



Photos by Grand Rapids Police Department/IPMBA

# Shifting into the Summer

Bicycles provide officers with a variety of advantages when it comes to patrolling streets and interacting with members of their communities. **By Paul Peluso**

**S**ummer is here and amid the warmer temperatures, many law enforcement agencies across the country are deploying bike officers to perform vital roles in patrolling areas that cannot be safely reached by other vehicles. At parks, outdoor events and on congested downtown streets, bicycles allow officers to maneuver around obstacles while also interacting with civilians in their communities.

While almost everyone knows how to ride a bicycle and biking in general continues to grow in popularity—it has been a social-distancing favorite during the COVID-19 pandemic—International Police Mountain Bike Association Executive Director Maureen Becker notes that operating a police bicycle is “not just like riding a bike.” Training is essential and a lot has to be taken into account by the officer and the department.

“There’s still some situations where there is a little bit of an attitude where ‘It’s just a bicycle. Everybody knows how to ride a bicycle. Here’s your bike, go ride it,’” she says. “This isn’t a responsible decision because it’s an emergency vehicle. When a police officer is riding a bicycle, it’s an emergency vehicle and

the agency is responsible for training the person how to operate it safely and effectively for their rider’s safety as well as the safety of everyone that they will be operating the bicycle around.”

## Importance of training

Last year presented many challenges when it came to access to training, and that included bicycle training courses offered by IPMBA. So far this year, there’s been an increase in demand for training. “It’s really a good thing departments are trying to make up for the lost time and get their officers back out on bicycles,” says Becker.

There haven’t been too many dramatic changes to the fundamental policing and security cyclist courses offered by IPMBA because even though

the bicycle technology changes and evolves, Becker says “there’s still only really one way to ride a bicycle.” The training focuses on bicycle handling skills, including obstacle avoidance and obstacle clearing as well as vehicular cycling—how to ride the bicycle safely in various traffic situations. It also involves procedures and tactics such as how to position a bike when contacting a suspect, pursuits and dynamic dismounts.

Becker says one of the biggest changes to IPMBA’s training has been the emergence of electric bicycles. “With more agencies adopting e-bikes or considering adopting e-bikes, we’ve developed an add-on training module that is designed to take the skills that the officer has acquired during the class on a conventional bicycle and transfer the skills to the e-bike.”

## Starting a bike patrol unit

When considering starting a bike patrol unit or expanding an existing one, Becker stresses that it is important to make sure that the uniforms and equipment are appropriate. This means uniforms must be wickable and breathable and move with the body when in motion. When it comes to purchasing

bicycles, IPBMA tries to steer agencies to models that are built specifically for public safety. “They tend to be heavier duty, use a heavier duty component because they are going to have to withstand maybe more equipment on the bicycle itself and definitely more equipment on the rider,” says Becker. “Our classes teach them how to ride up and down the stairs and over curbs, so they are going to be taking the bike up and over obstacles.”

IPBMA has a start-up packet and a book called “The Complete Guide to Public Safety Cycling,” as well as countless resources and articles on its website about how to purchase bicycles and start a patrol unit. “It’s important to look at why you want a bike unit and how you’re going to use it. That will direct a lot of other decisions,” says Becker. “How are you going to ride your bike? Where are you going to ride your bike? It will help you buy the right equipment, and picking the right personnel is also important. Not necessarily people who are cyclists, though that helps. They have to be community-oriented and interested in talking to people and engaging with the public because that’s what they do. It’s important to get people who are passionate about the service to their community.”

She also stressed the importance of networking with other agencies. “Talk to other agencies in the same regional area and find out what they are using, what challenges they have faced.”

## Selecting the right bikes

Michael Espejo, owner of the Police Bike Store and C3Sports, recently developed a house brand called CODE BIKES based on feedback from customers on what they were looking for in a bike. The bikes are manufactured in a factory in Taiwan that also makes bike for brands like TREK, Specialized and Fuji.

“We wanted to have that focus where we could make a line of bikes that is specifically focused on police use. We found that with our lights and the different things we do that the more focused we are, the more successful it’s been,” he says. “We’re not worried about making something for the regular consumer; rather we can focus solely on police, security and EMS as the consumer and what they are looking for in a bike.”

Among the things that separate a police bike from a consumer model are the components on the bike itself. “Police need something that is going to be good and is going to be reliable,” says Espejo, noting that while consumer models may include some components that meet a high standard, like Shimano XT, they will also include other cheaper parts that will break down under the stress of police use. This includes the rear derailleur, front derailleur and shifters.

Police bikes also usually include a rear-mounted kickstand, rear rack, toe clips on the pedals and suspension forks. The types of tires used typically include treads that

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## VEHICLES & FLEET

are street-friendly, yet are still able to go over rougher terrain if needed. Good seats or saddles that will be comfortable when the officer is on it for long periods of time also are a necessity.

Reliability is key, and Espejo says that departments can't cut corners when purchasing bikes for their fleet. "If they see something that is say \$300 or \$400 dollars, that's probably not the kind of bike you're going to want to have for police use. I've seen instances where department have gone out to even say Walmart or just a regular department store, bought bikes and then they give up on the program because the bikes didn't hold up." According to Espejo, a decent entry-level police bike runs in the \$700 range.

### The advantages of police bikes

A bicycle offers officers different advantages that traditional patrol vehicles lack. "They are really aware of their surroundings, because when you are on a bicycle you're going more slowly and you're listening, and you see things and you smell things that you may not be able to pick up when you're in a patrol car," says Becker.

A bicycle officer who knows their patrol area can get places faster because they do things that patrol cars cannot. A bicycle responding in an emergency can ride on the sidewalk or cut across a parking lot or ride through a wooded area or use a




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mountain bike trail to get from point A to point B. Bicycles can also prove to be very stealthy. An officer can approach a crime in progress from an unexpected angle or direction almost silently while potentially not being recognized as being an officer. Officers on bicycle are also a lot more approachable. "They can really engage with the citizens they serve much more effectively," says Becker. "It's not the average person who goes and knocks on the window of a patrol car, but people will go up and talk to an officer on a bicycle."

Becker notes that bicycles won't work in every situation. "It's not supposed to replace other modes of transportation and vehicles within the fleet. It really enhances and supplements it. It's really great for certain applications. Where it would not be practical would be some place that is really rural. You go to a lot of places out west where the towns are hundreds of miles apart and people live on hundreds of acres of land. A bicycle really wouldn't be a practical mode of transportation." She added that bicycles work the best in urban centers and some suburban areas. Many towns and villages with downtown cores and residential neighborhoods really benefit from them. Almost every place—even small towns—has at least one event where they are going to close streets or have a parade or fair or festival. "It's going to get congested and they are going to need to have their personnel getting around quickly. Or maybe a university town that has a football team; during games you just have traffic people and bicycles are very maneuverable. They can get through traffic congestion."

Weather also can be concern, as Becker notes that the majority of public safety cyclists are like the majority of bicyclists in that they tend to ride in temperatures that are not on the extreme end of the spectrum. "In our model policies that we have developed in conjunction with the IACP, we roughly outline the temperature span from 40 to 90 (degrees). However, there are a lot of different factors that can also affect the temperature. Obviously, things like humidity and wind chill, also the personality of the rider and the equipment that the rider has been provided."

The severe weather situations in which being out on a bike would be dangerous, like sleet, ice storms, high winds, heavy rain or lightning storms, but Becker says that normal hot and cold temperatures can't keep bike officers off the road in some areas. "We have members who ride all summer in Arizona and who ride all winter in places like the Twin Cities and Edmonton and Montreal." 

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