

Rules of the Sidewalk? Tampa grapples with the rented scooter craze



TAMPA — They won't be here in time for Gasparilla but come February, Tampa is likely to see scooters motoring alongside pedestrians and baby carriages on city sidewalks.

You won't be able to cruise on the Riverwalk or Bayshore Boulevard or East 7th Avenue in Ybor City, but a proposed ordinance would allow scooters on the sidewalks south of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard between Armenia Avenue and 40th Street, a 12-square mile area.

Think South Howard Avenue on a Friday night. Now, add scooters.

On Thursday, City Council members signed off on an attempt to rein in the chaos that has afflicted other cities since rental scooters became the next hip thing in urban transportation.

The city isn't going to pay for scooters. In fact, three lucky companies will pay the city for a year to operate in its boundaries. A \$20,000 administrative fee and \$1 per day per scooter is likely to be the asking price. At 1,800 scooters, the discussed number, that's \$657,000 a year into municipal coffers.

The city received 12 bids on Friday and will pick the three winners within 30 days, said Jean Duncan, the city's transportation and stormwater director.

The companies would also bear the risk and costs of accidents and injuries.

And it's that vision of broken limbs or worse and the ensuing public outcry that occupied council members' interest.

After the pilot program ends in a year, the city should have a tally of the carnage, said council member Yvonne Yolie Capin.

"We'll know how many people are *not* injured," quipped Capin.

Council member Charlie Miranda said he was concerned about scooter riders running people down on the city's sidewalks. Current law prohibits them from operating on the street, although council member Mike Suarez suggested lobbying the state to allow them to be used in bike lanes.

Duncan said the scooters wouldn't be able to go faster than 8 mph. Miranda said that could still do damage.

"You hit somebody and they hit their head on the sidewalk, then it's bye-bye," he said.

Other council members said scooters, also on the radar in St. Petersburg, represent the next step in transit.

Luis Viera, a council member who is also an attorney, said he could see young lawyers hopping on scooters to get from law office to courthouse.

The council's lone Millennial, Guido Maniscalco, took a test ride on a scooter and warned that not paying attention could result in injury. But he said his concerns were calmed when city officials said they could terminate the pilot program without penalty.

"Having that caveat put in there, that we can stop this if it does get out of control, makes me comfortable," Maniscalco said.

Plenty of potential pitfalls have been identified. Other cities have seen scooters dropped all over streets and yards. Tampa is trying to craft a program that rewards vendors for making their customers want to drop the scooters off at a corral (think Coast Bike Share) when they're done rolling around.

"We do not want those bad headlines that other cities have had," Duncan said.

Electric scooters have popped up in dozens of cities across the country. They often cost as little as \$1 to start riding and then 15 cents for each minute after. All users have to do is download an app, enter a credit card and scan a bar code to unlock the scooter.

San Francisco and Santa Monica, Calif. were ground zero for the scooter craze and the backlash. Companies have dumped scooters in cities before asking for official permission, ruffling municipal feathers. By putting out a bid and setting some ground rules, Duncan said, the city hopes to avoid that kind of free-for-all.

But no amount of rule-making will eliminate the possibility of some mayhem, Suarez said.

"You can't regulate stupid," he said.

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