

Community Concerns over E-Scooters Cause Conflict

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Sidewalks: a space normally filled with wandering tourists, unbothered seagulls, and assorted litter. Since 2017, when the first e-scooters were introduced to Santa Monica, they have been covered by haphazardly strewn scooters left by unbothered community members.

In 2018, the first shared mobility pilot program was launched by the city with four companies operating by permit. Now, in 2023, with the e-scooter industry struggling, and higher environmental concerns than ever, the Department of Transportation is looking to change the permit system to a contract system to keep companies like Veo and Spin supplying the Santa Monica community with micro mobility devices, such as scooters. For this to happen, an emergency ordinance must be adopted to renew the permits for long enough for the new processes to be established.

This emergency ordinance has a tight deadline: Oct. 1. If no decision has been made by then, the current permits will expire, and operators will be forced to cease operations in Santa Monica - meaning no more e-scooters. This issue was first brought up in the council meeting on Sept. 12, and continued to be addressed in the meeting on Sept. 26.

Trevor Thomas, a senior transportation planner with the Santa Monica Department of Transportation, and the person responsible for this motion said, “This will allow for... the best possible shared mobility service in the Santa Monica community and will enable the continued operation system to serve transportation needs of a great many community members while removing nearly a thousand car trips on Santa Monica streets daily.”

Certainly, the environmental implications of this act weighed heavily on the minds of council members. Offering e-bikes and scooters as an alternative mode of transportation not only gets cars off the roads, but cuts carbon emissions, and fits with Governor Newsom’s pollution reduction bills. In fact, in a survey conducted by Santa Monica’s Department of Transportation, around 40% of responders said that the last trip they’d taken by scooter would have otherwise been taken by car.

Additionally, this ordinance, and the future permit based contraction system would allow for scooters to become a more financially feasible mode of transportation for citizens. The metro costs \$1.75 for a one way trip. However, scooters cost \$1 to unlock and an additional 35 cents per minute to ride. According to census data, the mean travel time to work was 26 minutes (most likely including traffic). That could mean paying upwards of \$10 one way with the current scooter rates. Admittedly, 63% of census takers drive to work. But, the proposed ordinance aims to create contracts with providers in order to create a price ceiling for services, making them more affordable for the average consumer in hopes to change this.

The dockless nature of scooters (compared to e-bikes) makes them a more convenient option for transportation, as you can leave them whenever you get to your destination. However, the very concept of being able to step off whenever has created problems on the sidewalks of the

city. While scooters provide mobility for some, Councilmember Phil Brock raised concerns about the disarray scooters are left in on sidewalks, limiting mobility for others.

“Scooters blocking the sidewalks means that people with ADA requirements could not ride on the sidewalks they were entitled to ride on.”

Brock was a big source of opposition to the adoption of the emergency ordinance to extend the current policies. He mentioned multiple complaints lodged to him about the sidewalk blockage, the trouble he personally has encountered, and a case of a woman being beaten up by five men on scooters. While scooters can be a nuisance on the streets, one possible contractor company, Lyft, has plans in place for docking stations that scooters would be returned to, like for e-bikes. This could cause some problems for commuting users, but may assuage citizen concerns about sidewalk accessibility.

Ultimately, the motion to adopt an emergency ordinance allowing the Department of Transportation to continue to procure scooter operators to create a permit based system passed 5-2.

Around 800,000 to 1 million shared micro mobility rides happen in Santa Monica per year, and the numbers are only seeming to go up. With more secure contracts for companies in place, hopefully we will see an increase in scooter users, a decrease in traffic, and a better outlook for our environment.