

The HISTORY of A.B.A.T.E.



A.B.A.T.E. of PA's history is difficult to document since bikers have typically been more interested in getting the job done than documenting how it was accomplished.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA is a special interest group whose primary tool is grass roots political activism. Originally founded in 1977, it has accomplished many

legislative successes. Perhaps the most notable is Pennsylvania's Motorcycle Safety Program, which is administered by PennDOT and funded by motorcyclists through a surcharge on their registration fees. A.B.A.T.E. of PA played a significant role in getting the original surcharge approved and was the leading influence behind subsequent legislation expanding the program.



But A.B.A.T.E. of PA's history is inextricably tied to Pennsylvania's motorcycle helmet law, which took effect on Friday, September 13, 1968. That event was the driving force that led to the founding of A.B.A.T.E. of PA and its development into one of the state's most effective grass-roots lobbying organizations.

In this article, we'll review the events leading up to the founding of A.B.A.T.E. of PA and what has happened since in the never-ending struggle to protect the rights of motorcyclists.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA's history can be divided into six periods. We'll look at each of them.

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Motorcycle Movements...The Political Awakening

Several things happened in the 1960's to change that. First, the political activism of the Sixties showed that it was possible for a relatively small group of people, properly organized, to affect in some way the overall political landscape. Second, the federal government began getting involved in motorcycling like never before.

In 1966, Congress passed the first "Helmet Blackmail" law, which forced states to give up a percentage of federal highway funding if they didn't have mandatory helmet laws in effect. Also, the United States Department of Transportation began issuing regulations affecting the burgeoning chopper industry.

Over the next several years, almost every state enacted a mandatory helmet law. Handlebar height restrictions, eye protection, licensing requirements, and lights-on laws became commonplace. Pennsylvania's own mandatory helmet law came into existence during this period.

In October 1971, Easyrider magazine (in its third issue!) founded what was called the National Custom Cycle Association (NCCA). This was the first national motorcyclist's organization founded for the sole purpose of influencing legislation and governmental regulation of motorcycling. In February 1972, the name was changed to the Alliance of Bikers Against Totalitarian Enactments (Abate) because of a trademark issue with the acronym NCCA. Under Easyriders' sanction, Abate chapters began springing up across the country in a loosely knit national federation.

In 1973, the Modified Motorcycle Association (MMA) was founded in California. This event is worthy of note because the MMA was the first State Motorcycle Rights Organization (SMRO) to incorporate the elements that every successful SMRO has today...

- Individual chapters throughout the state with membership open to anyone willing to pay a membership fee.

- Organized under the auspices of a state office with a paid professional lobbying presence in the state capitol.

It's also worthy to note that the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club was instrumental in the founding of the MMA. As the restrictions of the late 60's and early 70's developed, the motorcycle clubs were the first to fight back politically. But there were limitations to the amount of political influence that patch holders could bring, and the realization of that in California led to the founding of the MMA.

Then governor of California Ronald Reagan's belief in states' rights led to California being one of the few states that had not enacted a mandatory helmet law during this period of new regulations and laws. The US DOT had filed suit against California as a result. This was the political backdrop that made it possible for the MMA, the AMA, and Abate together to successfully push for the repeal of the federal mandate, which Gerald Ford signed into law on May 5, 1976.

In 1977, conflicts over direction and purpose broke the fragile Abate coalition. In the end, Easyrider magazine gave up rights to the Abate name and ended its involvement. Two national Abate organizations were founded in the aftermath but both eventually disappeared. The various Abate chapters that had been formed were left to their own devices, which led to the next period in A.B.A.T.E. of PA's history.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA...The Beginning

In 1977, the first ABATE of PA was founded. It had its roots in an earlier group called Motorcyclists Against Unfair Legislation (MAUL). In 1976, MAUL held helmet protest rallies at the state capital in July and September. At the time, MAUL's president was Scott Hart of Reading, and Scott Halverson of Philadelphia was listed as an organizer.

From 1977 to 1983, ABATE of PA's activities are uncertain. What we do know is that in 1983, ABATE of PA declared bankruptcy and was replaced by a new organization, A.B.A.T.E. of PA (note the periods after the letters which differentiates the two organizations).

A.B.A.T.E. of PA...Moving Legislation

During the early years, A.B.A.T.E. of PA had few legislative supporters. We were a little rough around the edges and hadn't yet learned how to influence legislation in Harrisburg. There were a few legislators,

though, who saw us as friends even though they weren't ready to be seen with us yet. One of the most influential was Senator Clarence Bell.

In 1985, A.B.A.T.E. of PA hired its first lobbyist, Herb Packer.

In 1987, A.B.A.T.E. of PA created BikePAC as an independent, fully chartered PAC.

With a lobbyist and a PAC, A.B.A.T.E. of PA was finally in a position to begin influencing the legislative process. Prior to having these tools in place, A.B.A.T.E. of PA had not moved any major bills out of committee.

Three years later, on November 20, 1990, A.B.A.T.E. of PA got its first full House vote on a helmet law modification bill. An amendment to HB 1867 offered by Mike Veon was defeated by a vote of 89 yea to 124 nay.

On June 4, 1991, A.B.A.T.E. of PA got its second House vote. HB 369 (introduced by Representative Mike Veon) was defeated by a vote of 77 yea to 124 nay.

In 1992, A.B.A.T.E. of PA got its first Senate vote. SB 7 (introduced by Senator Clarence Bell) was defeated by a vote of 21 yea to 26 nay.

These votes represented significant progress in that A.B.A.T.E. of PA had learned how to navigate the committee process and move bills to the floor. Many grass-roots organizations never get to that point. Unfortunately, a floor vote is only one of the many hurdles a bill must pass before coming law. A.B.A.T.E. of PA was learning just how hard it is to get a bill over all of them.

From 1992 to 1997, A.B.A.T.E. of PA spent its time building a legislative majority in both houses. One vote at a time, it took five years before another attempt was deemed practical.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA . . . Winning the Legislative Process

In the 1997/1998 legislative session, A.B.A.T.E. of PA was ready to try again.

In 1997, Representative Theresa Forcier introduced an amendment to Senate Bill 279 with helmet law

modifications. It passed the House 134 yea to 63 nay. On November 23, 1998, the Senate concurred with the amendment 27 yea to 21 nay. The bill was sent to then-Governor Tom Ridge.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA had actively courted Governor Ridge's support. Although he had not taken a public stand, A.B.A.T.E. of PA believed that he would be favorably inclined to a helmet modification bill.

Governor Ridge vetoed the bill on December 23, 1998. The stated reason was that a technicality in the language that would have offered motorcyclists the opportunity to ride without protective eyewear in addition to helmets. The Governor did promise to sign a similar bill if it reached his desk with the protective eyewear provision intact.

In 1999, A.B.A.T.E. of PA attempted to correct the bill with Senator Clarence Bell's SB 241. The bill was defeated in the Senate on April 21, 1999 by 24 yea to 26 nay due to the loss of two Senators' support.

Toward the close of the 1999/2000 legislative session, Representative Theresa Forcier successfully amended SB 1478 with the helmet modification which passed the House on November 21, 2000 by 131 yea to 66 nay. However, A.B.A.T.E. of PA and the Senate leadership knew that the votes weren't there in the Senate so the bill died in the lame duck session.

During the 2001/2002 legislative session, several bills were introduced but no votes were ever taken. A.B.A.T.E. of PA realized that without a majority in both Houses, there was no point in running a bill that would ultimately not pass. A.B.A.T.E. of PA concentrated its efforts on the Senate to win a few new supporters.

By the 2003/2004 legislative session, two things had occurred which changed things for A.B.A.T.E. of PA. The first was that a majority could be counted on in the Senate. The second was that Governor Ed Rendell had replaced Governor Tom Ridge. A.B.A.T.E. of PA had built a friendship with Governor Rendell when he was Mayor of Philadelphia and he had promised to sign a modification bill when it arrived on his desk.

Senator John Wozniak introduced Senate Bill 259, which in 110 breathtaking days sailed through the

Senate by 29 yea to 20 nay, the House by 118 yea to 79 nay, and was signed into law by Governor Ed Rendell on July 6, 2003, and went into effect on September 4, 2003.

The law that Senate Bill 259 amended had gone into effect on Friday, September 13, 1968. Nine days short of thirty-five years later, the law changed. When that bill ran in 2003, the idea that any special interest group could run a somewhat controversial bill from introduction to the Governor's pen in 110 days was unheard of.

Accomplishing this took the efforts of tens of thousands of motorcyclists over three decades, hundreds of legislators, and a few key individuals.

Accomplishing its primary legislative objective has been a double-edged sword for A.B.A.T.E. of PA.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA is about motorcyclist's rights and helping the community. Since the helmet law reform, A.B.A.T.E. of PA has become the primary influence for motorcycle safety in the legislature. Forging new ties with PennDOT, A.B.A.T.E. of PA is working to create road conditions that benefit motorcycle safety, promoting motorcycle rider education, and education of the driving public about motorcycles. Our success in the Legislature and the removal of the "helmet" issue as a controversial subject has opened many new doors.

On the other hand, a significant number of A.B.A.T.E. of PA members who have been active for many years want to take a well-deserved break. This puts pressure on the organization to bring in new members who are equally committed to the cause of protecting motorcyclist's rights in Pennsylvania.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA's membership levels have historically fluctuated at around 1% of the state's motorcycling population.

The future of A.B.A.T.E. of PA will revolve around its continued ability to engage the motorcycling public in Pennsylvania in protecting its interests.

Author's Note: This article was first written in 2006. Valuable information came from a variety of sources, in particular from an AMA article published in 2001 and an old article by Bill Bish.

I'd like to thank them and the other sources for the help. Kevin Snyder

Some key individuals in the history of A.B.A.T.E. of PA



Senator Clarence Bell: He was an early and lifelong political supporter. His support actually predates A.B.A.T.E. of PA and is mentioned in a 1976 Harrisburg Patriot Evening News column detailing a MAUL helmet protest rally. Over the years he was a key source of political guidance as A.B.A.T.E. of PA learned the “ropes” of the Harrisburg political process. Following his passing, A.B.A.T.E. of PA created a scholarship fund in his honor and supported legislation naming a highway in his memory.



Representative Mike Veon: His name has been on every piece of motorcycle-friendly legislation for more than two decades, either as a sponsor or co-sponsor. Through his influence, A.B.A.T.E. of PA got some of its first floor votes.



Herb Packer: He was A.B.A.T.E. of PA’s first professional lobbyist. Through his influence, we created BikePAC, which is a political action committee supported by donations from concerned motorcyclists.



Bruce Johnson: He was our second lobbyist. There is no doubt that Bruce put his heart and soul into his lobbying efforts for A.B.A.T.E. of PA. His guidance through the “middle” years of A.B.A.T.E. of PA’s development was crucial to the eventual success.



Charles Umbenhauer: Perhaps the one person most influential in the A.B.A.T.E. of PA history. Starting as State Legislative Coordinator in 1985, Charles has guided A.B.A.T.E. of PA's development as a grass roots lobbying organization since.

[Learn more about Charles Umbenhauer](#)



Representative Teresa Forcier: She has been the most influential single Representative on A.B.A.T.E. of PA's development in recent history. Her involvement and mentoring has aided the organization immeasurably. Time and time again, she has gone to the edge for Pennsylvania's motorcyclists.



Senator John Wozniak: In 2003, A.B.A.T.E. of PA was searching for a Senate sponsor for its helmet law modification bill. According to traditional thinking, a Republican would have been ideal. Senator Wozniak (who is a Democrat) showed that traditional thinking was wrong and made the helmet modification a bipartisan issue.



Governor Ed Rendell: A.B.A.T.E. of PA got to know Governor Rendell when he was Mayor of Philadelphia. The "For the Kids" Toy run sponsored by the Delaware Valley Chapter of A.B.A.T.E. of PA is the largest motorcycle toy run in the country with fifty thousand plus riders attending every year. Mayor Rendell was a Grand Marshall at the Toy Run for many years. When he became Governor, he told A.B.A.T.E. of PA that he was a supporter of motorcyclists, would support helmet law modification, and did so.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA members are constantly creating history. So stay tuned to see what history we are making or better yet, join and become part of history like these dedicated members.

We will be glad to have you!

