

The Oregonian

Editorial: Sure They're Fun, But Are Portland's E-Scooters Safe?

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
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Along with the controversial rallies, a lengthy occupation and an eternal August heat wave, 2018 will be remembered as Portland's summer of the scooter.

For some Portlanders, the peppy and affordable transportation alternatives have been a blast. For others, they're as pesky as yellowjackets at a picnic. In dozens of letters to the editor and online comments over the past week, Portlanders have complained that scooter jockeys are going without helmets, hitting pedestrians, cruising at speeds of up to 15 miles per hour into traffic or dumping them haphazardly when they're done.

Indeed, there've been a few minor e-scooter accidents in the three weeks since the city launched a pilot program with three different brands. And while some Portlanders claim on social media that there've been many more near-misses, the biggest problem with the potential scooter sensation is a lack of knowledge of - or attention to - the rules.

Yes, there are rules. And for this experiment to take hold, the city and the companies' communication and enforcement must improve.

For a change, however, we haven't arrived here for a lack of trying. Commissioner Dan Saltzman and the Portland Bureau of Transportation should be lauded for their work earlier this year to get ahead of this craze. It's clear they learned from the fiasco that was Uber's unauthorized entry into the Portland market - a strategy that some scooter companies have also tried elsewhere.

Portland transportation officials researched the trend, sought advice from a citizen group and invited various e-scooter entrepreneurs to join a four-month trial program that ends in late November. Participants had to agree to a variety of stipulations, including distributing scooters across both sides of the river equitably, using a specific app and - brilliantly - sharing ridership data that's been withheld from other municipalities.

Come to Portland without playing by our rules, the invite warned, and the city will confiscate scooters.

As The Oregonian/OregonLive's Andrew Theen has reported, Portland's regulations are some of the stiffest nationwide. To cover administrative, marketing and enforcement costs, the city charges companies a 25-cent-per-ride surcharge, and applicants paid \$5,250 to play.

That's not chump change considering the total of 2,049 e-scooters operating in the city today will eventually rise to a maximum of 2,500. As of Aug. 15, the city logged more than 96,000 rides, or around \$24,000. Dylan Rivera, the bureau's spokesman, said revenue that goes beyond costs will be spent to ramp up marketing and enforcement efforts.

Good, because the biggest challenge to scooter success is ensuring both Portlanders who are on and off the two-wheelers are safe.

The city has received 700 complaints - from 300 individuals - as well as another 150 reported by the companies. Most center on scooters on sidewalks or riders without helmets. State and city rules require helmets, which some of the companies have agreed to provide to riders at no cost. City rules also ban the e-scooters from city sidewalks and parks, including the Eastbank

Esplanade, Waterfront Park and the Springwater Corridor. And kids 16 and under aren't allowed on scooters.

Rivera said Portland police, parking enforcement officers and park rangers are tasked with scooter supervision. For now, most folks are getting warnings, he said. But from the looks of it, that should ramp up sooner rather than later along with a citywide campaign to get the word out. Tickets, even if small, could serve as a reminder that what was once considered a toy is now a regulated vehicle - and must be treated like one.

City leaders cleverly avoided the adversarial relationships other cities currently have with scooter companies. But it may be more difficult for them to foster a good relationship between scooter fans and other Portlanders. An Oregonian/OregonLive reader poll - albeit unscientific - shows the steep hill they may face. Thoughts on scooters? "KeepOnScootinPDX" scored 39 percent of the vote Friday afternoon, while "StopScootinPDX" received a hearty 61 percent.

It would be a shame for Portland to miss out on a chance for a fun, convenient and low-cost option for a full commute or just a little help making that last stretch between home or work and public transit. This city values creativity, environmentally friendly options and car alternatives.

Scooters could fit the bill as long the city takes the time now, when ridership is high, to smooth out what has become a bumpy road. Without that work, this viable option may very well get kicked to the curb.

The Portland Tribune

Neighborhood Associations Knock New Development Rules

*By Zane Sparling
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Change to meeting requirements for new buildings worries Overlook, Kenton neighborhoods in Portland.

Proposed development rules would allow builders to hold required community meetings on weekends, at odd hours — or even far away from the project on the other side of the river.

Long before hammer hits nail, would-be developers must currently share their plans with the area's neighborhood association, who can choose to set up a public conversation that's often held at the group's regular gathering spot.

The city's Neighborhood Contact Code Update would instead require the applicant to plan the meeting — and host it for any length of time anywhere within two miles of the build site.

Christian Trejbal, chair of the Overlook Neighborhood Association in North Portland, thinks some developers will try to minimize participation, even though they're not obligated to take the public feedback they hear into consideration.

He says the portion of Portland's 95 official 'hoods with vibrant neighborhood associations should have the "right of first refusal" to host the meeting.

"I understand the city's desire to make sure that neighborhoods that don't have associations as active as ours still get an opportunity to hear the proposal," he said in an interview. "But in doing so they're throwing out a system that works for a lot of neighbors."

At least eight other neighborhood chairs agree. They've signed on to Trejbal's recommendations, which also call for the meetings to be held for all developments larger than 10,000 square feet. The city's suggested threshold is 25,000 square feet.

The Bureau of Planning and Sustainability proposes requiring developers to post signs summarizing the project at the site and to alert the neighborhood association, district coalition and business association via email or regular mail, not certified mail. Trejbal says only certified mail prevents developers from backdating letters to run down the clock.

Portland Public Schools would be notified of large builds.

"The problems that we're trying to solve with this proposal — we wanted to bring more information to more people more predictably," said city staffer Sara Wright at a meeting of the Planning and Sustainability Commission on Tuesday, Aug. 14.

Wright noted that projects that go through a land-use review have typically been exempt from the neighborhood contact process, but the new rules would end that loophole.

Some neighborhood chairs feel like they're being punished more than 30 years after the groups were established as a linchpin of engagement. In a telling move, Commissioner Chloe Eudaly renamed in July the Office of Neighborhood Involvement as the Office of Community & Civic Life.

"The city is trying to pull power away under the banner that neighborhood associations are just a bunch of old white men who are grumpy and own homes," said Tyler Roppe, head of the Kenton Neighborhood Association. "I think it's a tragedy. We're seeing a discouraging trend."

The Planning and Sustainability Commission is scheduled to hold a work session on the code update on Tuesday, Aug. 28, at 5 p.m. at 1900 S.W. 4th Ave., Suite 2500. It's unclear what amendments will be adopted into the plan at that time.

"Collaboration can and does happen and has value even where there's no statutory requirement that you listen to somebody," Vice Chair Chris Smith said at the planning meeting. "Sometimes they bring good ideas anyway."