



A flock of electric scooters suddenly descended on Austin. Now the city is scrambling to regulate them.

Two electric scooter operators — Bird Rides and LimeBike — launched in Austin before the city could roll out a permitting process. The scooters vanished from city streets after the city council cracked down on the companies.

BY **CLAIRE ALLBRIGHT** MAY 1, 2018 12 AM



Motorized scooter on the UT-Austin campus on April 25, 2018. 📷 Shelby Knowles for The Texas Tribune

Seemingly overnight, Austin was buzzing with electric scooters last month. Scooter riders weaved through crowded sidewalks and traffic downtown and zoomed out of drivers' blind spots near the University of Texas campus, catching motorists and pedestrians alike off guard.

Bird Rides, a dockless scooter company, deployed a fleet of thin, black scooters in April that quickly grew to almost 700. Then came LimeBike, which flooded the streets with their own white and green Lime-S scooter models on April 16.

Then, just as quickly, they disappeared last weekend.

The appearance of rentable scooters across the city briefly threw Austin's political leaders into a frenzy as city government officials rushed to roll out a plan to regulate the businesses, which had started operating before a city-led pilot program could begin.

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"In order to forestall a predictable and unmanageable swamping of our streets with thousands of vehicles, ATD recommends a more nimble response than our previously expressed pilot timeframe," Robert Spillar, director of the Austin Transportation Department, said in a letter to the mayor and Austin City Council members.

The council worked until after 2 a.m. Friday to change city code and prohibit leaving dockless scooters or bicycles on city sidewalks and streets until a permitting process begins. Violators can have their scooters impounded and face a \$200 fine for each seized scooter.

Over the weekend, both California-based companies pulled their vehicles from Austin city streets — but not before the city's transportation department impounded about 70 of them.

"We expect Birds in Austin to be back on the streets within a few days," company spokesperson Kenneth Baer said. "From the beginning we have respected the rule of law and we will not operate outside the boundaries of the ordinance just passed."

Mary Caroline Pruitt, LimeBike's communications manager, said the company applauds the city for setting up a permitting process and hopes to deploy a range of vehicles to Austin streets shortly. Along with scooters, it wants to rent both regular and electric-assisted bicycles.

"We express our sincerest apologies to our riders for the inconvenience and look forward to deploying a multi-modal fleet later this week," Pruitt said in a written statement.

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