

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

San Francisco could be the e-bike commuting capital of the country. Here's how

By Dana Yanocha

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Gift Article



Ed Parillon rides an electric cargo bike to run errands with son Simon, left, and daughter Louise in the Mission District of San Francisco. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle 2020

With mild winters and dry summers, San Francisco has always been a prime candidate to be the bicycle commuting capital of the country. But for many residents, the steep hills make the prospect of regularly bicycling to get around town impossible.

Electric bikes solve that. Yet the electrically powered two-wheeled and three-wheeled cycles have never really taken off in San Francisco. Through incentives and better street design, the city can change that.

E-bikes are compatible, in terms of size and maximum speed, with conventional bicycles; the top speed for most e-bikes is 15-20 mph. They are better substitutes for cars and mopeds than pedal bicycles because commuters, errand runners and even parents doing school drop-offs can more easily cover longer distance trips, especially those that include a few hills. In the U.S., nearly 2 in 3 trips are less than 5 miles, about a 20-minute e-bike ride. At about 10% of the annual cost of owning a car (estimated at around \$12,000), e-bikes can replace a second (or third) car.

E-bikes are also obviously good for the environment. Using e-bikes for 15% of all urban miles traveled in North America could reduce carbon dioxide emissions from transport by 12%, according to a 2020 study.

When replacing vehicle trips, e-bikes support safer, slower streets for all of us. Motor vehicles caused more than 2,800 crashes resulting in injury in San Francisco, according to city data from 2023. And in bike-friendly cities, a 2019 study from Norway found that e-bikes are no more likely to cause serious accidents than pedal bicycles.

So how can San Francisco take advantage of these benefits and become a more e-bike-friendly city? E-bike share, purchase subsidies and safe bike lane networks.

Integrating e-bikes into local bike-share programs can allow more people to test and experience them without upfront purchase costs. Bay Wheels, for example, introduced 2,000 e-bikes and 55 charging/docking stations in San Francisco and other Bay Area cities last year and initially lowered rental costs to capitalize on their popularity.

While subsidies and rebates for electric cars and trucks are plentiful, few exist for e-bikes. Denver launched a program providing vouchers worth up to \$1,700 to offset the cost of an e-bike or e-cargo bike. In its initial year, the program supplemented the purchase of more than 4,700 e-bikes. Denver officials project that annual emissions reduced by this first batch of e-bikes will be the equivalent of taking more than 300 cars off the road.

But with more people using bikes and e-bikes, cities must provide safer places to ride. San Francisco and other U.S. cities can take note from global leaders like Bogota, Colombia, and Paris. In 1974, Bogota's government closed several major thoroughfares to cars for the first *Ciclovía*, now held every Sunday. Bogota, population 8 million, has a connected bike lane network of 368 miles and an estimated 900,000 daily bike trips. The *Ciclovía* program inspired Sunday Streets SF, which turns certain San Francisco streets into car-free community spaces several Sundays a year for all to enjoy. But the city can do even better.

Paris is one of the few cities that has embraced all three key actions. Paris wants to be 100% cyclable by 2026, and e-bikes are a part of that vision. Of the 19,000 bicycles in the public bike share system, *Vélib' Métropole*, 40% are e-bikes. Municipal subsidies paid for one-third of the cost for people to buy 85,000 e-bikes or cargo bikes from 2009 through 2022.

Streets in Paris prioritize people, with cars removed from several major thoroughfares, including along the Seine River in the city's heart. With only 10% of trips made by car, on-street parking spaces are being converted into bike lanes across the city. The French national government plans to invest [about \\$21 million in cycling through 2027](#). This includes \$2,000 vouchers for e-bike purchases, with priority for low-income residents and an option for certified second-hand e-bikes.

In the U.S., no municipality has situated cycling and e-bikes as a primary solution to reduce transport costs and emissions. New York's shared e-bike expansion plan and a [proposal for an e-bike purchase voucher](#) in the state legislature are steps in the right direction. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission recently announced [\\$1,000 e-bike purchase rebates](#) to low-income residents as part of a broader bid to help Bay Area residents and [delivery workers](#) use e-bikes rather than cars.

The time is right for American cities to embrace e-bikes. They can make this happen by establishing and expanding e-bike share, investing in programs to make e-bikes safer and more affordable, and building protected bike lane networks. With its 56 miles of protected bike lanes, San Francisco already has the makings of a city primed for e-bikes — especially with those notorious hills. Now is the moment for the city to supercharge its momentum.

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