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Bringing Skateboarders Doing 60 to a Halt

By IAN LOVETT

LAGUNA BEACH, Calif. — Chance Gaul cannot drive a car yet. He is only 14. But he is already the fastest thing on wheels around here.

While Porsches and Mercedes-Benzes precariously descend the windy canyon roads here at 25 miles per hour, Chance bombs down at 40, sometimes even 60 m.p.h. on his skateboard, savoring the sea breeze on his face. But this may be his last ride here.

The future of downhill skateboarding is in jeopardy in the region where the sport was born, with bans spreading across Southern California and lawmakers questioning whether people — teenagers mostly — should be barreling downhill at 60 m.p.h. with very little between them and the pavement.

Laguna Beach is set to become the latest city to severely restrict high-speed skateboarding, sometimes known as “bombing hills,” following other coastal cities like Malibu and Newport Beach. Once a final vote is taken on Tuesday, eight canyon roads will almost certainly be entirely off limits, while others will remain open on a six-month trial basis, after which they, too, may be closed to skaters.

“From a public safety standpoint, there is a lot to worry about,” said Mayor Toni Iseman. “I understand why kids want to do it, and I appreciate the skill set it takes, but I don’t think public streets are the place for this sport.”

Almost since its inception, skateboarding has drawn ire from pedestrians and governments. Norway banned even skateboard ownership in the 1970s and ’80s, and Nike later made light of animosity toward the sport with [an ad campaign](#) that posed the question: “What if we treated all athletes the way we treat skateboarders?”

These days, skaters can “ollie” ([a trick jump](#)) and “kickflip” (a variation on the ollie) on sidewalks with relative impunity, and the popularity of downhill skateboarding has boomed.

Dozens of local boarders now don helmets and gloves to bomb Laguna Beach's hills, up from a handful a few years ago.

The prospect of a ban here has made Laguna Beach — whose majestic cliffs overlooking the Pacific attract, and produce, some of the best boarders in the world — the center of the debate over downhill skateboarding.

“The best talent in the world is here in Laguna,” said Mark Golter, a two-time world downhill skateboarding champion who grew up here and trains younger skaters. “We’re trying to fuel and help the sport, and all of a sudden the city is saying we can’t ride.”

But residents say the boarders' growing ranks have made driving a harrowing undertaking, rife with worries about hitting young skaters and legal liability. Because boarders are considered pedestrians under state law, they are not subject to speed limits; almost any collision with a vehicle is considered the driver's fault.

“It just scares the dickens out of me trying to avoid these skateboarders screaming down the hills,” said Peter Weisbrod, 73, a longtime resident. “I worry about their safety, even with helmets. And I worry about liability.”

As Chance, last year's 14-and-under U.S. Nationals Open Downhill Skateboarding champion, skated down Nyes Place after school last week, Barbara Evans pulled over in her S.U.V. to tell him to get out of the street.

“I don't want to see a skateboarder on this hill, or any hill that I'm going down,” said Ms. Evans, who has lived here since 1975. From the back seat, her grandson, a toddler, yelled “Never!” and “Bad boy!”

Chance said most opposition to downhill skateboarding was because people were not yet familiar with the sport.

“It's something new that they don't know, so their eyes aren't open to it yet,” he said. “Skateboarding was always looked down on, and now downhill skateboarding is, too. People are used to seeing bikers, so they don't react this way to them.”

Still, injuries do happen in downhill skateboarding — as do lawsuits. Mr. Golter broke his elbow, wrist, arm, shoulders, ribs and pelvis before he retired in 2003 after his fifth concussion. And the family of a 17-year-old boy sued and settled with the nearby City of Mission Viejo after he suffered brain damage in a 2004 skateboarding accident on flatter ground.

So far, Laguna Beach has tried to broker a compromise, closing some roads to skateboarders but leaving most open for at least six months and imposing speed limits. It will also look into allowing skaters to use emergency fire roads, where there is no traffic.

But even if the city banned downhill skateboarding outright, the sport's ties to Laguna Beach would probably not end anytime soon. Although Malibu banned downhill skateboarding in 2009, boarders still frequent its canyons.

"There are so many people joining the sport every day," said Michael Brooke, author of "The Concrete Wave: The History of Skateboarding." "I think if they ban it and turn it into an outlaw thing, it will probably add to the sport's appeal."