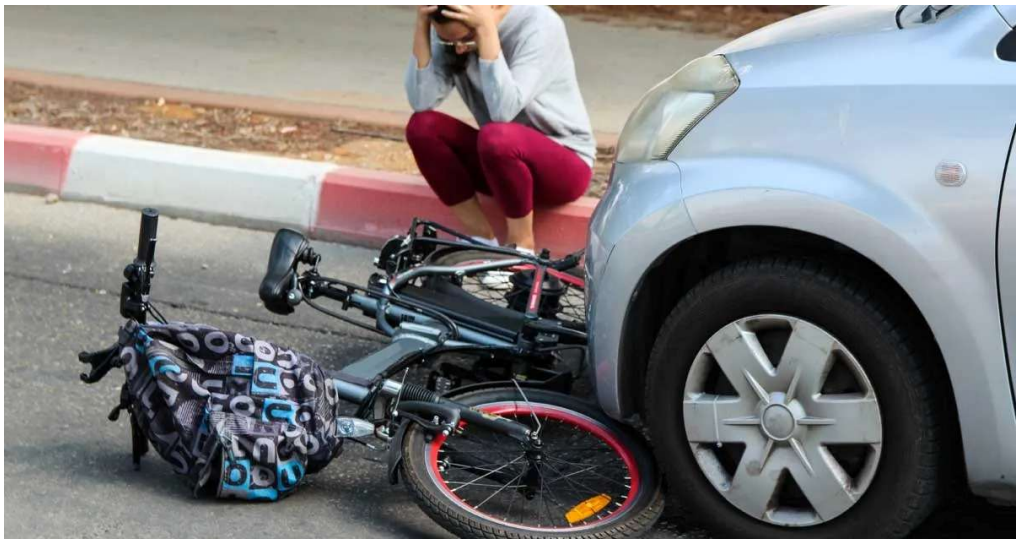
E-BIKES IN SANTA BARBARA

What Will It Take to Make Them Safe?



SUMMARY

Electric bicycles, or e-bikes, have become an increasingly common mode of transportation. Whether they are used by students going to school or adults traveling to work, they have become a part of our culture of being on the go. This is evident in Santa Barbara, where City officials have been redesigning City pathways to encourage bike, and now e-bike, traffic. However, the rapid rise of e-bike usage since the pandemic—particularly among younger riders—has led to increased frustrations and dangers for riders, pedestrians, and even automobile drivers. Public safety is at risk.

The proliferation of e-bikes has presented significant challenges for Santa Barbara County's South Coast, and especially the City of Santa Barbara, where State Street has become an e-bike promenade. City officials initially waited to determine appropriate traffic laws applied specifically to e-bikes and only recently enacted new laws in the spring of 2025 regarding unsafe e-bike riding. The question now is how the new ordinance will be enforced.

It is with a sense of urgency that the 2024-25 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury studied the matter of e-bikes in the City of Santa Barbara. Numerous postings on social media by local citizens cite bad behavior and near accidents on the part of e-bike riders. Accidents have been verified by local police and hospital records. Riders and pedestrians are at risk of critical injuries and death. The advent of e-bikes marks a broad cultural shift in how the community interacts in shared spaces, and addressing this change will require a collective effort to educate the public on the City's new e-bike ordinance.

BACKGROUND

California State Law

The standard pedal-propelled bicycle is still a mainstay of American culture, but the e-bike has grown rapidly in popularity since the 1990s. There are now a substantial number of e-bikes on public roads. But in California, there is still no requirement for registration or a license to use e-bikes, nor is there a requirement for insurance. As with many rapidly emerging technologies that present safety concerns, state and city governments have been slow to respond with updated legislation to institute effective enforcement of traffic safety laws for e-bikes.

The federal government enacted its first e-bike law in 2005. The California State Legislature passed its first e-bike law in 2015. The first step, with the passage of California AB 1096 (2015), was to define what qualifies as an electric bike, differentiating e-bikes from gasoline-powered bicycles, mopeds, or motorcycles. As a result, as of 2017, all e-bikes in California are required to have a label that describes its class, maximum motor-assisted speed, and motor wattage.[1] The maximum wattage for e-bikes is 750 watts. Any wattage above that could require that e-bike be reclassified as a moped or motorcycle, necessitating licensing and registration.

Like many other states, California classifies e-bikes into three categories based on top speeds and whether pedaling is a necessary function for motor assistance. The following categories are defined in California Vehicle Code section 312.5, subdivision (a) 1-3:

- A Class 1 electric bicycle, or "low-speed pedal-assisted electric bicycle," is equipped with a motor that provides assistance only when the rider is pedaling and that ceases to provide assistance when the bicycle reaches the speed of 20 miles per hour.
- A Class 2 electric bicycle, or "low-speed throttle-assisted electric bicycle," is equipped with a motor that may be used exclusively to propel the bicycle and that is not capable of providing assistance when the bicycle reaches the speed of 20 miles per hour. A throttle provides a boost without pedaling.
- A Class 3 electric bicycle, or "speed pedal-assisted electric bicycle," is a bicycle equipped with a motor that provides assistance only when the rider is pedaling, that is not capable of exclusively propelling the bicycle, and that ceases to provide assistance when the bicycle reaches the speed of 28 miles per hour. A Class 3 e-bike is equipped with a speedometer.

California has few restrictions on where e-bikes can be ridden. All three classes of e-bikes can utilize properly designated bike lanes on public roadways, and, generally, all classes of e-bikes are allowed on bike paths and multi-use trails. Though Class 3 e-bikes were initially restricted from bikes paths and multi-use trails, California AB 1909 (2022) amended section 21207.5 of the California Vehicle Code in 2023 to remove this restriction. However, local authorities do have the ability to impose restrictions on designated trails such as equestrian or hiking trails within their

[1] See Cal. Vehicle Code section 312.5, subdivision (c).

jurisdiction. Moreover, local governments can decide where e-bikes cannot go, including sidewalks, to safeguard their communities.

There are currently no statewide age restrictions for riders of Class 1 and 2 e-bikes. E-bike riders under the age of 18 must wear protective headgear. All Class 3 e-bike operators need to be 16 years or older and must wear a helmet regardless of age.[2]

Following the passage of AB 1096 in 2015, the State Legislature has generally focused its efforts on e-bikes in two specific areas: the first, restrictions on consumers' ability to modify their e-bikes; and, the second, studies and pilot programs aimed at gathering data as groundwork for future legislative efforts. SB 1271, signed into law in 2024, clarified the definitions of Class 1 and Class 3 e-bikes, and restricted consumers' ability to modify an e-bike to reach speeds beyond 20 mph on motor power alone, exceed 750 watts of motor power, or remove the operable pedals. In a similar vein, AB 1774, passed in 2024, amended section 24016 of the California Vehicle Code to clarify that modifications to an electric bicycle are allowed only if it can still meet the legal definition of an e-bike, and prohibited the sale of devices that alter its speed capability to exceed that definition.

Following the passage of SB 381 in 2023, which authorized a comprehensive study by San Jose State University of e-bike injury patterns and policy prescriptions, the State Legislature passed two separate bills in 2024 enabling two California counties to enact pilot programs enforcing stricter laws for e-bikes, including stricter age requirements.[3] AB 2234 allows local authorities within San Diego County to prohibit a person under 12 years from operating a Class 1 or 2 e-bike, with a warning for the first 60 days following the adoption of the ordinance or resolution and a $25 fine thereafter. Parents or guardians will be jointly liable for the fine. The State requires the County to report how many riders were detained for violations and the results of each detainment. Similarly, AB 1778 allows local authorities within Marin County to prohibit youth under 16 from operating Class 2 e-bikes and to require the use of helmets for all Class 2 e-bike riders, with a warning for the first 60 days following adoption of an ordinance or resolution and a $25 fine thereafter. Peace officer actions on traffic stops for violations will be again studied—how many underage youths were stopped and the results of that action. Both pilot programs end on January 1, 2029. The State Legislature is reportedly waiting for the outcomes of these two programs before entertaining more restrictive e-bike laws at the state level.

Santa Barbara E-bike Law

The City of Santa Barbara has only recently finalized an ordinance with guidance on e-bikes. The City's 2016 Bicycle Master Plan made no mention of e-bikes. It emphasized the "safety of all road users" as its first goal. Likewise, the City's 2018 Vision Zero plan "to eliminate all severe and fatal

[2] See Cal. Vehicle Code section 21213.

[3] See Cal. Vehicle Code section 21214.5 and section 21214.7.

transportation-related collisions on City streets by 2030" did not refer to e-bikes. However, the proliferation of e-bikes after the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant rise in e-bike related injuries since 2019 necessitated an overdue review of street safety with e-bikes in mind.

Many citizens have voiced support for e-bikes as well as criticism of them. The Santa Barbara City Council has often been caught in the middle. The City Council, with its support of clean air and green alternatives to motor traffic, as seen in its 2024 Climate Action Plan, had been reluctant to create anti-e-bike rules. Yet when the closing of State Street to motor traffic in 2020 allowed an explosion of e-bikes on the pedestrian mall, the e-bike traffic brought on increasingly insistent calls for local e-bike regulations.

In October 2024, the City's Ordinance Committee considered stricter local regulations on unsafe e-bike riding. Some were inspired by more punitive laws enacted by the City of Huntington Beach, another beachside city with e-bike problems. Following the Ordinance Committee's October meeting, a few of the proposed elements of the ordinance were sent back for restructuring. In February 2025, the City Council approved a final version of the ordinance that made unsafe riding, as now defined in the municipal code, punishable by administrative fines. The City of Santa Barbara is now at a decisive point in determining how strictly to enforce its new rules.

METHODOLOGY

After initial deliberation on the scope of the e-bike issue in Santa Barbara County, the 2024-25 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) decided to focus on the City of Santa Barbara, where unsafe e-bike riding had become a public concern and a contested issue. The Jury based this report on the following:

- Data on serious e-bike injuries and e-bike-involved accidents from Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital and the Santa Barbara Police Department
- Local social media postings, articles from local news outlets, and publications on state and national e-bike use, accident, injury, and legislative trends
- Pedestrian survey of State Street and other areas of active e-bike use, noting rider behavior and law enforcement presence
- Observations of Santa Barbara City Council meetings

The Jury also gathered information from interviews with the following:

- Santa Barbara City Council members and City staff members
- Local law enforcement officers
- Local school officials
- Members of the California State Legislature and officers of California Highway Patrol
- Directors of local bike advocacy organizations and local e-bike store owners

DISCUSSION

After years of declining retail business, the COVID-19 pandemic led to discussions about substantial change in downtown Santa Barbara. The outcome was to close State Street to automobile traffic and have a pedestrian promenade. Once the isolationism of the pandemic ended, traffic came back, but in the form of pedestrians, pedal bikes, and e-bikes, not cars. This brought new problems, even dangers, with no immediate solutions. E-bikes were often the target for citizen frustrations with calls for more public safety regulations. There have been numerous serious crashes involving e-bikes in Santa Barbara, providing validation for public complaints. The Santa Barbara City Council was slow to react, as it wanted to maintain its identity as a pro-bike city, to encourage young people to be active outdoors, and to promote a friendly, healthy atmosphere. In the winter of 2024-2025, public complaints compelled the City to take definitive action to restore public safety on the streets.

E-Bike Injuries

Nationwide, as e-bikes have become more popular for personal transportation and leisure activities, emergency departments (EDs) have been attending to an increase in injuries. These commonly include head and traumatic brain injuries, broken bones, back and spinal issues, and garden variety cuts and bruises. A 2023 report by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), "Micromobility Products-Related Deaths, Injuries, and Hazard Patterns," showed that injuries associated with e-bikes have trended upward significantly in recent years, increasing from an estimated 3,500 ED-treated injuries in 2017 to over 24,000 in 2022.[4] Fractures, followed by contusions/abrasions, were the two most common injuries. The most frequently injured body areas are the upper and lower limbs, as well as the head and neck. The CPSC also documented a dramatic national increase in fatalities associated with e-bikes over the same time period, reporting zero e-bike-related deaths in 2017, yet a sharp rise to 42 deaths by 2022.

Similarly, research published in *JAMA Network Open* shows that e-bike injuries in the U.S. increased by 30 times from 2017 to 2022, and hospitalizations rose by 43 times.[5] During that 5-year period, there were more than 45,000 visits to emergency rooms stemming from e-bike injuries, and more than 5,000 hospitalizations. The head injury findings among e-bike riders were the most striking, particularly amid the decline in helmet usage.

Locally, on October 29, 2024, the Santa Barbara City Council brought to light a study by the National Traffic Safety Administration, which found that of 105 cities of similar size in California,

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[4] James Tark, *Micromobility Products-Related Deaths, Injuries, and Hazard Patterns: 2017–2021* U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2022. https://www.cpsc.gov/content/Micromobility-Products-Related-Deaths-Injuries-and-Hazard-Patterns-2017-2021

[5] Adrian N. Fernandez, et al., "Injuries with Electric vs Conventional Scooters and Bicycles," *JAMA Network Open* 7, no. 7 (2024): e2424131. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24131

Santa Barbara ranked #1 in bicycle crash victims (83) in 2021, and #1 in 2020 with 76 bicycle crash victims. In comparison, for total road injuries and fatalities, Santa Barbara ranked 15th and 30th respectively in similarly sized California cities. These shocking statistics were highlighted when the City Council was considering an action plan to prevent traffic-related injuries and fatalities. This study, however, did not differentiate bicycle accidents from e-bike accidents. Nonetheless, the statistics for bicycle victims validated the public's concern over e-bikes.

This report came on the heels of an October 16, 2024, Santa Barbara City Council meeting, in which the Santa Barbara Police Department announced that there had been 80 collisions involving e-bikes so far that year (with the e-bike riders at fault 48 times), compared to 73 in all of 2023 and only 10 in 2022. The Jury later learned that the Police Department only counts collisions when there is damage to a car because of insurance reports or when someone goes to the hospital. Thus, the number of accidents involving bikes and e-bikes reported could be only a small percentage of those that actually occur. It should also be noted that e-bike involvement specifically is now on traffic accident forms, but not on traffic citation forms, which are set by the State. Again, e-bike traffic statistics are thus underreported as they are not counted if there is no official accident report.

Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital disclosed statistics to the Jury for e-bike crash victims with injuries severe enough to be taken to the Santa Barbara Cottage Emergency Department. Over a two-year period, there was a significant number of e-bike-related trauma cases arriving at the emergency room.

Between October 2022 and October 2024, 84 patients were seen after e-bike injuries. The causes of the injuries were classified by the hospital and are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Causes of Injuries	
Non-collision transport nontraffic accident	24
Non-collision transport traffic accident	15
Collision with car/truck/van nontraffic accident	6
Collision with stationary object nontraffic accident	5
Collision with stationary object traffic accident	3
Collision with non-motor vehicle traffic accident	1
Collision with pedal cycle nontraffic accident	2
Collision with pedestrian/animal nontraffic accident	1

The age ranges of the patients are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Age Ranges of Patients	
0-10	0
11-20	**40**
21-30	11
31-40	12
41-50	3
51-60	9
61-70	8
>70	1

Almost all of the injured were the operators of the e-bike; four were passengers.

These figures demonstrate a significant public health problem. A count of 84 patients over a two-year period suggests that nearly one patient per week suffered serious injuries. The age of the patients peaked in the 11-20 age group (40 patients), indicating that the teen-aged population is at greatest risk of injury. The remainder of injuries occurred relatively evenly in older age groups, including in nine individuals over 60 years old.

The types of injuries at Cottage Hospital were also serious. While orthopedic injuries were most common (24), 19 patients also suffered head and neck injuries, four had chest injuries, and two had major vascular injuries. Cottage Hospital did not report any deaths over this time-period.

The Santa Barbara Police Department also provided statistics to the Jury for recent accidents involving e-bikes. Between the dates of January 25, 2022, and August 24, 2024, there was a total of 163 e-bike related incidents, of which 85 were sent to the hospital. Of these 163 incidents, the e-bike rider was at fault just over 52% of the time. The Department also noted the type of vehicle involved, with passenger cars the most frequent. Regarding end-of-year data, the rapid increase in incidents should be noted:

- 6 out of 10 e-bike riders involved in collisions were at fault in 2022
- 32 out of 73 e-bike riders involved in collisions were at fault in 2023
- 71 out of 107 e-bike riders involved in collisions were at fault in 2024

When the data from both local sources is combined, it is clear that e-bike injuries are common and that these injuries are frequently serious and life-threatening. In fact, the City of Santa Barbara experienced its first e-bike-related fatality in May 2025. Along with this increase in related injuries come assorted legal concerns regarding liability. Without helmets or insurance, e-bike accidents on city streets might come at a public cost for medical treatment. Additionally, pedestrians involved in accidents may not have liability insurance. This possibly threatening liability issue has not been publicly discussed by the City Council.

Santa Barbara City Council

Santa Barbara has long held clean air as one of its priorities. This dedication to the environment has been apparent in the City's financial support to increase the use of alternative means of transportation and create a master plan for bikes throughout town. E-bikes are considered a more environmentally friendly mode of transportation. Furthermore, at a time when the City is hoping to convert underused buildings downtown to housing without adding more parking lots, no parking structures are required for e-bikes. These factors favor e-bikes in city planning. However, citizen complaints against unruly e-bike traffic redirected City Council discussion from long-range planning to more immediate action for street safety.

City Ordinances

After State Street closed to vehicle traffic, the close contact between pedestrians, bikes, and e-bikes got to the point that members of the public felt endangered. In reaction, City Council moved to curb unsafe behavior on bikes in Emergency Ordinance 5944 in March 2023. While defining a closed State Street, the City Council pointedly authorized rules for bikes, stating:

> It is contrary to public safety and thus unlawful to use a bicycle, electric bicycle, or similar device in motion upon the ground or pavement within the State Street Promenade in a willful or wanton disregard for the safety of persons or property or in a manner which endangers the safety of persons or property.

The State Street regulations included yielding the right-of-way to pedestrians, no exhibitions of speed, no passengers other than on an attached separate seat, a helmet if under 18, adequate brakes to counter the higher speed and weight of an e-bike, and a lamp and reflectors for night-time use. These laws were basic safety measures for all bikes.

By 2024, just having bike safety rules was not adequate to match the exuberant e-bike activity on State Street and elsewhere, and complaints from citizens put pressure on the City Council to enact an additional ordinance specifically written for e-bikes and certain "bad actors." In the October 15 Ordinance Committee meeting, the report from the City Attorney's Office and Santa Barbara Police Department acknowledged that the previous emergency ordinance had not specifically defined e-bikes, nor had it provided ways to address violations of the safety rules. The proposed amendment to Chapter 10.52 of the Municipal Code regulations stated that enforcement would be done through administrative citations and not Traffic Court citations that would permanently stay on the rider's record. Administrative fines were proposed starting at $100 for the first offense, rising to $200 for the second, and up to $500 for three offenses in one year.

The recommended 2024 regulations against unsafe e-bike behavior specifically included:

- Do not perform "any acrobatics, tricks, wheelies, or stunts on a public street [or] public right of way"

- Use bike lanes or ride close to the correct curb
- Ride in a single file

Riders were again required to yield to all pedestrians, wear a helmet if under 18, use reflectors, have brakes strong enough to stop the e-bike, and not ride on the sidewalk, as stated in the original Ordinance 5944. For enforcement, the report recommended following the Huntington Beach-inspired initiatives of allowing police officers to impound a juvenile's bike or e-bike. A parent would have to retrieve it, thus creating a conversation between the family and law enforcement. Importantly, the proposed ordinance was applied to the entire city of Santa Barbara, not just State Street. Public speakers at the October 15 Ordinance Committee meeting voiced various reactions. Some of the strong new rules engendered debate, and the proposals were sent back for further review and revision.

At the February 25, 2025, City Council meeting, some revisions to the more punitive elements of the ordinance proposed in October were made. Most notably, attending a Youth Diversion Program with the Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (CADA) for juvenile offenders was offered in place of impounding the bike or e-bike. If a citation was given to the juvenile, attending a two-hour course, ending with a test that would award a certificate, could eliminate the citation and fees. If the class is refused, the youth and the parents would be responsible for the administrative fines. If bad behavior continued, the juvenile would go to Teen Court. But e-bikes still would not be confiscated. (The newer, faster "pocket bikes" are illegal on streets and will be impounded on all occasions.) Adults who contravene the ordinance would continue to receive an administrative citation, not a vehicle code ticket. This way, there are no points on one's driving record, and for juveniles, application for a driver's license would not be impeded.

Other sections were also modified in the ordinance adopted in February 2025. The definition of unsafe behavior depended on if pedestrians or vehicles were "in close proximity." Whether to issue a citation or not depended on the peace officer's discretion, according to at what point the behavior became dangerous. When it came to riding on sidewalks under certain conditions, the City Council felt that this ordinance needed clear boundaries, and e-bikes remained prohibited from sidewalks.

After years of delay, the Santa Barbara City Council enacted this e-bike ordinance in response to calls for action. How it is enforced will make a difference in how it will be recognized and obeyed.

Law Enforcement (Santa Barbara Police Department)

The Santa Barbara Police Department welcomed the ordinance on e-bikes. It gave them the tools to do their job by giving them laws by which to administratively cite offenders. The ordinance came into effect on April 4, 2025.

In the past, the Santa Barbara Police Department had written few citations, especially with juveniles. There were several reasons suggested for this:

- The Police Department is understaffed
- Peace Officers would be working overtime if they added e-bike surveillance to their main duty of fighting crime
- Peace officers and City officials alike do not want a youth's first encounter with the law be a citation
- Peace officers do not recommend chasing after youths on bikes as it could be dangerous

In the month following May 4, enforcement of the new ordinance was moderate and multi-faceted. Ten officers over the course of several days came into contact with bike riders. While the officers spoke with 70 people, a total of 13 juveniles were issued citations related to the new ordinance. Two juveniles on illegal, high-speed electric dirt bikes had their bikes impounded. Peace officers also contacted several parents. The Department also initiated education through some social and news media posts during these days of direct patrols.

When officers incorporate bike and e-bike watches into their patrols on a regular basis, the new e-bike ordinance will have an impact on the Police Department. Officers may have to work overtime, but there will be no additional funding for overtime, nor for new hires for the additional duties. The Santa Barbara Police Department will instead need to move resources around: people, shifts, and money. This includes having officers strategically placed around schools early in the morning and mid-afternoon, as well as around popular riding areas downtown or on the beach pathways. People often do not see the officers and do not know they are there. Higher visibility of officers will be critical to taming unsafe behavior on e-bikes.

The Santa Barbara Police Department, like many law enforcement agencies in the nation, has had to deal with shortages of police officers in keeping the law. Priorities will always first be for hard crimes, not bike-riding violations. Santa Barbara does have a bike patrol. Ironically, they have not been and will not be assigned to catching e-bike riders who ignore stop signs, ride on sidewalks, speed, or endanger pedestrians, especially if the offenders are young juveniles. Bike Patrol officers do give warnings, but they have not issued and do not currently plan to issue citations. This maintains the community-friendly image of the Bike Patrol.

In the past, there have been few consequences for those e-bike riders creating dangerous conditions on local roads and sidewalks. In addition, the Jury heard from several branches of local government that when the financial burden imposed by an administrative fine is modest, it can fail to make a significant impact. The main goal of the Police Department is to change behavior, not collect fees. Further, the new arrangement for a youth diversion program also minimizes the weight of a citation, as it can easily be erased by a class.

In contrast, police officers in the City of Huntington Beach dedicate two hours of their shift to keep an eye on e-bikes and make sure the riders follow the rules. They have the discretion to issue a civil citation or an infraction with a ticket. For juveniles, the Huntington Beach police officers can impound the e-bike. It is not known at this point if this added police work is making a difference in e-bike safety in that city, but additional cities in Orange County are now in agreement and enacting similar laws. Moreover, because of a sharp increase in e-bike-related injuries and emergency room visits since 2020, the Orange County government enacted laws that came into effect in April 2025 governing speeding and unsafe behavior on e-bikes in unincorporated areas, hoping to additionally encourage consistent e-bike rules among all cities in the county.

The underlying force of all safety rules is accountability. If riders of bikes or e-bikes face no consequences for their reckless or too relaxed behavior, there will no doubt be limited adherence to rules of the road, old or new. And this could only increase cases of injuries or even fatalities. The 2018 Santa Barbara Vision Zero Plan addressed this issue straight on:

> Without enforcement, traffic laws…cannot be expected to reduce traffic fatalities or serious injuries. If traffic laws are not enforced, *or are perceived as not being enforced,* compliance is less likely. Effective enforcement includes establishing, regular updating, and enforcing laws that address collision risk factors. Locations where repeated collisions occur can indicate where robust enforcement is needed. (Emphasis added.)

Schools in Santa Barbara

School districts in the Santa Barbara County area have seen an increase in usage of e-bikes to get to school by students in junior high and high school. Outside each of the three public high schools in the Santa Barbara Unified School District, the Jury observed over 100 e-bikes parked, and almost as many outside junior high schools. E-bikes have allowed parents a break from the daily school commute.

It has been estimated that about 10% of students ride their e-bikes to school. The Santa Barbara Unified School District is concerned about student safety—once they arrive at school. At some of these schools, bike racks have been purposely placed at the periphery of school grounds in attempts to minimize the use of e-bikes in more central parts of campus. How students are getting to school has not been a major concern for school administration. Programs to provide information on e-bike safety have not been required. School-wide presentations—mainly at elementary and junior high schools—take place, but these are initiated by the Police Department; they are not a District promotion. No District funding is currently being specifically allocated for e-bike education.

In the past, there has been no consistent approach to e-bike instruction in the Santa Barbara Unified School District. In contrast, the Huntington Beach Union High School District has a 20-minute e-

bike safety video on its website, and students must apply for a school permit before they are allowed to ride their e-bikes to school.

Under California law, rules of the road for e-bikes exist as they do for cars: ride with the flow of traffic; stop at stop signs; obey speed limits; etc. For young riders who have not yet taken a driving test, these rules are not ingrained and sometimes not even known. The Jury learned that not all parents know them either, or they are not aware that these rules apply to young e-bike riders.

A local cycling advocacy group that provides bike education has expanded its focus of attention from bike riding training in elementary schools to include e-bike safety training in junior high and high schools. Not only do they emphasize traffic rules, but they now also address behavioral issues. It was suggested that such courses include videos of e-bike accidents, much like the crumpled cars that are shown to high school students prior to proms and graduation. This would highlight the danger of reckless riding. The Santa Barbara Police Department has recently begun to coordinate with bike advocacy groups to educate students on topics of e-bike safety.

Most complaints about e-bikes on social media and in public meetings focus on juveniles, including youths utilizing e-bikes for unlawful activities after school such as harassing and intimidating local residents or car drivers. Frequent complaints have been posted on local social media by residents who report damage to property and threats to their person. However, the Santa Barbara Police Department has recently expanded its efforts to more regularly educate students at local elementary and junior high schools, which the Jury believes will have positive and lasting effects.

Public Education

The City of Goleta organized an E-Bike Week in January 2025 and cooperated with two nearby high schools and one junior high for presentations. Working with the California Highway Patrol, the Goleta Police Department, Goleta Valley Cottage Hospital, and a bike advocacy group, the City of Goleta gave safety presentations and distributed helmets and protective equipment at the schools. This came one year after the Santa Barbara Association of Governments (SBCAG) held a similar e-bike safety awareness day in downtown Santa Barbara. These entities and organizations saw the need to educate students and the public of all ages about e-bikes.

The City of Santa Barbara has considered a significant e-bike awareness campaign. Although limited media outreach began, a comprehensive public awareness campaign has not been implemented. After enacting the new ordinance, the entire community will need to be informed about the revised expectations for e-bike riders. With collaboration among City officials, law enforcement agencies, and school administrators, the City of Santa Barbara could stage a powerful education campaign. Bike shops would willingly participate, according to officials and shop owners. But as one bike advocate said, someone has to say, “Make this happen.”

In 2018, the City of Santa Barbara adopted a Vision Zero Strategy to eliminate severe and fatal traffic accidents. The prologue to the Vision Zero program compared the current need for a different approach to traffic safety to the introduction of seat belt requirement laws in the 1980s. People were slow to adapt to the new laws that were more constraining, even if it meant saving lives. The Vision Zero statement credits stronger laws, enforcement, and automobile design changes in addition to education for increases in public acceptance of seat belts. It took years to see meaningful changes in behavior. With increases in public awareness, people accepted wearing a seat belt as part of driving safely. Seat belts have saved lives. Santa Barbara could benefit from the same all-around approach in order to prevent inevitable crashes and injuries for e-bike riders in the future.

The two California counties that instituted stricter laws for young people on e-bikes, Marin County and San Diego County, were mandated by the state to administer a public information campaign for at least 30 days prior to the enactment of their ordinances or resolutions, including "public announcements in major media outlets and press releases."[6] The City of Santa Barbara should do no less.

CONCLUSION

Riding e-bikes has resulted in many serious injuries in Santa Barbara, particularly among riders 20 years and younger. Santa Barbara experienced its first e-bike-related fatality in May 2025. In February 2025, the City Council enacted a new e-bike ordinance to cut down on certain unsafe riding behaviors, and the Santa Barbara Police Department is rolling out enforcement. It remains to be seen if more robust actions need to be taken to assure compliance with the new laws and more publicity to make an impact on public awareness.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: Since the City of Santa Barbara's adoption of the new e-bike ordinance, Santa Barbara Police Department officers now have broad discretion in responding to unsafe behavior by e-bike riders, but, as a general principle, behavioral change requires a strategic and consistent approach.

Recommendation 1a: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council encourage the Santa Barbara Police Department to establish a plan to strategically and consistently focus enforcement efforts in high-traffic areas so as to achieve high visibility and have the greatest impact on behavior in enforcement operations. To be implemented by December 1, 2025.

[6] See Cal. Vehicle Code section 21214.5, subdivision (f), and section 21214.7, subdivision (e).

Recommendation 1b: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council require the Santa Barbara Police Department to give the Council monthly reports on the number and severity of e-bike-involved accidents in the City of Santa Barbara, as well as the number of citations issued. To be implemented by December 1, 2025.

Recommendation 1c: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council make available to the public these monthly reports on the number and severity of e-bike-involved accidents in the City of Santa Barbara, as well as the number of citations issued. To be implemented by December 1, 2025.

Finding 2: The Santa Barbara City Council has tasked the Police Department and its officers with additional responsibilities related to enforcement of the new e-bike ordinance but has not provided additional funding to support those purposes.

Recommendation 2: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council conduct a study to determine how much new funding for this additional police work is needed. To be completed by April 1, 2026.

Finding 3: The City of Santa Barbara has initiated only a limited public information campaign about the new e-bike ordinance now in effect, thus limiting awareness of the ordinance.

Recommendation 3a: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council initiate an expanded and long-term public information campaign to inform and educate the public about the City's new e-bike rules. To be implemented by December 1, 2025.

Recommendation 3b: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council invite the cooperation and participation of secondary schools in the Santa Barbara Unified School District, private organizations that are involved in e-bike education, neighboring cities including Goleta, and local businesses for expanded public outreach on e-bike safety and laws now in effect.

Finding 4: The Santa Barbara Police Department has recently expanded its outreach in Santa Barbara Unified School District to instruct students in e-bike safety and laws, which is a positive development.

This report was issued by the Grand Jury with the exception of a Grand Juror who wanted to avoid the perception of a conflict of interest. That Grand Juror was excluded from all parts of the investigation, including interviews, deliberations, and the writing and approval of this report.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree with an explanation
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with an analysis completion date of fewer than 6 months after the issuance of the report
- It will not be implemented with an explanation of why

City of Santa Barbara – 90 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4

Recommendations 1a, 1b, 1c, 2, 3a, 3b