

Cyclists say safety isn't guaranteed by helmet laws

By CRAIG PIECHURA

A group of people with a common interest — motorcycling — have been mobilized into a strong special interest lobby in Lansing.

"Before we got organized, a lot of these guys would have had a hard time telling you who the governor is," says Vince Consiglio, legislative director of Michigan ABATE. "Now most can tell you who their state senator and state representative are and how they voted on the helmet law."

ABATE of Michigan, is a statewide chapter of a national organization opposed to mandatory helmet law regulations. ABATE's slogan is "Let Those Who Ride Decide" and its position is that more education, not more helmets, is the only way to protect the motorcycle-riding public.

The ABATE organization was founded by a staffer of "Easy Rider" magazine. Since 1976, 32 states in the nation have repealed mandatory helmet laws for motorcyclists.

Unlike other lobbyists in Lansing, few in the helmet repeal effort dress in Brooks Bros. suits. Most who ride to the hearings on their motorcycles wear protective leather gear.

But, like any politically active lobbyists, they know the legislative ropes and keep tabs on how lawmakers vote on the issue. ABATE representatives take time off from work to ably trade documented statistics with their main opponents, insurance lobbyists, when the bills come up for discussion.

THEY PHONE or knock on the doors of their elected representatives before a helmet law repeal bill is being heard, and they can tell you how many votes

are needed to get a stalled helmet bill out of committee.

Despite a recent victory on Nov. 13 when the Michigan Senate voted 21-11 to repeal local laws requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets, and 21-12 to appeal the state law, ABATE members expect a fight when the same bills come up for discussion before the state House Insurance Committee this Thursday.

One sure sign of motorcyclists' growing political clout is the allegation made last month by state Sen. Alvin Grow, Republican from Pigeon, that fellow senators were "stampeded" to appeal the law by politically-active clubs and organizations such as ABATE.

ABATE stands for "A Brotherhood Against Totalitarian Enactments" but officers in the Michigan chapter would like to change that to the less heavy-handed sounding anachronism "American Bikers Aiming Toward Education," explains Carl Decker of Southfield, vice president of ABATE.

Bikers' dislike of helmets is deeper than a desire to ride with their hair flapping in the breeze, says Decker. ABATE members consider helmets mainly cosmetic and potentially dangerous because they increase cranial temperatures, reduce peripheral vision and hearing and have caused spine and neck injuries to some wearers.

Because persons pushing for helmet law repeal ride motorcycles, members of the media and some lawmakers often try to brand them as a greasy, foul-smelling, beer-drinking, marijuana-smoking band of anarchists, says Decker.

In reality, say ABATE members, a typical member of their organization is

fairly conservative, staunchly individualistic, married, owns a home and a Harley-Davidson, and probably voted for Ronald Reagan. Sort of a John Wayne on wheels. "WE'RE getting to the point, in this country, where we're almost socialist," says James Rhoades, of Garden City, president of ABATE in Michigan. "We're getting to the point where we let the government take care of ourselves and getting away from the pretext this country was founded upon."

"If the government really wants to save lives, why don't they force people to learn to ride motorcycles and cars instead of forcing them to wear a questionable piece of equipment?"

In conjunction with efforts to repeal the mandatory helmet law, Michigan ABATE is pushing for tougher state testing of applicants applying for a li-

cense to ride motorcycles.

Some ABATE members say they'd continue to wear helmets when riding motorcycles in busy traffic even if the law is repealed in the state. But members of the organization say it is infringement on their personal liberties for the state to demand that all riders wear helmets at all times.

Most voters, say Decker and Rhoades, don't ride motorcycles and therefore pay little attention to the helmet law issue. But imagine the public outcry, both men say, if the state Legislature tried to pass a law making it a crime to drive a car without wearing seatbelts.

Secretary of State Richard Austin has said that insurance rates for motorcyclists and car drivers will rise if the mandatory helmet law is repealed.

"A LOT of people are just giving insurance companies another excuse to raise their rates," says Decker.

After surveying average insurance rates paid by ABATE members throughout the country, members of the organization said they failed to discover higher premiums being paid in the 32 states that voted to repeal mandatory helmet laws.

"Nine of the 10 states with the worst increase in motorcycle fatalities for the total year, 1978-79, according to the Fatal Accident Reporting System (of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) were states that still have helmet laws on the books," said Decker.

Statistics cited by proponents of mandatory helmet laws, said Rhoades, are often selective and misleading.

"For example, in one state where the

law was repealed there was close to a 40 percent increase in fatalities one year," Rhoades said. "They point out the increase of deaths of motorcyclists but fail to say that there was also a 41 percent increase that year in fatalities for (drivers of) heavy trucks."

A statistic cited by motorcyclists pushing for repeal of the law is that motorcycle fatalities rose 166.7 percent in Rhode Island in 1971 when helmets were made mandatory and declined by 40 percent in that state the year the helmet law was repealed.

Statistics are cited by both sides. But Federal Department of Transportation tests have shown even the most expensive helmets deteriorate under lateral skids of 2 1/2 miles per hour or more and are incapable of rejecting impact stress at speeds above 13 miles per hour.

Postal service offers holiday gift ideas

The Postal Service this month is issuing some new philatelic products that will help get new stamp collectors started and keep veteran philatelists up to date on their collections, Farmington Postmaster Kenneth Harris says.

"The 1980 Postal Service Mint Set being released this month contains all the commemoratives and special stamps released during the year — 28 stamps in all," Harris said.

The new Mint Set will be available at

all post offices and will retail for \$5.

Also being issued this month is the Postal Service's seventh edition of Stamps & Stories. It contains information for new stamp collectors, stories about U.S. stamps, details about price trends of selected stamp issues, catalogue numbers and an index listing of every U.S. stamp ever issued. The new book is still priced at \$3.50, the same as last year.

Two new philatelic products, the

"Women's Mint Set" and the "U.S. Commemorative Stamp-Coral Reefs" Folder, are now available at all Philatelic Centers, or through the Postal Service Philatelic Catalogues at all post offices.

The "Women's Mint Set" includes a package of nine mint stamps, mounts and one postal card retailing for \$3. All items in the Women's Mint Set honor prominent women in history, among them Edith Wharton, Helen Keller,

Anne Sullivan, Dolley Madison, Frances Perkins, Molly Pitcher, Emily Bissell, Willa Carter and Harriet Tubman.

The "Coral Reefs" folder is a new philatelic product and is similar in design to the winter olympic folder. It contains underwater photography, a mint block of four Coral Reef stamps, mounts, and interesting narrative on each reef.

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