

TRANSPORTATION

## E-Scooter Growth Hits a Massive Roadblock

*Can the micromobility mode find a place in the postpandemic transportation network? By Adina Solomon*

**E**LECTRIC SCOOTERS have filled city streets in force over the past two years.

In 2018 alone, the year shared and dockless e-scooters made their widespread debut, more than 85,000 were used for nearly 40 million trips across the U.S.

But that growth stalled out this spring as many jobs went remote, people sheltered in place, and

in mobility generally as people keep themselves home, [companies] are retrenching. And so they're trying to conserve their resources and trying to focus on the places where they're able to drive the most business now and in the near future."

Companies are also working to improve service and city collaboration, long a sore spot for the industry. In April, Spin partnered with Portland, Oregon, to incentivize use by reducing rental costs, while Spin, Lime, and Bird each offered free rides to health-care workers and other emergency personnel during the pandemic's initial months.

"It seems like they're using this time to take a breath after that big boom and see what they can do better," says Kate Calabra, partnership development associate at City Tech Collaborative, an urban solution accelerator.

### Planning ahead

Planning for e-scooters in a post-pandemic world could look very different, Calabra says. People will want to know that their scooter will be available when they need it, and whether they're heading into a large crowd to go pick it up. That would require more work around capacity management and advance trip planning, as well as increased data and real-time information sharing. Calabra says this necessitates expertise across local government, technology, urban design, and community engagement.

"You'll probably have more of the demand that we knew before

of people wanting to use these mobility options, but they're going to have a different mindset about what space means in terms of things they can touch and how many people they can be around," she says.

Companies like Spin have worked to address public health concerns by boosting and publicizing new cleaning procedures. E-scooters might also get in the autonomous game. A pilot launched in May by e-scooter provider Go X and tech company Tortoise allows customers in Peachtree Corners, an Atlanta suburb, to order a scooter that comes to them. (Remote drivers operate the scooters from Mexico City.) When a rider is done, the scooter then drives itself back to a designated parking spot for recharging and cleaning.

Scooter use could look different, too. Since recently relaunching in about 50 places around the world, Lime has seen riders in American and European cities taking longer trips by distance, according to spokesperson Russell Murphy. Lime believes riders are using scooters for full trips now, and not just for part of a journey, possibly to avoid using public transit.

"So much of what happens in this industry is going to depend on what happens in our communities in general," Franklin-Hodge says. "Are people moving? Are people going to jobs, or are they increasingly working from home? Are people traveling and visiting cities that they don't live in? These are all the big questions that are going to define so much of our economy and so much of our mobility. The answers to those questions will have big impacts on the scooter business."

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As scooter use slowed during the pandemic, Lime drastically reduced its global fleet.



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a feeling of anxiety over shared spaces swelled. Companies were forced to suspend or eliminate service in markets around the globe. Lime cut service in the U.S. and about two dozen other countries, while Bird pressed pause in American cities and pulled scooters from all of Europe.

"It's very unclear what this year is going to look like in terms of usage," says Jascha Franklin-Hodge, executive director of the Open Mobility Foundation, which works to build open-source technology tools that improve how cities manage transportation infrastructure. "Because there's been such a drop