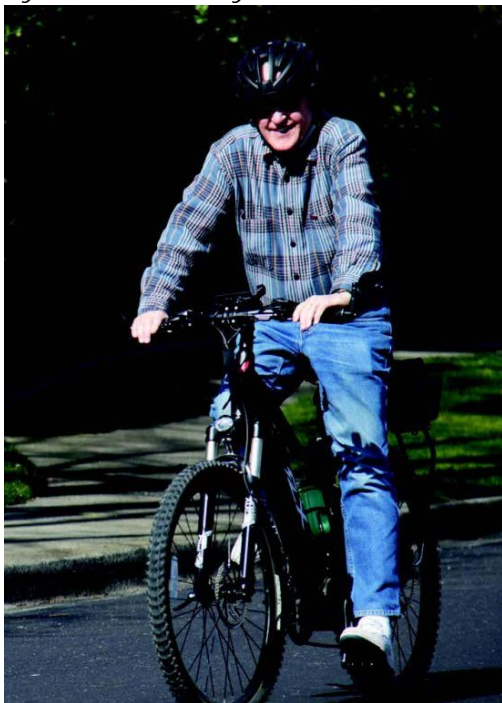


Published March 21st, 2018

## Riding a trend: e-bikes catch on in Lamorinda

By Sora O'Doherty



Larry Tessler Photos Sora O'Doherty

E-bikes are becoming more and more popular. Whether for touring purposes or for commuting to work, they are appealing to a wide variety of riders in Lamorinda.

Former Stanley Middle School principal Tom Schindele has been biking all his life. The 76-year-old purchased an e-bike a month ago and is planning to ride the Katy Trail ride in Missouri, some 220 miles, in June. When Schindele was 45, he spent 24 days biking through England and France by himself. He plans to ship his e-bike in a large box when he travels this summer, either by plane or train.

Here in Lamorinda, bicycle shops Hank and Frank's and Sharp Bicycle, both in Lafayette, stock an increasing number of e-bikes, which come in models for mountain biking, commuting, or just riding in comfort. Sharp carries Trek bicycles and Hank and Frank's carries the Giant brand.

Moraga resident Larry Tessler is 79 years old and loves the e-bike he bought off the internet about two years ago. Up until his 60s he rode a regular bike, but now he rides his e-bike recreationally, and only when it is warm. While he was interested in e-bikes, they were expensive, but he found a couple of guys doing a Kickstarter: FLX Bikes, who have a group on Facebook. He paid just \$1,300 for his bike, and couldn't be happier. "Originally," Tessler said, "I had difficulty with balance when the bike

was stopped, but never while riding." Tessler always bikes alone. While his wife is very athletic, she doesn't bike.

Tessler's bike has a throttle, so he can coast a little, but it won't take him up a hill. The battery on his bike goes 40-55 miles on a charge, which takes two to three hours when plugged into a charger. He's never run the battery out, and his longest journey has been 22 miles. He only likes to ride on off-road bike paths, so he throws his bike on a bike rack and goes to Walnut Creek to ride the Iron Horse Trail. He adds that you have to be wary about leaving your bike. Tessler has spent about \$500 to \$600 on accessories for his bike, which he keeps in a pack on the back of the bike.

Lafayette resident Michael Dimitruk is much younger than Tessler, but at age 40 with three children, he finds that he has less time to ride. He likes to bike in Briones Regional Park, but it has steep hills. On his regular mountain bike, he says, he really needs to pace himself so he won't run out of gas halfway through a ride.

"I end up riding slow and steady, trying to keep a constant pace and relentless forward progress," he says. "But on my e-mountain bike, I can cover four times the ground in the same amount of time, essentially riding at a sprint the whole way."

For James Leach, 68, the author of "The Sustainable Way" it's all about the climate. He's been a bicyclist for years and is concerned about global warming. He likes to use his bike to run errands, but he lives on a steep hill in Lafayette, so he uses his Trek bike, intended for riding on the road. He has a rack to carry his purchases home. Riding on the roads, he says you quickly learn which streets to avoid, like Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard. One of the benefits of riding an electric bike is that it is easy to use alternative routes. Hills are not a problem. "The city could improve bike access," he says, "but I generally feel safe." With no assist, Leach says an e-bike feels like a heavy bike, but with assist it feels kind of like someone is pushing you. Leach uses his e-bike strictly from his house. For recreation, he still rides a regular bike. All the e-bike riders interviewed believe that disk brakes on e-bikes are much better than rim brakes found on regular bikes.

Leach is enthusiastic about e-bikes. "You don't have to leave your e-bike at the station," Leach points out, "you can take it right onto the train." He added, "some e-bikes even fold up to make it easier to take them with you." He is now on his second e-bike. The first he used to commute daily to Dublin, a trip of over 20 miles. He would recharge the battery while he worked, then ride home on the Iron Horse Trail. "I would leave early," he said. "Driving would take me 35 minutes, biking only took 45 minutes and you'd have gotten in your exercise too." The only downside he saw was bad air days in the summer time. He notes that

bike touring companies are now using e-bikes, and that they are very popular in Europe.

Matt Sharp, who bought his father's bike business and has been in the business about 26 years, said 10 years ago he wasn't impressed with electric bikes, but in the last couple of years, he has been very impressed. E-bikes run about 14 pounds heavier than regular bikes, including six pounds for the battery and eight pounds for the motor, which sits in the middle of the frame. He finds that his e-bike customers fall into three main categories: commuters who ride all the way to work, or just park at BART; older people who can't ride like they used to and want to continue enjoying bicycling; and fit, active cyclists looking for another challenge, to go places they haven't been able to explore at greater distances. Sharp sells e-bikes ranging from around \$2,299 to \$5,000.

Hank and Frank's General Manager Andy Knickerbocker says there are now more options, with six to seven models representing the full range of bicycle styles: commuter, light fitness and full suspension mountain bikes. The bikes carry a limited two-year, no quibble warranty on the motor, battery and head unit (these units attach to the handle bars and tell riders how fast and how far they are riding, for example.) Battery replacement, which is rarely required, might run from \$500 to \$800, and batteries can be recycled.

When he was much younger, Schindele took tours with Bicycle Adventures with family members and worked for them as a tour guide one summer. Summarizing the benefits of owning an e-bike, he said, "The e-bike makes it possible to ride on the trails in our area and to also do some touring. It provides longer rides and easier rides, many of which I could not do at my age without the assistance given.

"If I tried a tour with a normal bike and was able to ride for awhile," he added with a chuckle, "I would probably be exhausted and have little energy for other activities."



From left, Tom Schindele and James Leach.

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