



After reading the recent (and very dumb) [New York Times expose by Matt Richtel on e-bikes](#), you'd be forgiven for mistaking electric-assist bicycles for the next big threat to human health. But 3 other news stories about the benefits, and growing pains, of e-bikes show there's real interest in them as a climate solution. Rather than just critique the [NYT's editorial choices](#), I want to highlight some of what we're learning from more thoughtful reporting on e-bikes.

The good news is there's a nationwide uptick in policy approaches to incentivize e-bikes, especially rebate and discount programs.

This month, Vanessa Arredondo wrote about local policies from Long Beach to Sacramento in a story for the Los Angeles Times titled ["E-bike programs and other green transit efforts are sprouting throughout the state. Will they catch on?"](#) She reports on the safety concerns raised by car collisions like the one in Encinitas without turning it into a hit piece on e-bikes. From her reporting and other sources, we learn a lot about what cities and counties in California are trying including:

Long Beach is seeking [a vendor](#) to help launch a small e-bike lending program before the end of 2023. Two-thirds of the bikes would be reserved for low-income residents.

Pasadena [launched an e-bike rebate pilot program in July](#) that will provide rebates of \$500 to \$750 for residents who purchase an e-bike in the city depending on income, with another \$250 if it's a cargo bike.

Berkeley launched an [e-bike lottery program](#) this year. More than 600 low-income residents applied to the project, which provided [56 households with bikes](#) to use through May. The city is now looking at a proposed point-of-sale discount.

Redding has a point-of-sale discount up to \$1,150.

Alameda and Contra Costa counties both have an active post-purchase rebate of anywhere from \$100 to \$600 depending on income and neighborhood.

San Mateo County offers a point-of-sale discount worth up to \$1,000.

The northeast San Fernando Valley has a unique program called [Electro-bici](#) as part of the Pacoima Beautiful project. It lends e-bikes out for up to 9 months at a cost of \$20, subsidized by \$500,000 from LADWP.

Statewide, the California Air Resources Board will [launch an e-bike incentive program sometime this fall](#). The program will also target low-income residents and those who live in disadvantaged communities, LAT reports, and will offer rebates of \$1,000 off a standard e-bike, with an additional \$750 discount for larger bikes. Currently, the program has \$13 million in funding.

That said, California is not leading the pack. In late June, Maria Galluci wrote this great first-person piece about riding a cargo bike around New York, called [“Driving less may be as easy as riding a bike - a big electric one”](#) for Canary Media. It captures the thrill, and relative ease, of the bigger e-bikes while giving a smart policy roundup of the various rebates and incentives that other states are trying around the country, including:

Minnesota lawmakers [passed](#) a \$1.3 billion infrastructure law designed to reduce auto emissions, in part by providing rebates worth up to \$1,500 for e-bike buyers.

Colorado lawmakers [approved](#) a \$450 tax rebate in May that residents at any income level can receive toward an e-bike purchase next year, and they [announced details](#) of a \$12 million e-bike program that's being funded by a 2022 air-quality improvement law.

Denver is an early success story with its e-bike program that budgets about \$3 million for instant e-bike rebates, funded through a voter-approved sales tax. Residents received rebates of \$400 or \$1,200, depending on their income status, that could be boosted an additional \$500 for cargo e-bikes. Canary reports that more than 4,700 Denver residents became new e-bike owners in 2022 and rode their e-bikes an average of 26 miles per week, replacing 3.4 round-trip vehicle outings.

These are just some of nearly 140 local e-bike programs throughout the country, according to a super helpful [online database](#) co-managed by John MacArthur, at the [Transportation Research and Education Center](#) at Portland State University in Oregon. “I think Colorado and Denver are becoming the de facto template,” MacArthur told me in an email. “Other states, nine so far, also have incentive programs but they are just beginning to launch. California is slow to launch their program and I feel it is very underfunded based on the size of the state.” Note that Colorado has dedicated nearly as much funding to its e-bike program as California, a state with 33 million more residents.

Knowing that states are policy laboratories, policymakers and advocates will be looking closely at participation rates based on income level for these various rebate programs, especially those that pay extra for cargo bikes, which can truly replace car trips because they offer space for groceries, equipment, and children. But what exactly constitutes a cargo bike? How much cargo must it carry to be worthy of an additional discount? MacArthur says several states are grappling with those definitions right now. It’ll also be important to see the difference between how point-of-sale discounts perform compared to tax rebates.

In my view, cities like Pasadena, Berkeley and Santa Monica should be able to rival the success of Denver when you take into consideration the superior weather. (It’s the biking *climate* that’s worse in California.) In Denver, more than 70 percent of respondents reported using their gas vehicles less often after purchasing their e-bikes, [according to research by RMI](#). For California cities to recreate that success, the quality of their bike infrastructure will need more investments. The next policy step is to pair e-bike incentives with more protections from cars so that people don’t just buy the bikes, they actually favor them over their cars. Because in the end, e-bike programs are only a success if they actually replace fossil fuel vehicles, rather than just add another family vehicle to the two-car garage.

Moving on, the third recent example of noteworthy reporting on e-bikes is critical of

e-bike manufacturers. Maddie Stone looked at why the e-bike industry is opposing laws that would make them easier to fix in this piece titled [“Why e-bike companies are embracing recycling while fighting repair”](#) for Grist. This report summarizes the various ways e-bikes are a sustainable transportation but spotlights the problems with not making them repairable in the long run. If all the new customers buying e-bikes (with the financial assistance of cities and states) aren’t able to repair their bikes, that’s a failure. Batteries from e-bikes have sparked fires and now the manufacturing trade group People for Bikes is lobbying lawmakers to request that they be exempt from so-called “right to repair” laws, which aim to make it easier for consumers to access parts to fix their bikes. New York has exempted e-bikes; Minnesota will not. Following these two states will be informative.

Now, some advice for the bike haters in the comments section. Take a minute to read [“You’re a Cyclist Who Was Just Struck by a Car Driver. Here’s Why It Was Your Fault,”](#) which lists a few of the reasons that bicyclists are *obviously* to blame for being struck by drivers, including: “You were riding during rush hour; You were riding at night or in the early morning; You were riding in the middle of the workday; You were riding on a back road; You were riding on a main road; You forgot to go back in time and tell people that subsidizing the oil industry might be a bad idea.”

This McSweeney’s story also contains perhaps the most brilliant takedown of the NYT coverage of e-bikes: “Frankly, I’m not sure a driver even hit you,” the author writes. “Maybe you were just [clipped by a Nissan van](#). Was there a driver in the van? Has the passive voice historically functioned to deflect responsibility and consolidate unjust power arrangements? These are all fascinating questions that, sadly, we will never know the answers to.” Oof.

So, hooray for these recent stories that seek actual answers and policy solutions to the climate woes caused by our transportation sector.