clear where these vehicles can be operated legally,” he said.

Age requirements are of concern, too.

“There’s a requirement that you must be 15 years of age or older,” he said. “In some cases, some states treat the Class 1s differently than the Class 2s or the Class 3s, and we’re going to continue to look at those issues.”

Rider behavior is also under review.

“Issues related to speed and to reckless driving such as wheelies, reckless behaviors and packing of multiple vehicles,” Morton said. “Those are issues that we see all of the time. We all see them on the street, but there’s kind of a gray area in our ordinances and in our revised statutes.”

E-bike registration and operations are being

explored, “and whether or not we should have a change in our registration laws for some of the vehicles,” he said.

Education and parental responsibility are the working group’s sixth topic under investigation, according to Morton.

“There was a discussion about the need for a pre-information about what the laws actually are, particularly looking at our keiki and our younger children,” he said. “We see 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds that are getting cited for illegal operation of the vehicle.”

He added, “In some cases I think that we need to do a better job in educating parents and others over what the laws are” regarding e-bikes.

Morton said the e-bike working group will host an industry day meeting Tuesday.

“And we’ve invited people that are involved in this industry of selling vehicles or renting them to come and have their thoughts shared with us,” he said.

In addition, the city will host “a virtual public meeting” Nov. 14 to allow the public “to express their opinions on these new devices,” he said.

The final working group meeting will be held Nov. 8, he said.

“We are committed to trying to provide some kind of recommendations by the time you have your Nov. 19 transportation committee meeting,” Morton added.

Those recommendations relate to Bill 52, which seeks to revise existing city laws with regard to the use and possession of e-bikes.

The measure, introduced by Council members Augie Tulba and Tyler Dos Santos--Tam and drafted in collaboration with the Hawaii Bicycling League, passed the second of three readings at the Council’s Oct. 9 meeting.

Dos Santos-Tam said he hopes to have Bill

52 finalized by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Morton said he's heard from DOT over its respective plans to offer recommendations to the state Legislature "for changes in state law" related to e-bikes.

"And we've tried to commit to them (that) by mid- November we would be in a position to talk to our state partners, too, about what this working group has come up with," he added.

He said the Council's final meeting is on Dec. 11, "and we're trying to get this information before the Council so that by your final meeting you'd be able to take final action on" Bill 52.

During Council questions, Council member Calvin Say asked Morton whether he considered an e-bike “a vehicle.”

“I’m just trying to get this coordination that if it is a vehicle, why don’t we just go and see the Division of Motor Vehicles?” asked Say. “They do the vehicle weight tax, and based on the weight of that particular vehicle ... you get a different revenue source.”

To that, Dos Santos-Tam said beyond Bill 52 there were possible opportunities under future Council measures “to look at some of the registration fees” in the city and county.

“Some of them are as low as 50 cents, which costs us more to mail somebody a new tag in postage than we collect in the 50-cent fee,” Dos Santos-Tam added.

Morton noted that at this point the city handles only new registration fees. “We don’t do annual fees on bicycles at this point,” he said.

During public comment, Oahu resident and longtime bicycle commuter Alvin Yoshinaga said his normal route along King Street in Honolulu has changed.

“Pedal-powered bicycles like I use are now a minority of the devices that I see on the bike routes,” he told the Council. “I say devices, not bicycles, because, in fact, those remaining things on the bike routes, besides electric bicycles, are all kinds of other things like electric skateboards, electric all sorts of things.”

“So any kind of regulation you come up with is going to have to cover all of these diverse devices, plus devices that have not yet come out,” he added.



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