COULD ECONOMICS YIELD A SOLUTION?

Flipping the Bird at pedestrians in the Triad?

By now nearly everyone has seen, and possibly tripped over, the latest development in urban transportation: rental bicycles and stand-up electric scooters. In Greensboro, Lime Bikes are everywhere, and Bird scooters will soon be back on the streets.

Bird scooters showed up in Greensboro and Winston-Salem over the summer. All of a sudden, people were riding them all over the place, cluttering sidewalks and public spaces. Photos appeared on social media along with disapproving comments.

When a representative of Bird Rides Inc., told the Greensboro City Council that the company’s business model is to deposit scooters in a city before getting permits or even talking to local governments, you could almost hear council members’ frowns. Officials in both cities have scrambled to react to the new reality. In recent weeks, Winston-Salem has banned Bird scooters, and Greensboro, after a brief ban of its own, passed an ordinance regulating them.

The Greensboro ordinance sets up a permitting process. It restricts scooter use to streets with speed limits of 35 mph or less and says they can only be parked in the pedestrian and green zones of the sidewalk and must be parked upright. The city has the right to remove the scooters from the right of way if they interfere with pedestrian or vehicular traffic. However, it’s not clear how those provisions would be practically enforced.

And that’s a problem. One of the main policy challenges created by electric scooters, and bicycles for that matter, is the cluttering of public spaces. No doubt it’s possible for the police to work out a system with Bird Rides that lets police identify riders who leave scooters on sidewalks. But there’s got to be a better way, right?

Bird Rides’ approach is to use freelance chargers, or “Bird hunters,” people who drive around and collect scooters and recharge them overnight. Bird Rides pays them a fee per charged scooter. It’s not a bad first step, but it doesn’t prevent used scooters from cluttering sidewalks during the day.

So let’s take a step back. Why don’t people who rent cars leave them sitting on the side of the road? Because they’d keep paying the rental fee until the car is returned to the rental agency. Why not apply the same economic incentive to scooter rentals?

Currently, Bird riders pay $1 per ride plus a fee based either on time or mileage. Suppose the city requires Bird to charge riders for the time of the ride in such a way that (and this is the key) riders keep paying until they return the scooters to a company rack or charging station. If a rider leaves a scooter on the street, he or she would pay Bird Rides for the time until someone clicked it into a Bird rack. It gives the rider a clear incentive to return it to the rack to keep the fee from rising.

Bird Rides would have to provide a network of racks to satisfy the requirement, but this is how bicycle-sharing programs work in some cities. And it would mostly—perhaps entirely—solve the problem of scooters cluttering our sidewalks.

One catch involves “last-mile” transportation. If you take the bus home from work, a Bird scooter might be how you get from the bus stop to your house or apartment. If this is the primary reason to have scooters, then we might just have to tolerate them cluttering our sidewalks and neighborhoods. But if the main purpose is to facilitate transportation in specified areas such as downtowns, a little economics could go a long way.