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WASHINGTON AREA  
BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION

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# LET'S TALK ABOUT E-BIKES

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*Caption: So much better than driving to school!*

You've probably noticed that there are more electric bikes (e-bikes) around than there used to be. Once the domain of DIY tinkerers, bikes with an electric motor to make pedaling easier are now available off the shelf. For folks who are accustomed to bicycling without the help of a battery, this trend can inspire skepticism and uncertainty. Today we're going to talk about that.

Before we dive in, it's helpful to clarify what we mean by **e-bike**. E-bikes basically fall into two categories:

**Pedal Assist** bikes use a motor to add power while you're pedaling. If you stop pedaling, the motor stops. A limiter built into the motor stops adding power when the bike reaches a specific speed, usually 20mph.

**Throttle On Demand** bikes use a hand operated throttle, rather than pedaling action, to determine whether or not the motor is adding power. It's possible to use the motor on a throttle-on-demand bike to propel the bike without pedaling. As with pedal assist e-bikes, a limiter built into the motor stops adding power when the bike reaches a specific speed, usually 20mph. Generally a user needs to use a mix of pedaling and electric assist to achieve a reasonable range.

Several states and national advocacy organizations have worked with the bike manufacturing industry to develop the following classification system for e-bikes.

	<b>Can be pedaled without motor assistance</b>	<b>Can propelled by motor without pedaling</b>	<b>Maximum assisted speed</b>
Class 1 - Pedal Assist	Yes	No	20 mph
Class 2 - Throttle on Demand	Yes	Yes	20 mph
Class 3	Yes	Sometimes	28 mph
Moped	No	Yes	Over 28 mph

**In most circumstances, WABA supports treating speed limited Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes as regular bikes.** These low speed e-bikes make bicycling a viable transportation option for more people. They reduce barriers for folks who have longer distances to travel, heavier loads or passengers to carry, or other challenges that might otherwise preclude using a bicycle to make a trip. More people on bikes is an unequivocally good thing.

**Some common questions:**

### **Don't e-bikes go too fast for trails?**

Not really. Class 1 and 2 e-bikes are technologically limited to 20mph, and [research shows](#) that on trails, e-bike riders are generally a bit slower than unassisted bicyclists. People riding e-bikes are also subject to the same speed limits and trail safety rules as everyone else.

Biking too fast is a behavior problem, not an equipment problem. You don't need an electric motor to be a 25mph jerk on a bike. We've all had the experience of being buzzed on a trail by someone riding far too fast.

By making it easier for more people to ride faster, e-bikes could democratize the capacity for bad behavior. This does not mean we should ban e-bikes any more than we should ban people with strong legs. It means we need to have systems in place to ensure that everyone is using our trails safely—infrastructure, rules, education, and social norms.

### **Aren't e-bikes cheating?**

E-bikes are only cheating if you're competing.

Bike lanes and multi-use trails are not competitive spaces, they're part of our region's transportation and recreation network.

At WABA we're pretty clear on this: the joy and convenience of bicycling should not be limited to the physically privileged. Everyone should be able to get where they're going on a bike, period.

### **Why can't e-bikes just ride on the street?**

Since many of our region's trails don't have low-stress, on-street alternatives, forcing people on e-bikes to use "parallel routes" isn't feasible or equitable. Riding a low-speed e-bike feels mostly just like riding an unassisted bike, except it's a little easier to pedal. They're not motorcycles, and they certainly aren't any less stressful than an unassisted bike on busy, high-speed roads full of tired, distracted, or angry drivers.

### **Isn't this a "slippery slope" toward letting electric motorcycles on trails?**

No. There's a clear framework for distinguishing between e-bikes, mopeds, and motorcycles. No one is arguing that a Tesla-Harley Davidson collaboration should be allowed on the Mount Vernon Trail.

**The conversation about e-bikes highlights an important reality: Lots of different kinds of people bike for lots of different reasons.**

For some folks, biking is a purely recreational. For others, it's about fitness or competition. And for many, it's transportation. The needs of bicyclists aren't always going to align. This isn't a problem—it's a testament to the versatility of the bicycle.

More people are biking in our region than ever. That's a good thing. But that means some of the places we bike are getting crowded, and it means that you're more likely to be sharing space with folks who are riding for different reasons than you are.

This is where we point out, because it's what we do, that our region needs lots more bike infrastructure. But new trails take years to plan and build. ([We're working on it!](#))

In the meantime, the best way to keep our trails as pleasant places is not by excluding different kinds of riders, it's by practicing courtesy and common sense. Here are a few of our recommendations:

1. Follow the rules of each trail, including speed limits. Call your passes and give plenty of space when passing. Remember, it's your responsibility to negotiate space in a way that is comfortable and safe, both for you and for everyone else on the trail.
2. Have reasonable expectations. We live in a major metropolitan region, and our trails are some of our greatest public spaces. Expect to share them with other people biking and walking. Expect to accommodate people who are moving at different speeds than you.
3. Don't judge other people's reasons for riding. All bikes are cool bikes! It's much more fun to celebrate the shared experience of bicycling than it is to be grumpy at people for riding differently.

**Get in touch!**

We know WABA members and supporters have strong opinions about e-bikes from many different perspectives and that's okay. Please feel welcome to share your thoughts by dropping us a line at [advocacy@waba.org](mailto:advocacy@waba.org).

*Disclosure: The Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA) is an independent membership 501(c)3 non-profit organization. WABA receives no direct funding from the electric bicycle manufacturing industry.*

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