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New 'Wheels' Electrify Moraga Reporter

By Cathy Dausman



Sophie Braccini takes a turn on her new electric assist bike. Photo Cathy Dausman

"This is my new car," Sophie Braccini said with a glint in her eye, as she stopped at a coffee shop to chat. While the Lamorinda Weekly reporter has purposely kept a low carbon footprint (she owns a Prius), this current set of "wheels" is electric assist, which allows Braccini to bike to work.

She considers herself the ideal biking candidate, living and working in the same small community. Braccini said she'd be "bored to tears" if she had to exercise indoors in a gym. "It gets me a little workout," she said of her frequent rides and "has put pleasure into my writing."

Still, she's not sure she'll rely on it once it rains.

Braccini and her husband spent eight months researching electric bikes before purchasing one. She has had hers now, a German-made Kalkhoff bike, for about two months. She wanted a lightweight, commuter styled electric bike which

would allow her to wear skirts when she chose. Her husband wanted a durable, safe ride with good brakes for his wife, and insisted she wear a helmet.

"My kids think I look ridiculous with the helmet," Braccini confided, as she buckled up for a demonstration ride, but a motorcycle accident in France at age 20 taught her firsthand what it was like not wearing one. The resulting concussion left her with a three day gap in her memory. "The helmet saved my life," she said.

Braccini's Kalkhoff is a pedal assist style electric bike, providing the rider with gentle additional power on inclines. Its heavy duty bike lock attaches to the nearest pole or post, but finding a suitable lockup is often a challenge. Once that is solved, "I never have any difficulty finding a parking space," she said.

Braccini recalls an "exhilarating moment" riding along public streets after a meeting one night; she was first through the intersection when the light turned green. When asked about any biking downsides, Braccini acknowledged she sometimes has difficulty negotiating traffic on city streets. She sought advice from Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe, who reminded her that bikes on public streets are treated the same as vehicular traffic.

She prefers the bike lane along Moraga Way, with its straight road and "people who mean business" to using the Lafayette Moraga Regional Trail, saying the latter "is not a commute trail."

Braccini also remembers the time her battery died during a return trip from Lafayette. Burdened down with her groceries, she admits having "felt the weight of the bike." A second time her battery simply stopped working. "I did not enjoy the experience," she concluded wryly.

Although cycling takes twice as long as it would take to drive, Braccini has risen to the challenge. She gently reassures cyclists she passes not to feel bad about being passed by an electric bike, and looks forward to the establishment of a bicycle commission in Moraga. She loves driving an emission free vehicle, calling her electric bike "the poor woman's Tesla."

"What I'd love is to have solar panels [to charge the battery] so I'd ride powered by the sun," she said.

Braccini shopped for her bike at The New Wheel in San Francisco and Pacific E- Bike in Berkeley. Hank & Frank Bicycles (Lafayette) no longer carries electric bikes since Giant discontinued

its electric version. Sharp Bicycles (also Lafayette) can order Trek electric bikes, but doesn't stock them in their store. Performance Bike in Walnut Creek offers the line of Currie electric assist bikes on its website.

Edric Kwan, Moraga's public works director, told Lamorinda Weekly the Moraga Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan Update project was approved at Moraga's June 11 Town Council meeting as part of the Capital Improvement Program. Funded partially by a Transportation Development Act grant, the project provides a comprehensive update of the 2004 plan and will incorporate a project specific bicycle and pedestrian committee.

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