

Heartland STEAM Conference

May 8 & 9, 2015 Bismarck, ND

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Having attended half-dozen 'MRF Best of the West' conferences over the past years, this year's Heartland STEAM was a real stand out. The Midwest ABATE members garner a deeper comradery, perhaps owing to their common farming family culture, sense of purpose, and Scandinavian/German parentage. Their biker enthusiasm and dedication is contagious. As comparative measure, North Dakota has 37,000 registered motorcycles and 2,000 members of ABATE. Idaho has 60,000 registered motorcycles and many fewer ABATE members. To be fair, North Dakota ABATE has a fixed infrastructure and employees and takes responsibility for training over 1,000 riders per year. Idaho has our STAR Rider Training program. However; I think there is a fundamental, cultural difference in Heartland and Western bikers.

The Friday afternoon conference kicked off with a general social hour with the Jack Daniel's girls passing out samples of their new Honey and cinnamon whiskeys (both were good!). MRF President Kirk "Hardtail" Willard spoke prior to a panel discussion of three-wheeled vehicle definition and the need for legislative differentiation between motorcycles. Several States have passed initial legislation, but Federal action is, already, underway in the Senator Vitter (LA) bill. Much more needs done on the Vitter bill, as the bill was written around the "Elio" vehicle and fails to address the wider range of new 3-wheeled products, such as the Polaris "Sling shot" and others. The consensus appeared to be a separate, new classification of motor vehicle needed to be established, devoid of the onerous requirements for autos, but outside of the motorcycle classification. Let's see where this goes. Friday ended with a social hour, MRF fund raiser, and carnival games in the Hospitality room.

Saturday opened with the posting of colors and Flag Pledge. Dick "Slider" Gilmore presented an excellent two hour talk on "The Diabetic Rider". This topic is near to Slider's heart, as he has lost many close friends to diabetes from its silent affects. The biker lifestyle is largely responsible for the elevated occurrence of diabetes among us and it continues to be a silent killer. Slider had volunteers taking attendee blood samples for sugar analyses for rider awareness. This was a great presentation.

There were several breakout sessions offered in the afternoon. I selected the 'Social Media and Website Development' session and the 'Ten Tips to Better Fundraising'.

The 'Social Media' session was somewhat helpful pertaining to website tips such as:

- 1) Design a website to lead with (in our case) "MEMBERSHIP" Always lead with the most important need!
- 2) KEEP IT SIMPLE! Focus on the message.
- 3) KEEP IT ITERESTING!
- 4) KEEP IT FRESH. Discard out of date info. Nobody wants to see last month's news.
- 5) Always check your links and references to insure they work.

The Social media connections such as Facebook, texting, Twitter, (and 4 others I never heard of. I guess if I were 17, I would know) are examples of ways to get out a message.

The second breakout session attended was 'Tips on Fundraising', hoping to hear about various new types of fundraising events or methods. However; the presenter was experienced in raising money for community charity organizations, such as the United Way, Cancer Society, etc., which amount to soliciting past large donors. So, this session turned out to be of little value.

In late afternoon, attendees gathered for a general session. The main speaker was US Senator John Hoeven of North Dakota. Saying I was impressed doesn't cover it, more like blown away. My faith in elected government was suddenly uplifted by the Senator's ability to speak and think on his feet, have detailed knowledge of a wide range of topics and know what he was talking about. Such qualities are virtually never seen in politicians, who, otherwise, rely upon spilling out heavily rehearsed phrases and bumper-sticker positions having little to do with any question. No, this Senator is the real deal. Where, oh where, can we find 50 more??

The Senator was questioned about several, current topics, beginning with the Federal classification of 3-wheeled cars. Legislation has already been introduced by Senator Vitter of LA to exempt the 3-wheel 'Elio' from many burdensome federal car requirements, but the current Vitter legislation needs to be broadened to include other configurations, such as the Polaris 'Sling Shot'. At the same time, this class of 3-wheel vehicle needs to reside in a separate class, not to be grouped with Motorcycles. I'm sure MRF Jeff Hennie will be working with the Senators to help guide the outcome.

A second topic of legislative interest concerned the ownership of data contained in vehicle 'black boxes'. The Senate is getting a handle on defining who 'owns' the data. Clearly, a vehicle manufacturer may 'own' by copy write, the computer programming or operating system, but the information created by the vehicle operation is not fully defined. The question may seem academic, until someone has a serious wreck and lawyers and police each have a keen interest in having the 'data'. 'Data' means: Exact GPS location and direction, date, time, speed, accelerator position, braking, vehicle diagnostics, and more. Compound the question of 'data ownership' when extending the question to include services, like 'On Star' who continuously monitors these things.

It was noted the need for legislation addressing the 'Right to Repair' issue has faded away over the past 2 or 3 years, apparently due to manufacturers openly sharing repair information. It appears to be non-problem at this point.

Following the Senator, Jeff Hennie, our MRF 'lobbyist' in Washington, DC, recapped efforts in to head off helmet regulation by the Fed and addressed the 'Vision Zero' program by the NHTSA. This 'Vision Zero' is a no holds barred effort to eliminate all vehicle fatalities through regulating most anything that is the least bit dangerous. Clearly, motorcycle operation will be in their sights.

Following dinner, there was entertainment, close out of the silent auction, and a live auction, all to raise bucks for the MRF.

All things considered, the Heartland STEAM Conference was the best event of this sort I have attended. Thank you, ABATE of North Dakota!