

OPB Think Out Loud on E-bikes

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SPEAKERS

Michael Kohn, Jonathan Maus, Dave Miller

 Dave Miller 00:00


From the Gert Boyle studio at OPB. This is think out loud. I'm Dave Miller. Earlier this month, a 15 year old boy riding electric bike died after he was hit by a minivan at an intersection in Bend. It was a first fatality involving an E bike in the city. According to a recent article in the bend bulletin, and it's prompting city officials to consider new approaches to ebike safety. Michael Cohen is an environment and public lands reporter at the bend bulletin who has been writing about this issue. Jonathan Maus is the editor and publisher of bikeportland. They both join me now it's good to have both of you on the show.

 Jonathan Maus 00:34

Good to be here. Thanks. Thank you,

 Dave Miller 00:36

Michael. First, what sparked your interest in writing about E bikes and safety.

 Michael Kohn 00:43

About a month ago, I was riding along in Bend, driving car, and I witnessed an E bike crash just in front of me and I was the first on that scene and called 911. And it was two young girls that were riding any bike and crash going downhill. And they were one of them was hurt pretty badly. And after that incident, I was just thinking to myself, well, how often is this happening? And how often are ebike crashes occurring compared to regular pedal bike crashes. So I started doing some research and contacted Ben police and Ben fire department in the city of Bend and started writing a story about safety issues related to E bikes. And then as I was writing this story, this incident occurred where this teenager was killed in an accident. And we published a story just after the weekend. What can

 Dave Miller 01:36

you tell us about the fatal collision that happened earlier this month.

 Michael Kohn 01:42

It was a 15 year old rider and he was riding without a helmet on he had a person riding behind him in the on the bike like the little stand that sits in the back of the bike. And they were riding eastbound on a westbound the westbound side of highway 20. It just a wide boulevard and Eastern men and a Dodge van pulled out onto the road from a side street. And they just collided. And the man was taking the hospital and Unfortunately, he died. So that's that's what happened there.

 Dave Miller 02:18

What if police said about what happened

 02:23

Please sit in an investigation. They looked and they didn't cite the driver or ticket the driver. So they they determined that, you know this is just an unfortunate collision. It wasn't like reckless driving or something like that. This was just an unfortunate collision and at an intersection. And the boy was riding on the sidewalk rather than the bike lane.

 Dave Miller 02:48

Have there been other serious collisions of of any type at this particular site?

 Michael Kohn 02:55

At that particular site? No, but we do get quite a few bike crashes. And Ben so far this year, the paramedics have responded to about 40 bike crashes and a quarter of them are e bikes. And they do happen just all over the place. There are an increased number of bike lanes being built around the city. But there isn't just like one spot. That's like a hotspot for accidents that are occurring all over.

 03:20

Michael, I want to hear more about what's happening in Bend politically as a result of this. But as I noted, Jonathan Maus is with us, the editor and publisher of bike Portland, Jonathan, for people who aren't familiar with E bikes, can you give us a sense just for the variety of vehicles that fall under this term?



Jonathan Maus 03:37

Yeah, there's a wide range of bikes that people are buying from a both regular bike shops and also ebike only stores everything up to bikes that have a throttle, right. So bikes, you can actually just hit with your thumb on a little throttle and you don't even have to pedal. And then there are like more cargo utility bikes that families are riding most of those some of those have a throttle, a lot of those have what's called like a pedal assist, electric electric motor. So you have to actually pedal in order to get any of the benefit of the motor. And there's a wide range. There are people who are bolting on kits that they buy off the internet or wherever, onto just standard bikes and turning them into E bikes. So part of this is it. The technology itself and the types of bikes I think is far ahead of any type of sort of like regulation or how we look at integrating into a system.



04:23

I should note that I ride the bike. That's how I got here today. We just before we went live, you you said that you got here on the bike as well. I've seen anecdotally a huge increase in in E bikes in the last five or six years, which I remember talking about on the show maybe 11 years ago. And it's it is anecdotally I'll say a world of difference. Is there data to back that



Jonathan Maus 04:46

up? Well, yeah, I mean, the the rates of the sales rates of these things are just like skyrocketing. I mean, they're going it's the best news in the bike industry that I can remember in terms of a boom I mean, there's a lot of unit sales how happening with these things and they are flying off the shelves.



05:02

Do you think that riding an E bike presents different safety issues than riding a traditional pedal bike?



Jonathan Maus 05:11

Absolutely, absolutely they do. And again, it's a range of types of bikes, right. So some of them are pedal assist only with a top speed of only 20 miles an hour. And then on the other end, you have some you have some with a throttle, that can have a top speed of 28. Right, others can go even faster ones that are, I guess, not technically legal to be bicycles. But that's a different conversation. But absolutely, they I think one of the big things they do they pose in terms of safety issues is that they eat bikes are appeal to a lot of people who, let's say, haven't written a lot of bikes in their past. Either they're, they're maybe they're older folks, or younger people or whatever, or somebody who the ebike is a great ticket to more freedom, more ability to ride bikes, and it's really exciting. They're replacing their cars with them. But they sort of can jump right in on any bike and go 18 miles an hour, very easily 20 miles an hour, very easily, even more 25 miles an hour very easily. And if you're coming into it with a traditional bike, you're

probably not going to be riding at those speeds for several years, you're going to progress, your skill level, sort of your street awareness up to the point where you feel comfortable going at those higher speeds, right. So it That to me is one of the biggest things. And there's a lot as folks probably understand, you have to understand closing speeds, right how to process danger of intersections and all the other things that come with it,



06:24

meaning, the speed at which you will arrive at a danger, right? potential danger. Yeah, all



Jonathan Maus 06:30

these like fine skills in that your brain does these calculations right as you become a bicycle rider and your first year wobbling, and then you get more confident. But you can literally hop on any bike as an adult and be going 2528, which is, in some ways, very dangerous if you're not ready to understand how the streets work from a bicycling perspective, which is a lot different than when you're in your car or in your walking obviously. So that in of itself, the ability for people to go higher speeds is problematic. And I think Well, I wouldn't say problematic. It's an issue, you know. And also the, the bikes themselves are built very heavy duty, they have these, some of them have really large tires, and they're built, more closely aligned to sort of mopeds are lightweight motorcycles. And so that also gives you when you're riding them a bigger sense of strength and power. And I think that can translate into a certain type of riding right, which may be less safe than if you had a smaller bike with a smaller footprint. So yeah.



07:21

Michael, you mentioned in both of the incidents, that one that you witnessed that actually set you on the course of writing about this, and then in the in the fatal collision that happened soon after that, that in both of those cases, there were two riders, two young riders, or a rider and a passenger on the E bikes. How common is that? From what you see in Bend?



07:47

Oh, it's very common. I mean, you just need to stand out on a busy street for about five or 10 minutes. And you'll see young kids riding multiple kids riding on a single bike, I'd see it basically every day. And a lot of times, they're not wearing helmets, they're going in the wrong direction on in the bike lane. They don't have like adequate any protection. And you know, they're just kids, they're like, some of these are, you know, 1012 13 year old kids riding bikes as they do in their neighborhood. But now all of a sudden, they're in traffic, and they're on. They're on main roads, where drive, people are driving 3040 miles an hour. So that presents a real danger.



08:28

And I should note that even just riding on an E bike, if you're below the age of 16, that alone is

And I should note that even just riding on an E bike, if you're below the age of 16, that alone is not legal in the state of Oregon, although enforcement is another issue. Michael, there was a Bend city council meeting last Wednesday, where the mayor and the council members at that city would be exploring ways to improve safety for bicyclists and pedestrians in Bend. What exactly do they talk about?

 08:56

Um, they're discussing rules that can be changed statewide. I mean, not just locally because it's not just a local issue. And if they're if they do want to implement changes, it has to come from the state. So they've been discussing enforcement. Should we enforce the under 16 year old rule for riding these bikes? And lack of helmets? Like what should people be fined or ticketed, if they don't have if they're not following the rules? And really, who's responsible? Is it the kid riding the bike or their parent? So there's a lot of issues to discuss, and they want to bring it to like a state level so that can be enforced locally.

 09:36

Has there been an increase in collisions involving bicyclists in Bend that has gone along with the rise of E bikes? What did you hear from paramedics or police officers or the fire officer Fire Department?

 09:53

Yeah, so So Ben fire is reporting a gradual increase year by year of an overall Like accidents. So four or five years ago, there was like around 6566 accidents that they reported to this has been fire reporting to accidents where they had to take someone to the ER or abuse them, help them on the road. And then last year, that number jumped up to around 100. And then so far this year, we're outpacing, outpacing those numbers. So it's probably going to go past 100 this year. And that can be attributed to the overall increase in population in Bend. We do have more people living here. But what my research showed that the percentage of bike accidents requiring paramedics is just growing faster than the population. So yeah, so they're just our overall more more like accidents requiring paramedics year by year.

 10:44

Jonathan Maus, what about in Portland? I mean, this also, this seems really hard data to disaggregate. I mean, you have the total number of miles written or the the changes in the number of riders, the experience of riders, which you were getting to before, the not to mention the behavior of drivers and the design of roads, how do you think about all of these factors together?



Jonathan Maus 11:09

Well, I think it's a bit of a fool's errand to try to focus on the enforcing and the regulation on the cycling side on this, partly because of what you said, the fact that again, the way the system

responds to these things, it's a system that is very, very centered around driving, right? I mean, the conversation I've seen in Ben doesn't really talk about the driving in the role of the road. And if you look at the road where this person was killed, it's essentially an urban highway, and the road that the driver was on, in my opinion sort of looks like an on ramp, you can think of it that way. Yeah, there was a stop sign, we don't know how much they slowed or not. But it's a very wide radius, it's a very easy, it's basically made so the cars can maintain their speed and enter this fast road. So I would worry that the focus gets too far on sort of this moral panic about young people with these crazy new bicycles, right? These newfangled D bikes, we have to recognize and sit back a little bit and look at the situation think this is wonderful that all these kids are getting out on their own, using bicycles getting onto the streets, right, and that they're not driving and they're not staying at home, in their basement playing video games. And just think about the way we respond enforcement regulation wise, with that in mind with how important it is that we get young people out on bicycles and not not do too much that might that might discourage it.



12:27

Let me run something by you because what you were just saying reminds me a little bit of a paragraph from an article or essay that that you published in bikeportland, written by a woman who lives in Hood River contributor, and she wrote about a huge increase in teens using ebike. She called them throttle kids. A phrase that she says she uses that phrase lovingly, she also wrote this, all it's going to take to have this conversation explode is a teen hitting a baby stroller or a senior citizen or just as bad hitting a fixed object like a pole or parked car. Crashes like this, unfortunately, happen with non electric bikes every year. But if it happens with someone who is underage riding an E bike, the media frenzy would be harsh. We could see overly restrictive laws passed police changing their enforcement stance, and a general public backlash that sets bike advocacy back decades. Are you bespeak basically basically arguing that that's where we are right now?



Jonathan Maus 13:23

For the most part, yeah. And I think that's why these moments are important on how like the bend City Council responds, and I'm sure that there's going to be a statewide conversation at the legislature next session. And we're going to be really careful that it's not some knee jerk sort of misguided attempt to regulate something, just because it's like a bunch of adults who mostly drive trying to say, Hey, you, you crazy kids in your little bicycles? Like, I'm aware that that is the essentially the dynamic of most people in Oregon. Right? It's this idea that we need to, you know, focus it in that way, instead of looking at the bigger systemic issues. Yes, we do have to be smarter. And I think the use of these bikes by younger and younger kids is something that really does have to be addressed. And I think there's some ways we can do that. I worry, though, that it's going to be like, similar to what we're seeing with electric scooters, right? You're seeing some cities where they become very, very popular, it's a really important way for people to get around. That's not driving. We need as many people to not drive as possible. But then some, like I think it's in San Diego, or they outlawed the electric scooters, because they weren't managing them well, right. And the easiest thing was to say, we're just going to outlaw these new things, because they're the other thing that's being used, right and everybody drives, that's kind of the it's this, the center of the system is driving,

everything is set up that way. So we just need to be careful that we don't allow that inertia of the sort of like driving centric, you know, bias that we have to make us make poor decisions and where we go from here.



14:44

If you're essentially saying that you don't want police based or some kind of civic enforcement or even statewide enforcement, you don't want that to quash this kind of non car mobility. Then Then wait or how do we get, say a 12 year old who's riding with another 12 year old may be going the wrong way not wearing helmets? What is the way to get them to be safer for themselves? And for others? If it's not police? What is it,



Jonathan Maus 15:18

it worries me that we would think that police would be sort of the only option and the first option, right. It's like, think of how we would educate our kids to do anything else in our lives. And the other kind of decision that they might have to make. You have parents, you have the manufacturers of the products you have the place where they buy the product, if they buy it from a bike shop, there can be education there, you can certainly ramp up education in schools, Oregon has a whole entire Safe Routes to School program that statewide funded, you can embed some of these electric bike issues into that curriculum. I also think our traffic engineers can do a good job of educate using the roads to sort of self educate, right. The question I'm not hearing about the Ben fatality is why was that person on the sidewalk? Why was that young person on the sidewalk? From what I've seen in places like that in Portland, a lot of people ride on sidewalks, let's say like in East Portland, for example, because it's really unsafe to be on the road and you feel scared, right? But a lot of this conversation feels like we're we're sort of blaming that child for making that choice, when it's that road that helps sort of force that choice for them. Right. So there are a lot of ways that we could increase the education without having to sort of have that, like I said, knee jerk reaction to like, let's just enforce some laws.



16:19

If you're just tuning in, we're talking right now about teens and E bikes and safety teens because it was a teen who was killed recently in a collision, in band about two weeks ago. But to a great extent, we're talking more broadly about bikes and E bikes and infrastructure for everybody. Jonathan Maus is the editor and publisher of bike Portland, Michael Cohen is Environment and Public Lands reporter at the bend bulletin, Michael, how much have you heard in Bend, the kind of talk that we just heard from Jonathan, about bigger questions of the built environment and better options for people who don't want to use cars and want to be able to do that safely?



17:08

Yeah, I mean, just to that end, what a few days after this accident, then city council, officially named their cross town bike route to bend bikeway. This is on something new, they just didn't make it up this week. It's been in progress for a few years now. But it's really starting to ramp

make it up this week. It's been in progress for a few years now. But it's really starting to ramp up, we're really starting to invest in it. And the idea is to create a north south route, an east west route across the city, that's going to be completely free of traffic, a lot of it will go through parkland, or divided away from the road to get like a young kid across the city without having to worry about being in traffic. So that's something that's being ramped up. And just the city's spending a lot of money in general, not just on those routes, but all trip all sorts of bike routes across the city to improve safety for for all riders. And in addition, you know, of course, the police are doing had been a campaign recently to help kids understand you bike rules and all my goals. So there is a community effort now to just increase awareness of bike safety.



18:12

I want to play you both a voicemail that we got from a listener in Eugene yesterday. Let's have a listen.



18:18

I contacted the city bicycle coordinator, and the person in charge of the Vision Zero program at the city of Eugene, because I was concerned about the electric skateboards, the E bikes. And the scooters. and the E bikes in the scooters, the city of Eugene has been actively promoting those as good transportation. What they haven't been promoting is safety and the rules of the road. And I'm just astonished to see no lights, no helmets, people traveling fast coming out of alleyways and office sidewalks going 1520 miles an hour and skateboards that are motorized. I mean, as a driver, people aren't really watching out and we had a skateboarder electric skateboarder that was hit here about three weeks ago. And the city just seems to kind of say, well, you know, they know the rules, and there's no public outreach about the safety, and yet they actively promote these



19:24

job, what would you like to see in terms of, of civic outreach, as she said, she, I get the sense that she is happy actually, that active mobility is being prioritized in a city like Eugene, but she says that something is being missed, will



Jonathan Maus 19:40

think something's always going to be missed. This is an inherently very difficult problem to solve. Cities are not necessarily well equipped to market and make people change their minds on stuff like that. It's just tough at some point. People that use the roads have to look in the mirror and say I need to take care to be as safe as I can to make sure I don't kill anyone. kill myself. So I think the reaction when we, when we see a tragedy like this is to sort of like point fingers and try to blame someone for not doing enough education, we certainly could do a better job at education. Sure. But if we sit around and wait for cities to solve this education piece without taking personal responsibility for the vehicle that I'm going to use, right and make sure that I don't ram it into someone and kill them, or make a mistake, right, then we're going to be waiting a long time and have a lot of trouble with this stuff.



20:27

We also got a comment from a bicyclist named Cameron in Northeast Portland, who had some general anti ebike statements of a kind I've seen before among people who I think are never going to be convinced that that E bikes are real, quote, unquote, bikes. He also wrote this, I viewed the trend toward e bikes with some unease, my main concern is the speed differential between a traditional bike and the new electric motorbikes. My other concern is the use of these motorbikes on bike paths and bike lanes, these two elements together can create a dangerous situation for the rider of a traditional bike. Bike riders without motors ride at 12 to 14 miles per hour on average, and many are much slower e bikes can go 20 to 28 miles per hour, e bikes shouldn't be allowed to go faster than 15 miles an hour on motorized power to match the speed of actual bikes. Or they should be required to stay off of designated bike paths and lanes. I'm curious how much of a tension you see in 2023, between ebike users and non ebike users. This is something we talked about 10 years ago,



Jonathan Maus 21:37

I don't necessarily see a ton of it, I think as the amount of people using the bikes has skyrocketed, and the types of people using them has changed and the bikes themselves have changed. You're seeing less and less of that tension less and less of that push back. It's still there, for sure. And especially like the person that you just mentioned, referred to on the pads themselves. You know, the pads are pretty narrow, they're not enough of them, people are fighting over a scarce resource. And there's this new thing that comes in. So there's going to be a natural reaction against that. That's human nature, I would hope that we could regulate that and say, Let's regulate for behaviors, not for types of vehicles. That's my concern for us.



22:11

You see this part of this as connected to the scarcity of good routes to begin with? It's until for you for a lot of ways it comes back to infrastructure. Absolutely.



Jonathan Maus 22:19

I mean, I've had people email me say there's DC bikes are on the Springwater. And they're going too fast. And I'm like, yeah, it's unfortunate. We only have like one one of these Springwater corridor pads that we're all fighting over when if I'm a driver, I have these redundant multi Lane arterioles that can drive it. No wonder they're not squabbling over the behavior of their individual drivers, which I do think we could be doing more of right. Everybody's on their phones, nobody's paying attention, reckless driving and speeding is out of control. That should be part of this conversation as well. Yet here we are framing everything in terms of bike safety, when it's really about road safety. And I think the people with the most responsibility on that road are people behind the wheel of cars.



22:54

Just briefly, Michael, what have you heard from from schools or school administrators or

just briefly, Michael, what have you heard from from schools or school administrators or teachers, that's something that that Jonathan mentioned earlier as one component of, of public safety education, our schools in Bend talking about this now.



23:14

conversation has been somewhat limited. You do see a lot of Wii bikes in middle schools just this last year, like a couple of years ago, you wouldn't have seen them at all. But just last year, my daughter's middle school kids or middle school, aged 12-13, you see about 15 or 20 bikes, they're parked outside. So there are a lot of kids there. The principal at one point sent us a message warning, advising people to be to take care and be safe and educate their kids. But they're not like banning them or preventing them from riding them to school. But their education, I would say has been somewhat limited. But let's see what happens when the when the school year starts again, given what happened a couple of weeks ago there that may change. We may see some more discussions about how the schools can increase the conversation around safety.



Dave Miller 24:04

Michael and Jonathan, thanks very much. Thank you. Thank you. Michael Cohen is the environment and public lands reporter at the bend bulletin Jonathan Maus is the editor and publisher of bikeportland