

The New York Times

Reconsidering a Belittled Transportation Option: Electric scooters have had their share of haters, but some cities have found ways to make them more appealing.

By Shira Ovide

12 June 2022

Late Edition - Final

4

Copyright 2022 The New York Times Company. All Rights Reserved.

When U.S. companies started renting grown-up versions of toddlers' plastic scooters in 2017, the mini vehicles were a lightly used and often mocked way to get around cities. But five years and one pandemic later, shared electric scooters are getting a second look and a chance to fix their bad reputation.

Electric scooters might also provide a blueprint for making technology mold to our collective needs.

About five years ago, in some U.S. cities including San Francisco and San Diego, a bunch of young companies began offering electric scooters that people could rent by the minute using a smartphone app.

Some people loved using the scooters for short trips around traffic-clogged parts of the cities. Officials and other residents saw scooter companies as interlopers with products that were an invitation for entitled people to mow down pedestrians or litter sidewalks with parked scooters. The scooter backlash was vicious.

Slowly, though, the companies started collaborating with cities to make the scooters safer, more reliable and less hated. They've also begun testing new ideas including automated speed limits, which some transportation experts would like to see applied to cars, too.

No new mode of getting around will cure all the world's transportation woes, and scooters definitely have drawbacks. But rented electric scooters may eventually find their place in cities that are hunting for solutions to traffic, pollution, road dangers and the limits of public transportation.

And if scooters catch on, it will be because many U.S. cities did something they didn't or couldn't do with on-demand ride companies like Uber and Lyft: They effectively regulated them to minimize the downsides and maximize the public good.

"Are we still doing scooters?" a Bloomberg News headline asked last month. Yes, but it's different from how we were doing scooters in the past.

Officials in many cities have responded to complaints by wading in to control how and where scooters operate. Many cities have limited the number of scooters available, required companies to beef up liability insurance or mandated that scooters be available in lower-income neighborhoods.

In the Los Angeles area, scooters have built-in no-go zones that stop people from using them in crowded areas such as the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Chicago is among the places that have required people to lock scooters to fixed objects like bike racks instead of leaving them anywhere. And New York has pledged dedicated lanes and parking zones to make it safer for people on bicycles and scooters.

Scooter companies, too, have responded to gripes about faulty or short-lived scooters. Wayne Ting, the chief executive of the scooter-and-bicycle rental company Lime, told me that many rented scooters used to be the same models that people bought for personal use. He said that Lime was now on its fourth generation of scooters designed to withstand the wear and tear of repeated rentals.

The pandemic has also altered people's routines and disrupted public transportation. Americans seem to be increasingly interested in alternatives for moving around, including rented and owned electric scooters and bicycles.

Not everyone wants scooters, no matter the changes. Some officials including in Miami, have said that scooters have no rightful place and have banned them at least temporarily.

On the other end, some advocates of alternatives to car transportation say cities have overreacted to scooters, arguing that restrictions can make them too cumbersome to use and may support the status quo of cars.

What's perhaps most surprising about the story of scooters in 2022 is that it shows that private tech companies and governments can work together to make an emerging technology serve the public interest.

Seleta Reynolds, the general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, told me she learned lessons from past regulatory mistakes that had allowed taxi service to stagnate and allowed Uber and Lyft to avoid addressing the ways that they made traffic and pollution worse.

"I'm laying the groundwork here so I can welcome new innovations," Reynolds said. "The way forward to doing that is not letting them come in and do whatever the hell they want."

Reynolds said that calls about scooters to the city's public complaints line had declined since new rules went into effect, and that restrictions on the number of scooters in some parts of the Los Angeles area had not reduced ridership. She said her goal was to ensure that city officials didn't block appealing alternatives to driving, which Los Angeles needs, while making sure that technology companies addressed the downsides of their services.

The approach to scooters, Reynolds said, is a model for how Los Angeles plans to incorporate future transportation technologies, including driverless vehicles and flying cars.

It's not clear whether scooter rentals will ever be an appealing transportation option for the masses or a financially viable business. But they show that to improve transportation, we may need as many alternatives to private cars as possible, and strict oversight to ensure the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.