

Gillibrand, Adams Push To Accelerate E-Bike Battery Safety Measures After Tragedies

U.S. Senate bill to create a national lithium-ion battery standard is still stalled despite deaths and destruction caused by unregulated devices. Meanwhile, the mayor is rolling out street charging stations.

BY MAX RIVERA JULY 22, 2024, 7:42 P.M.

Speaking near the scene of a fire earlier this year that displaced dozens of Sunset Park residents, public officials gathered Monday to call attention to the deadly risks of lithium-ion batteries used in e-bikes and urge passage of a federal bill that would set a single national safety standard.

“You deserve to trust your bike, your e-bike and scooter won’t catch fire,” said U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), who joined state Sen. Iwen Chu (D-Brooklyn) and outgoing Fire Commissioner Laura Kavanaugh at the headquarters of the Chinese-American Planning Council, a local nonprofit group.

Noting that the batteries have become a leading cause of deadly and destructive fires in New York City, she added: “Everyone here deserves to feel safe.”

Last year 18 people died in lithium-ion battery fires, according to the FDNY.

While a version of the Setting Consumer Standards for Lithium-Ion Batteries Act sponsored by Ritchie Torres (D-NY) passed the House in May, the Senate version sponsored by Gillibrand has remained bottled up in a committee.

The senator spoke just after Mayor Eric Adams [pledged a multi-agency city effort](#) to help stem the use of illegally modified and uncertified lithium ion batteries, including a battery swap program and sidewalk hubs to store and charge lithium ion batteries.

While noting local progress, including a decline so far this year in deaths and injuries, Kavanaugh stressed that such local efforts are hamstrung by a lack of federal regulations.

“Our marshals have done incredible work,” Kavanaugh said, remarking that some of them had just responded to a tip and issued violations and seized dangerous batteries from a service shop down the street from the press conference.

Tougher laws are needed, she said, “so that especially our delivery workers who depend on these bikes don’t need to make a decision between their lives or the safety of their family.” Earlier this month, Kavanaugh, the first woman to lead the department, announced she would be stepping down after two years in that role.

Earlier in the month Governor Kathy Hochul signed sweeping legislation intended to prevent the sale of lithium ion batteries that don't [meet manufacturing standards](#).

Fire marshals determined that the two-alarm February blaze in Harlem that [killed journalist Fazil Khan](#) and featured three dramatic rope rescues had been caused by a lithium-ion battery. That was the city's only fatal fire sparked by the devices so far this year.

Chu, whose Senate district has seen several battery-fueled fires, including a midday three-alarm blaze last October at a battery storage and e-bike repair facility, called the federal bill "a crucial step forward in our shared mission to protect our communities."

At that fire, where over 300 bikes and batteries were recovered from two interconnected stores, FDNY Chief Michael Meyers said sprinkler systems were not able to deliver the high volume of water needed to extinguish the particularly challenging fire conditions caused by lithium ion batteries.

While the FDNY has seen fatal and non-fatal lithium ion battery fires ease a bit, a sign that the commissioner says outreach programming is working, when they have occurred, they're typically spectacular, challenging fires for firefighters, prompting Adams to prioritize initiatives to make lithium ion battery use safer.

"Just look at the destructive power of these batteries," said Adams. "The fires spread so rapidly, and they are difficult to contain."

'I Don't Feel Safe'

Adams' initiatives announced Monday include a program to store batteries in sidewalk battery hubs with the goal of removing the volatile batteries from homes. People commonly charge the batteries, known for producing thick, toxic smoke, near apartment exits, amplifying the dangers.

A promised battery and e-bike exchange program aims to alleviate the burden faced by food delivery workers who rely on e-bikes, by allowing any city resident in the industry to trade in unregistered bikes and batteries for devices certified as safe by Underwriters Laboratory.

The program is set to start accepting exchanges by the end of year according to a spokesperson for Councilmember Keith Powers(D-Manhattan), who sponsored the bill.

A pilot program that charges lithium ion batteries in Cooper Square serves as a model for what Adams hopes to roll out citywide in the coming months, but delivery workers say the location is inconvenient and that demand for that hub has far outpaced its capacity.

Gustavo Ajche, a founder of the organizing and advocacy group [Los Deliveristas Unidos](#), says the pilot program is helpful but needs to be scaled up as quickly as possible — something he said delivery workers have been talking about doing with or without the city's help.

Ajche says he is hopeful his organization can receive funding earmarked for the charging hubs so he can start building charging stations in communities where food delivery workers live.

Ajche used to charge three to four batteries at the same time, every night, in the Bensonhurst apartment he shares with his cousin. Now they employ a one-battery-at-a-time policy, but even that isn't enough to allay concerns.

"I don't feel safe charging those batteries in my hallways," Ajche said.