

TRANSPORTATION

How scooters have changed Indianapolis after 1 year



Ethan May

IndyStar

Published 6:00 a.m. ET June 11, 2019 | Updated 6:34 a.m. ET June 12, 2019

It takes between 5 and 10 minutes for Lo Ray to ride a scooter from their Downtown Indianapolis apartment to their workplace on the near-east side.

The 23-year-old doesn't own a car. Before scooters, Ray would ride a bike, hop on a bus or get a ride from a friend to make the mile-and-a-half trip.

The Downtown resident's transportation options changed when Bird and Lime arrived last June.

"I love the scooters a whole lot," Ray said. "I think they're very accessible, they're easy to use, they can get you most places. And I think they're a great alternative if you can't use a bike or you have a place to go. They're pretty cheap. It works well."

In their first year on the streets of Indianapolis, dockless electric scooters have provided a new way to commute for some and a new form of recreation for others.

But the shared vehicles have also presented new questions about safety, regulation and planning.

Ray, who has lived in Indianapolis their whole life and Downtown for about five years, sees these challenges.

Ray has fallen and is always wary of potholes. The risk is worth it, though: Instead of buying a car, Ray spends \$2 or \$3 for a trip to or from work.

"I don't want to get a car if I don't have to," Ray said. "I don't have to make those payments."

People looking for another way to get around Indianapolis without owning a car had options before the scooters showed up, and scooters have changed each of them.

How scooters have impacted IndyGo, BlueIndy, Pacers Bikeshare

Both IndyGo and BlueIndy report more use since the scooters arrived.

"I think these mobility options can absolutely work together," said Lauren Day, IndyGo's director of public relations.

Day said IndyGo's ridership increased after making route changes a few months before scooters showed up. James Delgado, BlueIndy's general manager, said their numbers through May are up 19% over the same time last year.

Someone who doesn't want to drive will soon have a new option, as construction winds down on IndyGo's \$96.3 million Red Line project.

On the horizon:How IndyGo's Red Line will change Indianapolis

Day said scooters could help people leaving Red Line stops travel the "last mile" to their destination. That process often works in reverse for BlueIndy.

"We find that there are often scooters scattered around our stations," Delgado said, "so we know that people are taking scooters the first mile to our stations and then using BlueIndy cars to do their longer distance travel plans."

But Pacers Bikeshare has been hurt by the arrival of scooters.

Kären Haley is the executive director of Indianapolis Cultural Trail Inc., which runs the program with more than 250 bicycles in 29 stations around the city.

She said since the scooters have arrived the bikeshare has seen about a 30% decrease in ridership from people who rent a bike with a per-ride fee.

The number of rides from this group went back up when Bird and Lime left Indianapolis for a few months last summer while the city passed scooter regulations.

When Bird and Lime returned with thousands of scooters in early September, ridership from walk-up users dipped again.

More bikes coming: Pacers Bikeshare will more than double bikes this August

Haley said she thinks there is overlap between those who use electric scooters and those who use the bikeshare, but she also said she thinks there are people trying the scooters because

"I think scooters are definitely attracting people that, for whatever reason, are not or would not use Pacers Bikeshare or any bikes, for that matter," Haley said.

There is one major difference between scooters and bikes: where they can be ridden.

Where are scooters allowed?

The question of where people should be permitted to ride scooters — sidewalks, roads or trails — goes hand-in-hand with safety.

Some riders, like 27-year-old Downtown resident Rachel Rollison, often don't feel safe riding on the streets and would prefer to be allowed on the trails, where scooters are currently forbidden.

Rollison is a senior accountant at Salesforce who walks or rides a Pacers Bikeshare bike or a scooter to work. She thinks that the trails are wide enough for scooter riders to go around pedestrians and that bikes, which are allowed on the trails, are as dangerous as scooters.

"A bike can go just as fast as a scooter, and a bike is much larger," Rollison said. "A pedestrian being hit by a bike would hurt just as much or more. I think we're just focused on (scooters) because they're new."

Even though the non-profit that helps manage the Cultural Trail did not choose to ban scooters — the city's sidewalk rules automatically apply — Haley said their concerns come down to speed. She doesn't think cyclists inside the city are going as fast as scooters.

"There are people who move at slower speeds on the Cultural Trail, and that is something that we all must be aware of," Haley said. "We hear from people who are very startled (and) don't have a pleasant experience when they have an interaction with a very fast-moving scooter or groups of scooters."

Scooters have a maximum speed of 15 mph, according to Bird and Lime.

For Indianapolis City-County Councilman Zach Adamson, the ongoing question of where to ride isn't about speed but about riders following rules.

"If (scooter riders) can't follow the rules, it would be reckless for us to say sure, go ahead and ride wherever you want, even where pedestrians don't feel safe with you zooming by," Adamson wrote in an email to IndyStar.

"Pedestrians that don't feel safe have no where else to go. If you don't feel safe riding the scooters where it's legal, you don't have to ride them. For the same reason I don't skydive. I don't feel the excitement would justify the risk."

Adamson, however, said he sees little risk in riding on the street, which he said he does often.

Another location where some would like to ride scooters is the Monon Trail.

Ronnetta Spalding, chief communications officer with Indy Parks and Recreation, said Parks bans scooters from the Monon because they have motors.

She said nothing electric is allowed on the trail. An electric bike, for example, could only be ridden on the trail if its electric system were turned off.

Scooters are also banned from White River State Park and the canal walkway.

Lisa Pippin is the executive assistant for White River State Park, which contains about a third of the canal. She said scooters being banned from the walkway and the park comes down to safety.

"The Park has received numerous complaints from Park patrons stating that they have nearly been hit coming around a corner by scooters," Pippin wrote in an email to IndyStar. "Two scooters riding abreast leaves little room on the Canal walkway for pedestrians."

When asked why bikes are allowed while scooters are not, she noted that bikes are not motorized and that they "typically are using a route that is bike friendly, such as the Cultural Trail."

"Bicyclists own their bikes, and typically don't misuse or abuse their property," Pippin wrote in a later email to IndyStar. "They don't throw their bike down just anywhere, or toss them in canals."

Splash: People keep throwing scooters in the canal

The city has plucked dozens of scooters from the canal since starting to clean it in late November, Pippin said.

Scooters going for a swim and parked scooters blocking sidewalks and other areas are just some of the concerns that have been raised by Downtown business owners and property managers.

They've asked for new ways to educate riders on where the scooters should be ridden and parked — and for more proactive ways to enforce the rules.

Following the rules

City inspectors occasionally do sweeps to enforce parking rules, while the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department is responsible for ticketing riders who use the sidewalks.

Richard Cummings, who visited Indianapolis from Tampa, Florida, did not know where he was supposed to ride. When IndyStar spoke to him, he was on the sidewalk. After being told of the rules, he switched to the street.

Cummings was riding a scooter to a movie, though he said he would ride one just for fun, too.

A 2018 report from Lime said 32% of riders they surveyed were riding to or from entertainment. Indianapolis-specific data was not available.

Cummings said he was worried about hitting people while he was riding on the sidewalk along Meridian Street.

'Do we literally have to call every time?' Scooters in the way rile Downtown businesses

Whether scooters are being ridden there illegally or parked there properly, sidewalks sit at the center of much scooter frustration.

Downtown resident Rollison just wants a safe place to ride.

“If people are going to throw a fit about (riding on) sidewalks, you have to give them a place to ride and be safe,” Rollison said.

Safety questions loom as injury total passes 100

With the current rules and infrastructure, Indianapolis Emergency Medical Services transported 113 patients for scooter-related injuries September through May.

Brian Van Bokkelen, media relations and public affairs manager for Indianapolis EMS, said they track injuries by what medical personnel are told at the scene. The totals do not account for people who walk into the emergency room with an injury.

The most injuries recorded in a single month is 24. That total was reached in October, when Bird and Lime had the most scooters on the streets. May and September had the second and

third most injuries, with 23 and 21.

There were 72 bicycle injuries recorded in the same timespan, with the most injuries, 21, coming in September, according to Indianapolis EMS.

21% of injured bicyclists admitted to consuming alcohol before riding, compared to 51% of injured scooter riders. In October, Indianapolis police made their first arrest on suspicion of operating a scooter while intoxicated, when police say a 21-year-old ran a red light on a Lime scooter.

From October: After 20+ injuries in September, scooter rule enforcement begins

The future of scooters in Indianapolis

Even with injuries and controversies, the success of Bird and Lime may have drawn two new scooter companies to the market: Spin, a company owned by Ford, and Lyft, known for its ride-hailing services, are due to arrive any day.

Each company has applied and been approved to operate in Indianapolis after paying a \$15,000 fee.

When the companies were approved, the city did not have limits on the number of scooters they could deploy. That has changed.

The city continually reviews scooter-use data and uses it to update its rules.

The first and only major change so far came in May, when the city passed new regulations that limit the companies to 1,000 scooters each day, only 65% of which can be placed Downtown.

Indianapolis sets new limits on scooters: But there's wiggle room.

Under the new rules, the companies must prove the scooters are being used with a certain frequency to stay or to ask for permission to deploy more.

The rules allow a maximum of six shared mobility operators, so only one more license is available to compete against Bird, Lime, Spin, Lyft and Pacers Bikeshare.

In addition to the up-front fee, licensees must also pay \$1 per device per day. An October vote in the City-County Council directed those daily fees into a fund used to build and maintain bike lanes.

Daniel Hedglin, a senior planner for the city's department of metropolitan development, helps determine whether there should be more bike lanes and where. He said the city is using data provided by Bird and Lime to learn how the city can make the city safer for scooters.

"... we are still learning lessons on how to integrate them into the fabric of Indianapolis," Hedglin wrote in an email to IndyStar. "However, data indicates that riders often travel along routes where they feel safe and comfortable, particularly around bike lanes."

Hedglin said improvements suggested in the city's long-range transportation plan, Indy Moves, will also benefit scooter riders. Such improvements include the addition of new bike lanes and multi-use paths.

For now, the city continues to analyze the data the scooter companies started to provide monthly when they returned in September. Hedglin said the city will have a better idea of how scooters "fit into the overall transportation picture" when they have a full year of data.

As the way people use scooters changes, Hedglin said "cities like Indianapolis will continue to adapt, too."

IndyStar reporters Alexandria Burris, Crystal Hill, James Briggs and Kellie Hwang contributed to this report.

Call *IndyStar* digital producer Ethan May at 317-444-4682 or email him at emay@indystar.com. Follow him on Twitter @EthanMayJ.