

NEWS > POLITICS • News

San Diego cracks down on e-bikes with age limit, double-riding rule

City leaders say the goal is boosting safety for young people and pedestrians, but acknowledge more laws are needed



A person rides an e-bike in Pacific Beach in March. (K.C. Alfred / The San Diego Union-Tribune)



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San Diego cracked down on electric bikes Tuesday when the City Council set 12 as a minimum age for usage and banned double-riding unless an e-bike has a permanent second seat for a passenger.

Supporters hailed the move as a sensible way to keep young people safe and decrease collisions between e-bikes and pedestrians, but critics said it won't solve the most glaring e-bike problems and could discourage usage.

And one council member said he's concerned the new age limit could have racial implications, expressing concerns police will impose the rule more frequently on young people of color than on young White people.

Councilmember Raul Campillo, who spearheaded the crackdown, acknowledged that a possibly bigger problem than usage by people under 12 is souped-up e-bikes that are actually small motorcycles.

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Parents often mistakenly buy these vehicles thinking they are merely e-bikes, so state Sen. Catherine Blakespear, D-Encinitas, is sponsoring legislation that would prohibit sellers from labeling something an e-bike if it has more than 750 watts of power.

Campillo said Tuesday that he supports that legislation, but believes the city must also do something about youth usage of legitimate e-bikes — called Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes.

“If we know children are being seriously injured on e-bikes and we have the legal authority to act, why wouldn’t we,” Campillo said.

“E-bikes are and can be a great transportation option, but safety cannot be optional,” he said. “Today’s e-bikes are not the bicycles many of us grew up riding. They travel farther and faster, often in traffic alongside cars — and yet many young riders haven’t received training on rules of the road or safe-driving practices.”

Many community leaders agreed.

“E-bikes are now a tremendous problem causing severe injuries both to the riders of the e-bikes and to the pedestrians they hit,” Janie Emerson said. “This has escalated to emergency levels for all San Diegans.”

Emma Pierotti, a Girl Scout from Tierrasanta, said her troop has worked with local police to boost e-bike safety.

“As e-bike usage continues to grow, kids need these protections now more than ever to ensure they can ride safely and responsibly while protecting those around them,” Pierotti said.

But some critics said San Diego is making the wrong move.

“This bill accomplishes nothing,” said Zach Sturgeon. “The electric motorcycles creating dangerous conditions on the road are already illegal, and the riders on them are older than 12. This criminalizes reasonable and safe behavior that enables some children to navigate the hilly roads of San Diego.”

Councilmember Sean Elo-Rivera said he understands the safety concerns.

“I too have been very concerned at times when I’ve seen young folks bombing down hills on e-bikes,” Elo-Rivera said.

But Elo-Rivera said he's concerned about disproportionate enforcement possibly putting some young people of color on the wrong path in life.

"I will be very closely looking to see that Black and brown youth are not being disproportionately targeted for enforcement," he said.

San Diego's move, which the council approved 7-0, makes the city the sixth in the county to join a state pilot program that makes it illegal for users under age 12 to ride Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes.

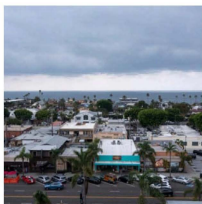
Coronado, Chula Vista, Carlsbad, San Marcos, Poway and Santee have already joined that state pilot program, which is limited to cities in San Diego County and is the product of legislation sponsored by Assemblymember Tasha Boerner, D-Encinitas.

The goal of the program is gathering data between now and 2029 about how such a crackdown will affect e-bike usage, safety, enforcement and related issues.

San Diego must now engage in 30 days of public outreach before enforcement can begin, establish a 60-day warning period before citations can be issued and allow first-time offenders to complete an e-bike safety course instead of paying the \$25 fine.

In May, the state Senate approved Blakespear's legislation, SB 1167, cracking down on e-motorcycle sales. It still must be approved by the Assembly and approved by the governor.

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