



FHWA E-bike Case Study Series

FHWA-HEP- 23-024



Durango, Colorado Conducts E-bike Pilot on Natural Surface Trails to Expand Access for Users

The city of Durango, Colorado, with a population of approximately 18,500¹ located on the San Juan Skyway All-American Road and just east of the Trail of the Ancients National Scenic Byway, is considered to have some of the best single track mountain biking in the world. Several high-profile bicycling races have been hosted in the diverse mountain setting, including the USA Pro Cycling Challenge and the Iron Horse Bicycle Classic, one of the largest and longest continuously run bicycling events in the United States. These activities have supported a large tourism industry. About 30 percent of jobs in La Plata County, where Durango is located, directly relate to tourism, and the tourism industry accounts for one-third of Durango's annual tax revenues.² Tourism is growing in the region as emerging technologies, like electric bicycles (e-bikes), increase access to the surrounding vistas. In response, the city of Durango has explored how to incorporate e-bikes on city pathways and trails.

As part of a multiyear effort, the city has been studying how e-bikes may affect the experiences of other users on trails. In June 2020, Durango began a one-year trial period that allowed e-bikes on natural surface trails in the Twin Buttes trail system. The pilot effort built on previous studies, such as the city's decision to allow e-bikes in the Animas River Trail in 2017. The Twin Buttes trial focused on community perceptions of how e-bikes may impact their overall experience of the area. After the pilot ended, the city [permanently allowed e-bikes](#) on select soft surface trails within the Twin Buttes trail system. As of 2022, there are no plans to expand e-bike access in other areas with soft surface or natural surface trails.

Laying the Groundwork for E-Bike Use on Natural Surface Trails

Initially in 2016, the Durango City Council briefly banned e-bikes as a precautionary safety measure while conducting safety and educational efforts on the Animas River Trail, a hard surface trail which

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¹ As of 2019, per the U.S. Census Bureau.

² [4 Ways Tourism Impacts the Durango and La Plata County Economy, May 5, 2020.](#)

Creating more livable communities through transportation choices



functions as a connector to several other trail systems.³ In 2018, after a one-year trial period on the Animas River Trail, the city voted to approve Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes on specific hard surface trails within the city as well as city streets and bike lanes. The decision was based on positive feedback received through public engagement and limited complaints during the trial period.

E-bike Classes

Class 1: pedal assist, max assisted speed of 20 mph

Class 2: throttle assist, max assisted speed of 20 mph

Class 3: pedal assist, max assisted speed of 28 mph

Source: 23 U.S.C. § 217(j)(2)

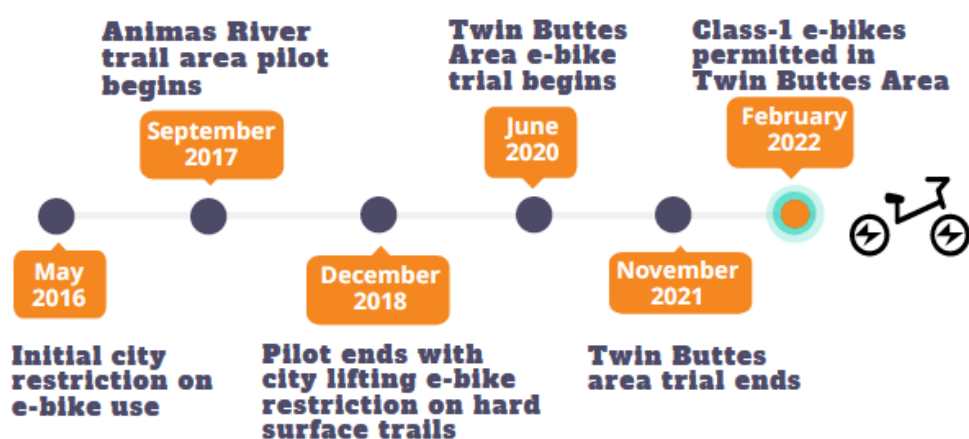
Twin Buttes Trail System E-bike Pilot

The success of the Animas River e-bike trial inspired further conversations within the community on whether e-bikes should be allowed on natural surface trails. Before 2022, motorized vehicles, e-bikes, and motorized scooters were not permitted on any natural surface trails in Durango. Similar to how the city explored e-bike use on hard surface trails, they studied user experiences on soft surface trails.

In June 2020, Durango initiated a trial program allowing Class 1 e-bikes in the Twin Buttes trail system to determine how they would operate alongside other users. Twin Buttes contains 10 miles of natural surface trails and was chosen for the trial because the majority of trails are self-contained within the Twin Buttes boundaries, avoiding jurisdictional issues. In 2020, the city focused on placing signage throughout the trail system to inform users of the trial and e-bike etiquette.

During the trial period Durango offered several opportunities for public engagement to better understand perceptions and community preferences for e-bikes on recreational trails. An initial public forum hosted over 100 community members. The comments at the meeting were split evenly on whether e-bikes should have access to natural surface trails. The trial also included a trailhead intercept survey asking trail users about their perceptions and opinions of e-bikes.

Timeline: City of Durango's e-bike pilot projects (2016-2022)



Timeline: City of Durango's e-bike pilot projects (2016-2022). Image courtesy of U.S. DOT Volpe Center.

³ Durango Bans Pedal-Assist Bikes on Trails, May 6, 2016.

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As part of the pilot, Durango conducted an education campaign on e-bikes and their appropriate use by partnering with community stakeholders, including bike shops and schools. The city educated and informed residents and visitors on the appropriate use of e-bikes via their website and trifold brochures. The brochures are very popular and can be found at recreation facilities and the welcome center for tourists. City staff also fostered relationships with local bike shops and advocacy groups to help distribute information on e-bikes by providing brochures and posting on social media. The trial period for the Twin Buttes trail system concluded on November 30, 2021, and the analysis of data from the surveys and public comment concluded on January 26th, 2022. After consideration of the [data](#), the City of Durango approved the use of Class 1 e-bike use only on select soft surface trails within the Twin Buttes trail system.

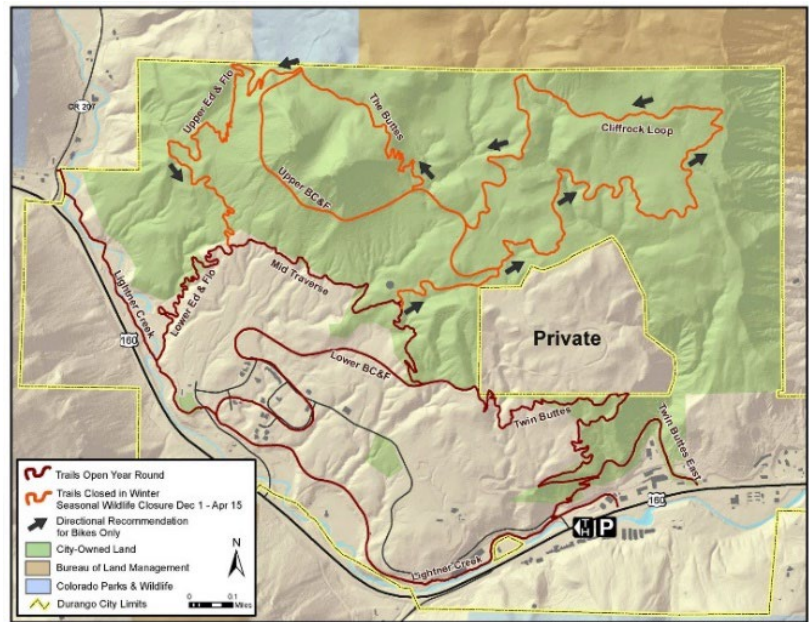
Implementation Challenges

Multi-jurisdictional trail networks necessitate cooperation among public land managers.

A key component of the Durango's e-bike regulatory approach involves consistent, open communication with other public land managers. Much of the trail infrastructure throughout the city connects seamlessly into Federal public lands. However, many of the Federal lands are Bureau of Land Management (BLM) special recreational management areas (SRMAs) have not been designated as open to off-road vehicle (including e-bike) use. The BLM has been reviewing whether to provide access to e-bike users in response to the

[regulatory developments](#) initiated by the Department of the Interior (DOI) Secretarial Order 3376.⁴ BLM SRMA properties in the La Plata County area have decided that e-bikes will be prohibited until further studies can determine e-bike impacts on natural surface trails. Throughout the pilot process, the city has maintained a constructive dialogue with BLM and other land management partners. If Durango grants e-bike access on natural surface trails in other parks, the city anticipates a need for interagency cooperation to identify trail connections, educate riders on what properties they can ride on, and coordinate enforcement resources. In anticipation of these potential challenges, the city and adjacent land management agencies have established an informal regional alliance that aims to develop consensus on solutions well before any jurisdictional conflicts arise.

Resources have been constrained by the pandemic. It has been difficult to dedicate resources to the Twin Buttes Area trial as staff focus has shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the



Twin Buttes Trail System. Image courtesy of city of Durango.

⁴ DOI Secretarial Order 3376, Increasing Recreational Opportunities through the use of Electric Bikes, August 29, 2019.



city has yet to determine if the pandemic has impacted how frequently residents use the Twin Buttes trail system. Durango extended the trial period to end in November 2021, so that the city could obtain sufficient public feedback over a full summer season.

Management of e-bike behavior requires both enforcement and education. City park rangers patrol the trail system, but they are not authorized to issue citations. Further, Durango has not modified local codes that regulate behaviors on trails to expressly address e-bike usage. Developing enforcement strategies and codes may be another outcome of the trial. The city has focused on educating trail users on proper trail etiquette as a strategy for managing behavior, for example, by publishing a [brochure](#) with information on e-bike rules and etiquette.

Key Takeaways

Durango's e-bike pilots have expanded access to outdoor recreational opportunities. The city's implementation of these trials highlights takeaways for other jurisdictions interested in standing up similar initiatives.

Public engagement is crucial. The city of Durango understood the importance of public engagement when making community decisions. By conducting a trial, community members could experience e-bikes firsthand and provide input on their experience with them. While the city conducted extensive research on e-bike safety and how they function alongside other users, decisions about management strategies on natural surface trails were also guided by residents' experiences and input.

Trial periods can help fine tune policy implementation. Trial periods allow localities to determine what educational materials and potential enforcement is needed based on their communities' preferences. Because many of Durango's natural surface trails are on lands under conservation easements, a blanket e-bike ordinance, similar to the hard surface decision, was not considered appropriate. Instead, the council is determining specific trails and systems where e-bikes are and are not allowed. The Durango City Council developed their policy position to permanently allow Class-1 e-bikes on Twin Butte's natural surface trails based on the findings from the pilot. Public commentary helped the City Council understand community sentiment about e-bikes on natural surface trails, and surveys conducted on the trail system indicated that there were minimal conflicts between e-bike riders and other trail users. This information informed the substance of the policy outcome and gave the Durango City Council confidence that the outcome reflected the community's desires.

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