

Is North Carolina bicycle registration bill a death sentence for WNC bike tourism?

Karen Chávez, Asheville Citizen Times Published 6:00 a.m. ET March 8, 2019 | Updated 1:46 p.m. ET March 8, 2019

ASHEVILLE – “Backwards,” “unnecessary” and “short-sighted,” are some of the ways local cyclists and state representatives are describing an [N.C. House bill](https://webservices.ncleg.net/ViewBillDocument/2019/569/0/DRH40082-MWf-48) (https://webservices.ncleg.net/ViewBillDocument/2019/569/0/DRH40082-MWf-48) that would require all cyclists age 16 and older to register their bikes or face a \$25 fine.

The bill, HB 157, introduced by Rep. Jeffrey Elmore, R-Wilkes, last week, states that cyclists riding on a public street or highway must pay a \$10 annual fee to register with the N.C. Department of Transportation, which would use the fees for “bicycle safety related projects, including bicycle lanes, signage, safety education, and bicycle helmet grants for minors.”

Cyclists would be required to attach a registration plate to the rear of the bicycle.

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An estimated 1,000 cyclists participated in the 102-mile Assault on Mt. Mitchell ride which began in Spartanburg, S.C and ended at the summit of Mt. Mitchell. The ride is hosted by the Freewheelers cycling club. (Photo: Matt Burkhart/mburkhart@citize)

Rep. Susan Fisher, D-Buncombe, is “totally opposed” to the bill, which she said would discourage people who use bikes to get to work and school, in addition to recreational users. She said it is a step backward in the challenge to drive less in order to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases that leave climate change particles left. Only 99¢ per month.

"We should be encouraging alternative forms of transportation in light of the carbon constrained future we're facing," Fisher said Thursday by phone.

"It's a procedure that will cause DMV to have to institute a new mechanism for licensing that will not make that much money, so there will not be a return on fees to streets and sidewalks or greenways or the things that this bill contemplated. It's a sort of an unnecessary fee."

RELATED: [Asheville discusses feasibility of bike share program \(/story/news/local/2018/06/23/asheville-public-meeting-feasibility-study-bike-share-program/725258002/\)](https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2018/06/23/asheville-public-meeting-feasibility-study-bike-share-program/725258002/)

The bill does not address the issue of visitors or those coming from out of state for the many bike races, organized rides or bike tours, or to ride the popular Blue Ridge Parkway and whether they would need to have their bicycles registered or buy a temporary permit.

It also hurts those least able to afford such a fee, said Rep. Brian Turner, D-Buncombe, who opposes the bill.

"A lot of people rely on bicycles as their primary mode of transportation. For many people, they can't afford other methods of transportation and this is going to add one more cost," Turner said by phone.

"There is also the enforcement issue. Is this what we want our police to be enforcing? I think our law enforcement resources are better used elsewhere he said.

RELATED: [Man who punched cyclist sentenced to jail \(/story/news/local/2018/04/11/driver-who-punched-cyclist-sentenced-3-days-jail/508265002/\)](https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2018/04/11/driver-who-punched-cyclist-sentenced-3-days-jail/508265002/)

Elmore did not respond to several phone calls and emails this week for comment. The bill was filed "by request," which typically means a legislator sponsored it as a favor to a constituent or someone not in the General Assembly and is not necessarily in favor of the bill.

According to the Wilkes Journal-Patriot, a resident complained to Elmore about large numbers of cyclists using Brushy Mountain Road, a rural road in Wilkes County, which is about two hours northeast of Asheville, and were being disrespectful with motorists.

Mike Sule, executive director of the nonprofit [Asheville on Bikes \(https://ashevilleonbikes.com/\)](https://ashevilleonbikes.com/), said he believes the representative should have handled the situation by working on a local level with bicycle clubs and landowners rather than proposing a state-wide registration fee.

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Jenny Leiser, 38, of Charlotte, crosses the finish line of the Assault on Mt. Mitchell as the first woman to finish the 102-mile ride which began in Spartanburg, S.C, for the second year in a row. She finished in 38th place overall with a time of 5:51:43. (Photo: Matt Burkhart/mburkhart@citizen-times.com)

Sule said such fees have not been proven to meet their objectives in other cities, such as Seattle, San Diego, Chicago and Fort Lauderdale, where the cost of administering the laws is often greater than the amount of fees collected, and can lead to discouragement of cycling.

He said these laws have only a minimal impact since such measures disproportionately target people of color, as well as children, and low income families, who are least likely to be able to register a bike and the most likely to be ticketed for that failure.

“Show us where it’s been successful, how many miles of bicycle paths have been built, how many after-school programs have been established, how much safer bicycle has become in other states with these fees,” Sule said. “We have researched this and have not found a clear, decisive example that this is a winning policy.”

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He said the bill would negatively affect both the booming bicycle manufacturing and retail businesses in Western North Carolina, home to heavy hitters such as Industry 9, Cane Creek Cycling Components and Fox Factory, as well as to bicycle tourism.

The 2017 Southern Blue Ridge Bicycle Plan study found that bicycle tourism had a \$14 million economic impact on WNC. The mountains draw thousands of riders from across the Southeast for races and group rides, such as the [Bike of the Irish \(https://ashevilleonbikes.com/events/asheville-bike-of-the-irish\)](https://ashevilleonbikes.com/events/asheville-bike-of-the-irish) coming up March 16, the [Assault on Mount Mitchell \(https://theassaults.com/assault-on-mt-mitchell/\)](https://theassaults.com/assault-on-mt-mitchell/) in May and the [WNC Flyer \(http://wncflyer.com/\)](http://wncflyer.com/) hosted by the Blue Ridge Bicycle Club in June, as well as people coming for vacation to ride scenic roads including the [Blue Ridge Parkway \(https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm).

RELATED: [Has the Blue Ridge Parkway lost its allure? \(/story/news/local/2019/03/05/blue-ridge-parkway-loses-visitors-weather-repairs-shutdown/2992924002/\)](/story/news/local/2019/03/05/blue-ridge-parkway-loses-visitors-weather-repairs-shutdown/2992924002/)

“WNC is a great place to ride a bicycle, but so is Pennsylvania, and so is Tennessee, and we have to understand that we are competing with those other states for people to come here and enjoy themselves,” Sule said.

“With this bill we would chase people away, let them know they’re not welcome in WNC. HB 157 is a direct threat to our prosperity.”

Frank Mandaro, an Asheville cyclist and manager of Beer City Bicycles in Woodfin, which sells and rents bicycle, said the proposed bill is a head-scratcher.

“Are people renting bikes going to have to pay a daily fee to ride a bike or are they going to get busted? How are they going to enforce it? It’s backward. It’s discouraging people from biking. It’s very short-sighted,” Mandaro said. “People are just going to say, I’m not going to Asheville to ride. “It’s going to kill cycling tourism.”

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