

Email from Rick Sharp (3/19)

Hi Chapin,

Thanks for getting back to me. I am very concerned that you have already made up your minds about a new contract with Bolt. Sounds like you already negotiated the terms without the input of Local Motion, Ski Rack, North Star Sports, us, or anyone else despite us asking about this repeatedly. I feel like we have been shut out of the process. I'm very disappointed in that and I will provide a full critique of what I understand are the terms of your current proposal in a bit.

But I must say I am absolutely astounded with your statement that Bolt will have ebikes in Vermont by the end of this month with no public discussion of "buy local first", hubs, pricing, helmets, "virtual hubs" and a whole lot of other issues. So Bolt doesn't even have a signed contract but the ebikes will be here within two weeks.

Pedal bikes didn't work at all as a point to point transportation system over the past two years. Ebikes won't either. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

The substitution of ebikes in a system that never worked as planned with only mean more pain for local bike shops.

Please let us in on this process.

I'll send my detailed comments out to everyone shortly.

Rick Sharp

Email from Rick Sharp (3/20)

Hi Chapin, Bryan and Everybody,

First, as one of the oldest (and still boldest) bicycle advocates in these parts, I want to express my extreme skepticism that the proposed Bolt ebike rental system for the Burlington area will accomplish the desired result of a point-to-point ebike transportation system for Chittenden County. My fear is that this new ebike rental system will follow the same path of the last two years of pedal bike rentals with two thirds of all rides instead being for recreation on the bike path, robbing local bike shops like ours of thousands of dollars in summer rental income.

In fact, I believe that competition from this Bolt ebike rental system could be the difference between our shop, Burlington Segways and Electric Bikes, surviving this year after the pandemic and going out of business permanently.

So I'm hoping you don't sign a new contract with Bolt. You have every right not to. They breached the 2019 Agreement. They never brought in the ebikes in 2020 and that contract was with Gotcha, not even the same company. The old contract certainly did not perform as advertised. Two-thirds of all rentals were round trip, out and back from the one hub on the waterfront. Let's call a spade a spade. It was a failure that cost local bike shops like us thousands. I am a long time member of Local Motion and have contributed thousands to the cause. I don't like seeing those rental bikes on the bike path we created at the expense of Local Motion and the other local bike shops as well. What ever happened to Buy Local first?

So my advice is to terminate negotiations with Bolt and instead put the resources into giving away bikes and ebikes to those that can't afford them instead. I don't believe a point-to-point rental ebike system works in the Burlington area without cannibalizing the local summer rental shops. So my vote (if I have one), is admit your failure and walk away.

But I'm a realist. I know you won't do that. And you probably won't listen to my suggestions, but here they are anyway:

1. Sounds like you already have an agreement with Bolt that there will be no ebike rental hub west of Battery Street. Thanks for listening. That's a start. We would still like a sign with all 4 shops within a reasonable walk of the old rack on College Street directing visitors to local shops as well.
2. If what you are really after is a point-to-point ebike transportation system and not an inexpensive joy ride on the bike path, and you have the ability to "geo-fence" at least the power of ebikes operating on Church Street, then why don't you "geo-fence" the bike path and the waterfront boardwalk as well. They can still pedal but no power for sight seeing. At least that cuts down on the competition for ebike rentals from us and other local shops.
3. You probably won't agree to that. But at least geo-fence the power beyond the Winooski River and make sure all hubs in the New North End are located along population dense North Ave., not the bike path.

4. The contemplated fee structure still doesn't work to discourage the use of these rental ebikes on the bike path or the Causeway. I don't care about Annual Plans, Student or CATMA plans. Knock yourselves out. They don't compete with summer rentals or our shop or the others and that is supposedly the "mission" of the bike share system in the first place. In fact the competition with local shops for rentals used on the bike path could be eliminated entirely if you eliminated the pay as you go option. All of those using the system regularly can get passes and you can give out passes to low income residents. Tourists would be forced to use local bike shops. Problem solved.

But I know Bolt wouldn't agree to that because that's where the money is. And that's my point. Take out the profit of summer and foliage season rentals on the bike path to tourists and the whole thing doesn't work.

But you won't do that so let's examine the "Pay As You Go" option. It takes about an hour to get out to the Causeway on an ebike. Round trip would be 120 minutes. With the proposed fee structure, that comes to \$43 which is less than what all the local shops are charging for one day ebike rentals (\$50). In order to discourage use of the ebike beyond the bridge you can geo-fence so that the power no longer provides an assist, but they could still pedal out for less than renting from a local shop. Again, not my preferred solution, but I would suggest doubling the per minute fee to \$.75 after the first hour. That would make the Bolt rental more expensive than at local shops for the trip to the Causeway anyway.

5. That still leaves you with the helmet problem. I believe all local bike shops require helmets. We provide them free of charge. You only get a helmet if you bring your own to Bolt rentals. Again, if you have a plan you are likely to have a helmet, but if you are pay as you go, not likely. And remember these are ebikes that regularly cruise at 20 mph, at least on the bike path. That's a good reason to not sign the contract. But even if you ignore me on safety, the City should encourage the use of local bike shops with helmets over those short term rentals by installing signs where appropriate directing visitors to local shops instead. Not just to "terrific local bike shops" but by naming the nearby local shops with addresses and phone numbers at each hub.

6. I also think it would be appropriate for the City and CCRPC to commit to terminate this program in one year if it again turns out that most of these rental ebikes spend most of their time on the bike path.

Hopefully, our business will survive one more year of an unlevel playing field tilted in favor of an out-of-state corporation that doesn't even have to pay rent for the space they use.

I appreciate your careful consideration of the issues I've raised.

Rick Sharp