



Moped conversation shifts gears

By Stephen Hester | Fri, 07/02/2021 - 9:15am

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The New Shoreham Town Council met in a hastily called session to discuss traffic, bicycle, and pedestrian safety, and the impact on emergency services.

Though Councilor Mark Emmanuelle suggested the agenda item for the June 24 meeting had been “cleverly worded” to leave the word “moped” out of it, the conversation predictably centered around mopeds.

Councilor Keith Stover acknowledged mopeds as “the stone in everyone’s shoe,” but indicated they were not the only problem. He also said he thought the pervasive feeling about town was that “this isn’t the town we want when we look down Water Street. It’s kinda gone haywire.”

Stover also called the mopeds a “serious issue,” saying: “you don’t get this much traction and noise and organization when there isn’t a real problem.” But Stover continued, saying: “Mopeds are a symbol of a growing feeling in the community that things seem to be getting worse, the problems seem to be growing,” reiterating, “it’s not just related to mopeds.”

Town Manager Maryanne Crawford mentioned the “mentality here that anything goes,” citing people walking around with open containers as an example beyond mopeds.

Mentioning that people don’t walk around Providence or Narragansett with open containers, Crawford said, “why they’re doing it here is beyond me.”

Second Warden Sven Risom agreed, describing the safety hazards of traveling Corn Neck Road with walkers, bicyclists, mopeds, and cars, all swerving around each other. He suggested the town needs to educate everyone on walking, biking, and driving on the roads together and following the laws.



Compliance with rules has long been a problem. This photo of a rental moped illegally operating on a dirt road was taken just a couple of weeks ago. (Photo by R. Meyer)

Risom said: “Maybe there’s some headline or soundbite like, ‘stay in lane,’ or ‘don’t pass’ or something.”

Counselor Martha Ball said she agreed, “we have a bigger issue than mopeds.” For a soundbite, she suggested, “You’re on

Block Island, calm down." Ball also advised, "If you can avoid going downtown, avoid it."

Emmanuelle suggested that the town pursue infrastructure money for bike lanes on the island.

Risom agreed, saying bike lanes would help, along with having "normal" shoulders on the roads, that people could walk and bike in.

While stating that he wasn't opposed to discussion and dialogue, Emmanuelle said the council was having the same discussion every time.

"It's time to neuter this dog," he said, by pursuing "lawfully taking mopeds off the road, buying them out, and widening our roads." Emmanuelle said, "Let's start bold and stop having the same discussion we've had for years and years and years." Crawford mentioned that she had hoped to restart discussions and negotiations with the moped owners, but their lawyers have advised them not to meet with her due to the continuing court battle. The moped owners won an injunction against the town's proposed amendments to the ordinance, but the lawsuit is still set to move forward in Rhode Island Superior Court.

Ball asked: "How can we get rid of litigation?" and "Does this litigation have to go on at the pleasure of the lawyers? Isn't there a point where we can say we aren't doing this anymore?"

Town Solicitor Kathy Merolla advised the council that some of these questions would be better answered in closed session.

Emmanuelle then said he was "getting all 60s," asking the council: "How many deaths will it take till we know that too many people have died?"

First Warden Andre Boudreau opened up the phone lines, while assuring the citizens that the council was listening.

Claire Costello called in to voice her opinion that Weldon's Way was unchanged from years past, and inquired what steps were being done?

Police Chief Matt Moynihan reiterated his talking points from previous meetings, emphasizing that the mopeds are "not doing anything illegal." He also said, "They have a right to travel on the public way."

Elliot Nerenberg called in to say that the problems the town had in 1984 with the mopeds were the same problems the island has today. In 1984, Block Island threatened to secede from Rhode Island unless the state intervened in the moped struggle. The state legislature held a special session to authorize Block Island to form its own moped ordinance.

"Nothing has changed in 38 years," Nerenberg charged. "Block Island is known as a place with no limits." He went on to ask for specifics on changes that would make this year different than the past 38. "What's different besides the intention?" he asked.

Crawford pointed to one thing that is different: Chief Moynihan taking 16 mopeds off the road over the previous weekend, towed by the moped owners after police officers caught the drivers in various states of violation. Crawford said, "What's hopeful is that as folks start hearing this stuff, sometimes it will improve behavior."

Risom agreed, saying he had never heard of 16 mopeds towed in one weekend, and praised the "collaborative effort" of the moped operators working with the police.

Boudreau reminded everyone that the town and moped owners have a consent agreement governing the town's ordinances, which will be up in 2022. Boudreau said that for now, "we are doing everything that we possibly can do in the framework that we are allowed to operate in right now. We stepped outside of that framework and the result we have was what happened yesterday in the court case."

Moynihan discussed the town's black numbered stickers for mopeds, which all moped owners are now using, saying: "(the stickers) help us out a lot. We can track (dangerous drivers) down, we're going to stop them, and let them know they've been called in and it won't be tolerated."

Moynihan also mentioned his need for double the number of dispatchers, as they are responsible for dispatching fire, rescue, and police. "There should absolutely be two dispatchers on duty," he said. In addition, Moynihan said he needed more officers out

on the street. "We had two officers today, one being myself," he told the council.

Stover said the council was willing to spend more money if that is what the chief needed.

Sarah Bacon called in to suggest a messaging campaign for Block Island, as the root of the problems was the idea that the island is seen by many "as a playground. They don't see it as a community."

Numerous residents had contacted the council with concerns about the high volume of calls the rescue squad had over the weekend. At one point all three ambulances were on call, with each bringing victims to the medical center.

Medical Center Director Dr. Tom Warcup and Rescue Squad Captain Tracy Fredericks both reported that while it is uncommon

for all three ambulances to be on the road at the same time, it is not unheard of. Warcup said when all three ambulances are out at the same time, they do not always bring a patient to the medical center.

Fredericks told the town council she has 17 active licensed EMTs, which is up significantly from last year. She also confirmed that Rhode Island's Disaster Medical Assistance Team will be sending help for Saturdays. Warcup also confirmed that DMAT will continue to provide Covid testing on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and vaccines once a week throughout the summer.

Fredericks told *The Times* that this June was similar to 2019, and unlike last year, she has enough coverage. She said that with

last year's Covid-19 pandemic, many first responders were not comfortable being out there, resulting in a much smaller crew. With the relaxed protocols and widespread vaccinations, this summer she is confident the squad has the coverage it needs. Boudreau said he thought everyone wanted the same thing, road safety. He said he was "hoping we are able to put the facts out there in a concise manner and let people know the road we're going down this summer."



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