

Politics and the City: E-bikes 'take the lane' on Worcester streets in pilot project

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WORCESTER — At 5 p.m. Friday, more than a dozen bicyclists gathered by the "Turtle Boy" statue on the city Common and checked the ABCs of bike maintenance in preparation for an evening ride.

"A" stands for air in your tire, "B" means brakes and "C" means chain, Galen Mook of MassBike, a Boston-based bicycling advocacy group, explained as the cyclists looked down at their respective equipment.

Mook then went over the 3-mile route from the Common, to Elm Park and then finally to Polar Park that the cyclists would travel; advised the riders to be wary of parked cars and trucks to avoid a "dooring" incident like that which killed a cyclist in Boston this week; and asked riders to "keep ourselves on a higher plane" in terms of road courtesy should disgruntled motorists be encountered.

More:Ofo bike share taking its wheels out of Worcester

The ride was in connection with a state pilot project that is distributing 100 free e-bikes to low-income city residents and then asking the recipients to track their use.

So far, 38 e-bikes — which have electric motors to help riders travel farther and cycle uphill easier — have been distributed of 50 set to arrive this month. The remaining 50 are set to be distributed around the end of September, Mook said.

At the end of the two-year pilot, the recipients will be able to keep the bikes. Roughly 1,200 people applied for the program and the recipients were selected by lottery.

"This bike is a beast," Julie Holy, 65, said while proudly displaying her bright yellow e-bike. Holy said that she had always loved bicycling and had lately been borrowing her son's e-bike when she found out about the program. She now rides "a couple hundred miles a week."

But there is a lot more involved with this pilot program than simply picking up and using a bike — even despite the color scheme that brings back memories of the Ofo debacle in Worcester.

“This is not a bike share,” Mook said. “These are personal bikes that people will take home, take to work and will have attachments to them because they are their property.”

Upon receipt of a bike, a bit of an orientation program also occurs where the participant learns about the program and reporting and about how to use the bike.

There is a short trial ride where basics like shifting, braking and power levels are reviewed, and recipients learn about bicycling safety in urbanized areas, Mook said.

Then there is the data tracking.

Monitoring greenhouse gas levels and more

The primary data point is miles traveled, so that the pilot project can calculate how much greenhouse gas emissions are avoided and how often people are exercising. Then there is more subjective data recipients contribute such as where the good and bad places to bike may be located, where bike infrastructure such as bike lanes and bike racks would be helpful, and the kinds of trips where people are using the bikes.

“By writing (your trips) down, when you see it on paper, it’s impressive,” Holy said.

A final, important goal of the program is less easy to track, however.

“We’re not just giving bikes to people and sending them on their way,” Mook said. “We’re engaging in group rides, classes, activities, as a way to create a

biking community within Worcester or create the ability for a biking community to grow in Worcester.”

That part of the program was on display Friday evening.

Brian Monteverd of Worcester Earn-a-Bike said that the biking community in Worcester has a lot of groups, but not necessarily groups that regularly interact.

There are the awesome wheelie kids - officially 508 Bike Life - and the spandex crowd who ride for sport, Monteverd explained. Then there are the folks for whom bikes are a main source of transportation, and two groups who really came into biking during the pandemic bicycling boom: people who didn't have access to a gym and started riding for exercise, and young families looking for a family activity that got them out of lockdown.

Many groups together for ride

And although seemingly somewhat disparate, representatives of several of those groups attended Friday's ride.

“It's just fun to get to ride around and go to different places like Boston,” Charles Cruz, 14, of 508 BikeLife, said as several of his friends performed tricks on the sidewalk while waiting for the ride to begin.

Obdulio Lopez and his father, also Obdulio Lopez, were on hand to participate in the ride. Lopez senior is participating in the program, and his son, who was translating, explained that he appreciated the classes that the e-bike program offered.

“It's bringing more bikes to the city,” the younger Lopez said, noting that he just moved from Boston where people regularly commute by bike. He added he commutes roughly 20 miles round trip by bike for his own job.

And more bikes in the city can lead to more biking infrastructure, something that several participants noted was lacking in the city. A city spokesman said Friday that Worcester is inventorying its miles of bike lanes and expected to have a number of total bike lane miles next week.

“The only thing is people in cars have to learn to share the road because not every one has bike lanes,” Cruz said. “Make more bike lanes.”

But as the group prepared to head off down Franklin Street, they represented a quintessential image of current Worcester. Mook spoke to the group over the sounds of live music from the Worcester Beer Garden. Black, Latino and white cyclists of all ages checked their equipment. The group was headed to Polar Park, where tickets to the game (and bike valets) awaited. And at some points, Mook said the group would assert their right to the road and ride in the traffic lane.

They would “take the lane.”

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