

Bike to Work Week: Are e-bikes the answer to health, traffic and environmental issues?

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Melissa Wenzel got rid of her Toyota Prius in April 2018.

After battling cancer, arthritis and severe knee pain for years, the

41-year-old Minnesota native found an active solution to help her "transition back to a healthy lifestyle that simultaneously helps the environment."

She bought an [e-bike](#).

"I was just finishing my treatment for leukemia and I had gained a lot of weight," Wenzel said. "I needed tools to help me get active again, so I bought an e-bike that has literally become my car."

She said the Pedego City Commuter she bought has a pedal assist that she uses when she's running late to work, and a throttle that she engages "if the chain pops off so I can get somewhere safely."

The electric-powered two-wheeler delivers moderate support when she needs it and she turns the assist off when she wants to "enjoy a slow, relaxing ride on a sunny spring day."

Two-wheeled future

Transportation enthusiasts pay a lot of attention to the future of electric-powered cars and robotaxis. We often keep our eyes on cars that can fly, robotic delivery services, and human-carrying drones that can transport passengers across town.

But in a world concerned about fuel economy, health, and convenience, perhaps the tech-forward answers to today's commuting problems are already on roads across the country right now.

Electric two-wheelers are taking Europe and Asia by storm, and [big cities](#) like Los Angeles and Atlanta have a growing market of e-bikes on the streets, and the prospects of commuter adaptation seem promising.

In fact, while standard bicycle sales have remained stagnant for the past three years, e-bike sales were up 79% in 2018, according to the market research firm NPD Group which also said that U.S. e-bike sales are eight times as great as they were in 2014.

So far in 2019, wholesale bike sales are down for every category except e-bikes, which are up 24.7% over last year, according to the latest Bicycle Product Suppliers Association Sell-in Report.

Bicycle manufacturer Trek says e-bikes are the company's fastest-growing segment.

"How many products do you know that (if) 100 people go on a test drive, they all come back and have a big smile?" said Trek CEO John Burke about e-bikes.

"I think it's word of mouth. I think consumers are driving e-bikes (sales)."

Trek is one of the largest bicycle brands in the U.S. based on representation in bike shops, according to industry research firm IBIS World.

A study released in 2018 by the National Institute for Transportation and Communities found that [electric bikes](#) appeal to a wider pool of riders than conventional bicycles, including older adults and those with physical limitations.

There are two types of e-bikes: the ones with pedal assist features like Trek's Super Commuter S8, which we tested out last week, and there are e-bike options with a throttle that have notoriously been banned in cities like NYC.

Bike or Motorbike?

There's a controversy in some municipalities as to where the line is drawn between bikes, which require no registration, and motorcycles, which require a license.

Some cities like Atlanta have legislation that limits how fast e-bikes can travel as ride-hailing companies like Uber and Lyft move in to offer solutions to congestion, bridging the gap between traditional bikes and cars. In Los Angeles, private companies are peppering the streets and sidewalks with electric bicycles that can be rented by the minute to cut down on traffic.

The head of Waterloo, Wisconsin-based Trek Bicycle Corp. says that biking also provides solutions to [environmental issues](#), but there are hurdles as consumers increasingly become more sedentary.

"I think one of the problems we have as a society is screens. People are addicted," Burke said. "Kids are screwing around with phones, and people are binge-watching Netflix. You don't have as many people being outside being active."

Some countries have laid the blueprint for what e-biking can look like in the future as America is just beginning its e-bike revolution, Burke says.

While an increasing number of cities have invested in their bike path infrastructure over the years, Burke, who inherited the 45-year-old company from his father, says the U.S. has a long way to go before becoming a "bicycle-friendly nation."

"If you want to see a bicycle-friendly country, go to Denmark. If you want to see a bicycle-friendly country, go to Holland," Burke said. He says that cities in the U.S. like Boulder, Colorado, and Madison,

Wisconsin, are some of the best cycling-friendly cities in the country, "but cities in Europe are still way ahead of the United States."

The self-proclaimed optimist said that he thinks bikes are a pivotal player in the future of transportation, but that more advocacy needs to be done on behalf of the industry to get more government support to build biking areas on [public roads](#) or on public land.

"It's a frustrating thing," Burks said about the lack of advocacy within the biking industry. There are a few companies that get involved and try to create more bicycle facilities and then you see other companies that do nothing. If you build them, they will come. If you give people a safe place to ride bikes, they will come."

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