Improving Access and Safety for Shared Micromobility Users in Santa Monica, CA

Challenge
Santa Monica is a coastal city west of downtown Los Angeles with a population of roughly 91,000 people. The city is a leader in sustainable mobility, having been the first in Los Angeles County to launch a municipally-owned and operated bicycle share system in 2015, called Breeze Bike Share. Shared micromobility devices such as bicycles, electric bicycles (e-bicycles), and electric scooters (e-scooters) can create a more diverse, convenient, and accessible transportation network that can provide more transportation options, reduce congestion, and improve quality of life.

In 2018, private e-scooter companies began operating with unsanctioned e-scooters in Santa Monica and the city needed to quickly determine how to best react to this development. After weighing their options, the city of Santa Monica approved a 16-month Shared Mobility Pilot Program to allow four private companies (Bird, Jump, Lime, and Lyft) to provide shared mobility services, including e-scooters and e-bicycles, under new city regulations. The city selected the Shared Mobility Pilot Program participating operators through a rigorous selection process, which included a public comment period.

Solution
The Shared Mobility Services Pilot allows participating companies to deploy a set number of devices within the designated ridership area in Santa Monica. The Pilot program enables the city to:

- Develop and refine a new area of policy, regulation, and enforcement through firsthand experience;
- Move quickly to adapt to a rapidly changing industry, while leaving room to learn and adjust as appropriate;
- Test new device and service providers in a growing industry;
- Explore partnership models with private companies;
- Explore possibilities for data capture, structures, and utilization; and
- Experiment with different management tools, such as geo-fencing and designated drop zones.
The Pilot enables flexibility and collaboration with the participating companies. Companies may request an increase in their allowable fleets, which the city evaluates based on market need, the number of devices deployed in the city, device utilization, operator performance, public safety metrics, seasonal and environmental conditions, device maintenance, and special circumstances, such as large events. The city also sets minimum requirements, such as geo-fencing on the devices, operation of a 24/7 customer service line, and a maximum response time of two hours for public safety concerns, such as devices blocking the right-of-way. The city designed the regulations such that they could be revised during the Pilot time period as circumstances and technologies evolve. For example, geo-fencing on devices was encouraged rather than required at the start of the Pilot; upon further development of the technology, geo-fencing became a minimum requirement. Santa Monica’s current administrative regulations for micromobility were updated in April 2019 and included revisions regarding incentives for use of Shared Mobility Drop Zones, enhanced outreach and education efforts required by shared mobility device operators, and a new reduced speed for devices operating within designated zones in order to increase safety.

Additionally, the city strengthened administrative language surrounding equitable access to these devices. For example, device operators must establish and promote low-income qualified rates for shared mobility device use, and offer incentives (such as education, outreach, and payment plans) for low-income or other disadvantaged users. The regulations require device operators to distribute two thirds of their fleet outside of downtown Santa Monica, with the intent of incentivizing a more equitable distribution of devices in lesser-served communities. The regulations also strongly encourage operators to provide a system for user sign-up and payment that enables easy use of the reduced rates via methods that do not require a smartphone and/or access to a credit or debit card.

The city used internal resources to develop and launch this Pilot, and later was able to implement cost recovery via a fee structure for micromobility operators. The fee recovery consists of annual operation fees (a lump sum from each operator, along with an individual fee per year per device); an infrastructure fee for upkeep of the right-of-way ($1/device/day); and citation fees based on unlawful operation. The city uses these fees to hire dedicated staff for the administration and enforcement of the Pilot, and to invest in dedicated infrastructure, such as separated lanes.

Santa Monica adopted Mobility Data Specifications (MDS) from Los Angeles County (now overseen by the Open Mobility Foundation) to collect, clean, and analyze micromobility data. The MDS are open-source and available in real-time, and can be used to help cities enforce, evaluate, and actively manage private companies who operate in public space. Santa Monica has been able to aggregate volumes from millions of micromobility trips to identify opportunities for new protected lanes, designated drop zones, and other infrastructure.

Ridership across these shared micromobility devices has continued to increase since the Pilot’s launch. Eleven months into the Pilot, the city released a Shared Mobility Community Survey to better understand user demographics; rider behavior; whether shared mobility trips displace trips by other modes; and the familiarity of users with the rules of riding shared mobility devices. Initial results from 4,260 self-selected respondents show that users take shared mobility
trips for a wide range of purposes, with work trips reported as the most common. Respondents reported that 50 percent of their most recent shared mobility trips displaced a car trip (including driving alone, ride-hailing services, taxi, etc.) and that, since the implementation of the Pilot, users have been using cars less. Compared to other modes, respondents reported a notable increase in walking and rail transit use (18 percent and 16 percent respectively) since using shared micromobility devices.

The city also published a Shared Mobility Pilot Program Summary Report in late 2019, which shares lessons learned and makes recommendations for the future of the program. Opportunities for future work include public right-of-way management; rider behavior; equity and access; device design and maintenance; and fleet management.

In November 2019 the Santa Monica City Council voted to extend the Pilot, which they cited as enabling over 2.6 million trips on shared mobility devices over the previous year. The extension through May 2020 will pave the way for a second pilot program with revised regulations that facilitate greater customer reliability and affordability, and more effectively achieve safety outcomes. These Pilot results are encouraging as Santa Monica seeks to further advance access to and use of sustainable modes, while also reducing congestion.

Conclusion

Micromobility devices, even when well managed, can present challenges. The cultural shift among Santa Monica residents and visitors to sustainable modes like shared micromobility is a long-term challenge with no quick solutions.

User education and safety remain challenges for Santa Monica. The initial phase of the Pilot deployed public education and signage around micromobility safety; the city released a video focused on safe e-scooter use, and created designated no-ride zones, such as the Santa Monica Pier. The city also formed the Shared Mobility Community Advisory Committee, made up of mobility advocates, subject-matter experts, and residents to examine challenges and provide suggestions to improve the Pilot program.

Maintaining equitable access to the public right-of-way for all users also presented a challenge. To ensure all can navigate safely, Santa Monica created shared mobility parking zones, shown on an iterative map, to keep shared micromobility devices off sidewalks and personal property when not in use. The city, per their agreement with device operators, also maintains the right to cite and impound unauthorized or unlawfully operated devices.

In hindsight, the city believes their solicitation and evaluation approach to micromobility was more effective than ad hoc permitting. Soliciting specific proposals from micromobility operators enabled the city to not only receive more detailed data and information on the operation of the devices from the outset, but also enabled a framework for operation and a regulatory environment that prioritizes the safety of all roadway users. As this new mode evolves, and as new riders continue to adjust to the new mode, the city is attempting to manage residents’ expectations about enforcement and success. Santa Monica acknowledges the necessity of experimentation and evolving regulations, and communicates this both within municipal departments as well as with the public and external stakeholders.

As Santa Monica evaluates ways to improve emerging modes of shared micromobility, the city will continue to work towards enhancing access, safety, and stakeholder engagement around micromobility. Based on its experience through the Pilot process, the city suggests that other municipalities approaching this topic establish clear rules of engagement, and focus on building collaborative relationships with the private industry micromobility operators from the outset.