

Commuter tries to pave way for Segway riders

RANGERS, HIKERS OBJECT TO SCOOTER ON TRAIL

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All Richard Roeder wanted was to park his sports utility vehicle and cut his gasoline bill. He wanted to declare an end to 45-minute, three-mile, traffic-jammed commutes.

Instead, he says, he's been harassed and treated like a criminal.

Eight months ago, imagining a smooth transition to a new life of zero emission, he bought a Segway PT, the little battery-powered scooter, and began riding to his job at Microsoft in Mountain View on the Stevens Creek Trail.

It has not been such a seamless segue. Rangers told Roeder he's not allowed to ride the two-wheeled, self-balancing device on the popular bike and hiking path. Some hikers called him a danger to pedestrians. Others told him to take a hike instead.

"California Vehicle Code states I'm a pedestrian," said Roeder, 38, a program manager at Microsoft. "I don't get what the big deal is."

Now, Roeder's quest for Segway acceptance has

resulted in a months-long examination and debate in Mountain View, the latest city to confront a dilemma that many have faced since the vehicle was introduced to the world seven years ago as a machine that would change civilization.

No fewer than three city commissions - the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee and the Council Transportation Committee - are studying whether Segways should be allowed on city trails.

"It almost seems somewhat hysterical," Roeder said of the different commissions studying the issue. "But in the same breath, I understand the city is doing its homework."

The California law that Roeder and others cite defines Segways as Electronic Personal Assistive Motor Devices, or EPAMDs, in effect classifying them as pedestrians. But the state also left it to cities and municipalities to regulate the use of EPAMDs.

San Francisco prohibits the use of Segways on city sidewalks. Campbell bans them on the Los Gatos Creek Trail.

For now, Roeder is spending half of his three-mile commute on surface streets, and half on the trail while Mountain View mulls a decision.

Everybody seems to have an opinion.

"That's his choice," said devoted Stevens Creek walker Claudia Scully, eyeing the machine during a recent stroll with a fellow retiree. "But I don't think he's getting the health benefits. He's not walking."

Roeder smiled and shook his head, perched serenely upright on a machine that looks mildly like a giant, inverted wingless dragonfly.

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"Hi, Richard," said Frank Zajac, a volunteer ranger on a bicycle at the Stevens Creek Trail, greeting Roeder early Monday morning on the trail overpass across Central Expressway. "When are they going to make the big decision?"

After volunteer trail rangers threatened to report him to the police department, Roeder fired an angry letter to Mayor Tom Means in April.

"I'm forcing a clarification," said Roeder, who emigrated from Canada four years ago. "I took this on to get a clear idea about it for the future."

The issue of Segways, he said, is also about removing regulatory barriers for residents like him who are interested in taking personal action about local traffic and pollution.

Sometime this fall, the Mountain View City Council will review the reports from the three advisory committees and decide what to do.

"I think people thought there would be thousands of these," said Means. "But is this much different in impact and space than say a bicycle? Now that the fear is gone, we've got to look for different ways for people to get around."

Personally, Means said, he's for allowing Segways on city trails.

By most accounts, there are a total of *four* in all of Mountain View. Roeder said he's seen the others on errands around town, but he's the only one who rides the trail.

"It's a tempest in a teapot," said Aaron Grossman, executive director of the Friends of Stevens Creek Trail.

The non-profit group that Grossman leads has

declined to take an official position. But personally, Grossman said, "the trail is meant for pedestrians and bicycles."

The Parks and Recreation Commission has recommended a 12-month trial to allow Segways on trails. The other commissions have not completed their work.

"We went in with an open mind," said David Muela, the city's community services director. "In the end," he said, "there wasn't any compelling reason not to give them a try."

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