



Trials riders are battling local government to keep their access to the trails of Emma Long Park in Austin, Texas.

URBAN OFF-HIGHWAY: THREE CITIES

Austin, Baltimore, Philadelphia Work With Riders On Issues By Jim Witters

As riders in Austin, Texas, battle officials who want to close more trails in a city park, coalitions are forming in Baltimore and Philadelphia to build urban centers where off-highway vehicles can operate within the law.

In each of these cities, the AMA is helping bring together the parties involved, so they can share successful strategies.

"We are offering our support and expertise, when asked," says Steve Salisbury, AMA government affairs manager for off-highway issues. "We hope that the groups in each of these cities can reach compromises that provide for the needs of responsible riders, while also addressing the legitimate concerns of the communities at large."

The efforts of local motorcyclists, with AMA support, are beginning to pay off.

Officials who once viewed the riders as a nuisance now are listening to the concerns of urban motorcyclists and ATV riders and are seeking solutions to the ongoing conflict.

The changes in attitude detected by motorcycling advocates during the summer are encouraging. But both the riders and the AMA recognize that these

long-simmering issues will not be resolved with the wave of a wand.

Local riders in each community, in conjunction with the AMA, are stressing the benefits of OHV parks as a way to curb illegal riding in streets and parks, to steer young enthusiasts along the right path and to provide a safer and supervised area for responsible riding.

In Austin, the battle involves enforcing longstanding agreements that protect the riding trails.

In Baltimore and Philadelphia, Salisbury has been highlighting the successes of OHV programs in urban areas, including Detroit and in Egg Harbor Township, N.J.

The Detroit program is operated by the National Youth Project Using Minibikes (NYPUM), which was started by American Honda Motor Co. Inc. as a way to engage youth who were not interested in traditional sports and did not respond to other youth services.

The New Jersey program, called Ready to Ride, is run by the Police Athletic League. A 35-acre park provides ATV, dirt bike and go-kart activities in a family atmosphere. Organizers say the park attracts kids who otherwise would be riding illegally on the streets.

"They keep changing the argument on us," Browning says. "At first, they claimed we weren't grandfathered. Then they said we harmed the birds. Now they are saying that we are causing erosion. But the erosion in parks without motorcycles or mountain bikes is similar or worse."

What once seemed an unwinnable battle against the public agencies has begun to turn.

The riders gained support from two city commissioners and one county commissioner and are working hard to educate more elected officials on the facts.

"We need a massive letter-writing campaign," Pantin says.

In addition to working with the AMA to get the word out to area motorcyclists, the Austin riders are collaborating with the International Mountain Bikers Association to increase the political pressure to keep the trails open.

Baltimore City

For years, kids, adolescents and young adults have been riding dirt bikes and ATVs illegally through city streets and parks, often taunting law enforcement officials, frustrating motorists and disrupting

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the peace in the community.

The activities became the subject of a documentary film in 2014 called "The 12 O'Clock Boys" and, more recently became the focus of community scrutiny when 24-year-old Allison Blanding was struck and killed by a stunt rider who did not stop after the incident.

Each Sunday, hundreds of riders flow through the streets to parks and parking lots, pulling wheelies, doing stoppies and performing other stunts. The activity draws a crowd, sometimes in the thousands. Baltimore police have turned to arresting riders and impounding vehicles to curb the problem.

Even as Baltimore police turned up in riot gear in August and used tow trucks to block streets near the parks where dirt-bike and ATV riders gather, community members and political leaders began to seek an alternative solution.

Lorren Hayman, representing the Blanding family, staged a press conference in August during which she called for the rider responsible for Blanding's death to come forward. At the same time, though, Hayman called on city officials to establish a safe environment for the riders and spectators.

Rather than halt the weekly events, she says, officials should close a city park or church parking lot for a time on Sundays to allow the riders to do their thing, while providing onlookers a safe area to watch the shows.

City Councilman Pete Welch has proposed a task force study the feasibility of establishing an urban OHV park—using public or private financing—that would help alleviate the problem.

Welch likens the dirt bike riders to skateboarders, BMX bicyclists and operators of radio-controlled cars. When those groups posed a threat to public safety, the city stepped in and provided areas for their activities, he says.

Welch and Police spokesman T.J. Smith participated in an Aug. 26 discussion on radio station WYPR-FM.

During the radio broadcast, Smith called for a "holistic solution" that includes talking to the motorcyclists.

Salisbury says the AMA has been working with Hayman, religious leaders, senior police personnel, city councilmen and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to find a solution to the problem of illegal street riding.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia officials have long considered that city's illegal street riders a law-enforcement problem.

The result of that approach has been a cycle: Police issue citations and impound vehicles, the violator pays the fine and gets another bike. In many instances, the impounded bikes have been sold at auction to other illegal riders, according to reports in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

This year, though, off-roaders appear to have turned the corner with officials, forming a coalition that includes a powersports dealership, an event organizer and magazine publisher, a NYPUM representative and the AMA.

The Philadelphia OHV Park Coalition is working with the police and other city departments toward the goal of establishing a supervised riding area within the city limits.



Gregory Brooks



Tomás Pantin