

E-Scooters Still Being Pushed Despite Urban Dweller Resistance



E-scooters and ride sharing were supposed to help save the planet from global warming. In spite of the fact that both are proving to be ecological disasters, proponents just keep on pushing them anyway. □ TN Editor

When they first appeared on the sidewalks of American cities in the fall of 2017 and spring 2018, rentable electric scooters felt as though they'd popped up out of nowhere—in part because they basically had. In cities like Santa Monica, California, and Austin, Texas, startups such as Bird and Lime didn't ask local officials for permission before planting fleets of e-scooters, figuring that the shared vehicles would prove enough of a hit that cities would accept them. They generally were, and so by last year even more e-scooters, in even more towns, appeared with the dawn of spring. By now, e-scooters are an entrenched feature of urban life in many cities—but the wild-bloom era is ending.

Cities know that shared e-scooter ridership rises with the thermometer—in many northern cities, the devices are pulled during winter—but this year they'll be even more prepared. Across the continent, local transportation officials have rejiggered their regulations

for 2020, incorporating insights gleaned from recent pilot projects. As a result, the experience of riding an e-scooter—and the business of operating a fleet of them—will be different, and likely improved, in many cities. It should, in theory, be a lot easier to find a scooter when you want one. But your favorite brand might be missing, because of a culling of e-scooter operators that has already begun. That culling will throttle the industry, allowing some companies a greater presence in some markets, but preventing many from attaining national dominance.

While ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft are now mostly regulated at the state level, cities remain in charge of overseeing e-scooters. After being caught off-guard by their explosive emergence two years ago, cities from San Francisco to Arlington, Virginia, oversaw limited e-scooter programs in 2019 and surveyed riders afterward to see what happened. Their findings generally supported the theory that e-scooters can provide an alternative to automobile trips, especially shorter ones. In Chicago, a survey of e-scooter riders suggested that almost two-thirds of e-scooter trips would have otherwise been taken by car, taxi, or ride hail. In Minneapolis, the city's Department of Public Works ran a similar survey, concluding that 55 percent of e-scooter trips replaced one of those three options.

Encouraged by such findings, many cities are now moving to loosen their caps on devices. This year the number of permitted e-scooters in D.C. will grow from 5,235 to at least 10,000, and in San Francisco from 2,500 to at least 4,000. Jamie Parks, the livable streets director for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, says his agency's pilot in 2019 bore out the car replacement theory. "We found over 40 percent of e-scooter trips were displacing single-occupancy vehicle trips," he told me.

With more e-scooters on the street, it should be easier for riders to find an available one nearby. That should boost overall e-scooter ridership, taking cars off the street and almost certainly improving the bottom line of operators, which are under pressure to show strong financials after having raised hundreds of millions of dollars in venture capital to subsidize their rapid expansion into new markets. Providing more trips in a city allows e-scooter companies to spread out fixed costs (such as

research and development and marketing). Kyle Rowe, Spin's head of local government partnerships, says that managing a larger e-scooter fleet enables his company to invest more in low-income programming and safety education programs.

Simply increasing the number of scooters attached to a permit is all gravy for the operators, but there is a wrinkle: Even as cities expand the total number of permitted devices, many are getting ready to shrink the number of operator licenses they give out. That makes the value of a permit even higher, since more vehicles are allowed with each one, but it also means more companies will be shut out.

In D.C. the number of permitted e-scooter companies will fall from eight last year to four this spring. Department of Transportation Director Jeff Marootian says his agency wants to improve the user experience for scooter riders: "I know people who like e-scooters, but they don't like having to jump between apps. So we're trying to help you have more availability, and less headache finding e-scooters." He expects residents will benefit from less congestion, as only half as many operators will be driving through the city to collect and redeploy their fleets. He also believes his agency can better monitor fewer operators, using automatically reported data to ensure they comply with rules around vehicle parking and equitable deployment. That could reduce common complaints about e-scooters, such as devices blocking sidewalk paths.

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