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Keep high-powered e-bikes off the rail trail

By DR. CHARLES BRUMMER September 8, 2026

I strongly agree with Elizabeth Holbrook's Aug. 25 letter, "Rail trail safety." The Northampton rail trails should be places where people can walk, jog, bicycle and enjoy the outdoors without having to worry about being struck by a heavy, high-speed motorized vehicle.

This is not simply a Northampton problem. Massachusetts is now recognizing that the rapid growth of e-bikes and other micro-mobility devices has outpaced existing regulations. The state's Special Commission on Micromobility reported that e-bike-related injuries have been increasing since 2017 and noted a particular concern about the growing number of high-powered devices. Massachusetts has seen nearly 900 crashes involving e-bikes and e-scooters from 2023 through 2025.

The problem is not the ordinary pedal-assist e-bike. E-bikes can be enormously beneficial, particularly for older people and those with physical limitations who want to continue bicycling. The problem is that the term "e-bike" now encompasses vehicles with dramatically different capabilities.

A relatively light Class 1 pedal-assist bicycle stops providing motor assistance at 20 mph and requires the rider to pedal. At the other extreme are very heavy, powerful e-bikes and electric dirt-bike-like vehicles capable of traveling 30, 40 or even more miles per hour, sometimes using a throttle rather than requiring the rider to pedal. Some can weigh roughly twice as much as a conventional bicycle. Massachusetts' own micromobility commission has specifically noted that the greatest risks come from the larger and faster devices.

Unfortunately, this distinction is difficult for an ordinary pedestrian to make. When a 100-pound, high-powered, throttle-driven bike comes silently down the rail trail at 30 or 35 mph, a pedestrian cannot be expected to determine whether it is technically a Class 2 e-bike, a modified e-bike, an electric dirt bike or some other vehicle. Nor should pedestrians have to become experts in e-bike classifications simply to feel safe on a shared-use path.

Fortunately, Massachusetts is beginning to address this problem. Gov. Maura Healey's proposed Ride Safe Act would establish a tiered system based primarily on the speed a device is designed to achieve. The proposal places lower-speed devices in Speed Tier 0, including conventional bicycles, Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes and mobility-aid devices capable of no more than 20 mph. Tier 1 would include devices capable of 21–30 mph, while higher-speed devices would fall into Tiers 2 and 3. Most importantly, the proposal would prohibit Tier 2 and Tier 3 devices from bike paths, bike lanes and shared-use paths. In my opinion, it would be best if any device capable of 21-30 mph without requiring pedal assist also be banned from bike paths. This is not the case in the Ride Safe Act but could be required in a policy written in a Northampton ordinance. The tiered approach makes considerable sense. Regulation should be based not merely on whether something is labeled an "e-bike," but on the characteristics that determine the danger it poses: speed, weight and power.

Northampton does not have to wait for the Legislature to solve every aspect of this problem. Current Massachusetts law already permits a municipality with jurisdiction over a bike path to regulate or prohibit electric bicycles on that path, following public notice and a public hearing. Northampton's own ordinance already recognizes the distinction between low-speed electric bicycles and electrically powered mobility devices used by people with disabilities. I believe Northampton officials should take responsibility for using that authority.

We should continue to welcome ordinary bicycles, reasonable pedal-assist e-bikes and legitimate mobility devices. People with disabilities who depend on electric scooters or other powered mobility aids should absolutely not be excluded from the rail trails. The objective should not be to punish people who need electric assistance or to discourage the many beneficial uses of e-bikes.

Instead, Northampton should address the specific and growing problem of heavy, high-powered and high-speed devices on shared-use paths. A speed-based system, such as the one proposed in the Ride Safe Act, provides a sensible model. Devices capable of substantially higher speeds should be required to use streets rather than crowded pedestrian and bicycle paths.

The issue is ultimately one of balancing rights. The right of someone to ride a powerful electric vehicle at 30 or 40 mph should not take precedence over the right of a child, an elderly walker or any other walker, a runner or a person with a disability to use the rail trail without fearing a collision.

We should act before a serious injury on the Northampton rail trail forces us to ask why we waited.

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