

Scooters revving up excitement, potential danger



Helmets don't come with a scooter rental, but state law says they are to be worn. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

Is South Lake Tahoe providing a green light to the potential of dangerous road incidents or an innovative transportation alternative by allowing electric scooters in town?

This was the question on June 19 related to the green bikes and scooters dotting the city landscape, prompting the City Council to hear the pros and cons during a presentation at its regular meeting.

LimeBike, which calls its riders "juicers," first launched its computerized ride share program locally about a year ago with single speed bikes, then later with 3-speed versions and now has expanded into scooters. Last fall, it poured \$50 million

in the venture.

In a year, 40 employees were hired locally and the number of vehicle miles traveled (VMTs) dropped – thus reducing the carbon emissions in a heavily populated tourist destination during the peak summer months, LimeBike local Operations Manager Stephanie Sarradet told the council.

The assumption is if people weren't on a LimeBike, they would be in a car. Thus the VMT reduction.

Beyond economic and workforce benefits, Sarradet insisted the chief aim is assisting with lake clarity. Of course that is an uphill climb considering **2017 had the worst clarity reading** in the lake's history.

As Sarradet put it, the environmental mission helps in not turning Lake Tahoe "into a mud puddle."

However, the prevalence of these scooters has not gone unnoticed by council members, citizens – including a doctor, and the police department. Officers have issued three warnings to riders without helmets.

"They're buzzing around like hornets all over town," police Lt. David Stevenson told *Lake Tahoe News*. His vehicle code book was covered with Post-It notes to mark important points. "I've only seen one helmet, and it was (worn by) a 10-year-old."

California law requires a scooter rider obey the rules of the road, wear a helmet, have a driver's license, stay off the sidewalks and avoid lanes alongside thoroughfares such as Al Tahoe Boulevard with speed limits over 25mph.

Mayor Wendy David, who called the transit option "awesome," is also concerned with the lack of helmet use.

She was also the one **who in April** when it was announced scooters would be coming here held up a *San Francisco*

Chronicle article showing the problems with them. The council at the time dismissed her concerns.



Andrew Aquino and Jack Kixmiller out for a joy ride to the beach on June 19. Photo/Susan Wood

The mode of transit is not without its detractors.

Resident Oliver Starr read a statement to the council that rattled off a list of complaints about LimeBikes and scooters ranging from their disposal, including all over his neighborhood, to how they're being ridden. Sometimes two people are riding them, possibly underage, moving against traffic and at night.

"It's only a matter of time before a tragedy occurs. Mark my words," he said.

While supporting the idea of smart, shared transportation options, Starr even submitted a formal complaint to the company upon a run-in with a driver looking for equipment in his neighborhood.

He suggested that since the city can stop shopping carts from leaving parking lots it should be able to "geo-fence" where the San Mateo company's equipment is parked. LimeBikes and scooters cost \$1 to unlock through the computer app and are tracked through GPS. Bike rental prices are that much every half hour. For scooters, the price is 15 cents per minute.

Councilman Tom Davis strongly urged the company to facilitate education along with rentals. He also encouraged Lime to program the scooters to go slower. Lime scooters may travel at a maximum of 15mph.

"I see them racing down the street. There are dangerous situations. But I also see families out enjoying them," said Davis, who pledged to ride one this weekend.

The councilman also asked Sarradet whether the scooter governs itself to go no faster than 15mph.

Sarradet answered yes.

But that claim was disputed by a couple of riders on Gardner Mountain that afternoon.

Jack Kixmiller and Andrew Aquino were zipping on side streets in the middle of the road with no helmets when pulled over by *Lake Tahoe News*.

When asked if the scooters run faster, Kixmiller said yes. Aquino's reached 17mph.

How do you know?

"It says right here," Kixmiller said, pointing to the computer gauge on the handlebar.

As it turns out, a company representative told them to wear helmets, but Kixmiller retorted: "We're locals, we're just going to the beach."

And there lies the challenge with enforcing the rules of the road with vehicles deemed as toys.

John Riddle warned the council a few times during the meeting about the "no helmet" quandary among riders who may feel invincible.

"As a doctor, even minor head traumas are a very serious injury," he told *LTN*.

Councilwoman Brooke Laine took the concern one step further by bringing up a scenario. She hypothetically mentioned a kid who flips over the scooter upon "hitting a pothole," placing the city at risk of being sued.

"I'm very concerned about the liability," she said.

Interim City Attorney Nira Doherty told Laine it was a pertinent scenario.

"Public agencies can be liable. Certain elements have to be met (though)," Doherty told *LTN*.

But the city would be exempt from litigation if the company and rider were found to be at fault, "even if dangerous conditions exist," she added.

More liability questions remain for those riding on U.S. Forest Service and California Tahoe Conservancy land. Representatives from those agencies did not respond to *LTN's* questions.

At a minimum the equipment could be impounded, but that does

nothing to penalize the rider using a motorized vehicle where it's not permitted.

Lime has paid for and pulled a business license, the finance department confirmed. That, though, is just for the city. The vehicles are in Douglas County too, but that jurisdiction does not have business licenses.

Sarradet pledged the company would focus on safety and launch an educational campaign designed to make riders more responsible. The League has a limited number of helmets for those who can't afford one. Lime also plans to ask other businesses associated with its 50 local partnerships to chip in per the mayor's request.

Otherwise, Marissa Fox of the League reminded naysayers and those with concerns that once Lime works out the kinks, it will be a win-win economically and environmentally for the community.

"There's no cost but to the user, and it is a benefit to the community," Fox said, adding if the council works with the company: "I think you'll find a receptive party."

A few Lime company employees joined Fox in support of the idea.

LimeBikes is available in 60 markets worldwide; at least 4 million trips have been logged by users. The transit alternative has environmentalists and ride-share advocates and even government officials seeing green.

Bikes versus buses

When the **Tahoe Transportation District** on the same day delivered a presentation lamenting a loss of revenue and decreased ridership that is likely to lead to fewer hours of bus service, the City Council seemed irritated the agency is not being innovative with transportation services.

Laine told TTD's George Fink that the agency appears to be "going in the wrong direction." In addition, the League is also advocating a program involving smart mobility vans, as mentioned by Fox during the public comment period.

"The community is not designed for these big buses," Laine said, adding she's "concerned and disappointed," finding the TTD's bad-news report as "extremely alarming."

Her response to the buses operating only 10 hours a day?

"You might as well not even offer it," she said.

Councilman Austin Sass wants to see more connectivity by combining buses and bike routes.

Davis would still like to see a free transit system, a dream of elected officials for years.