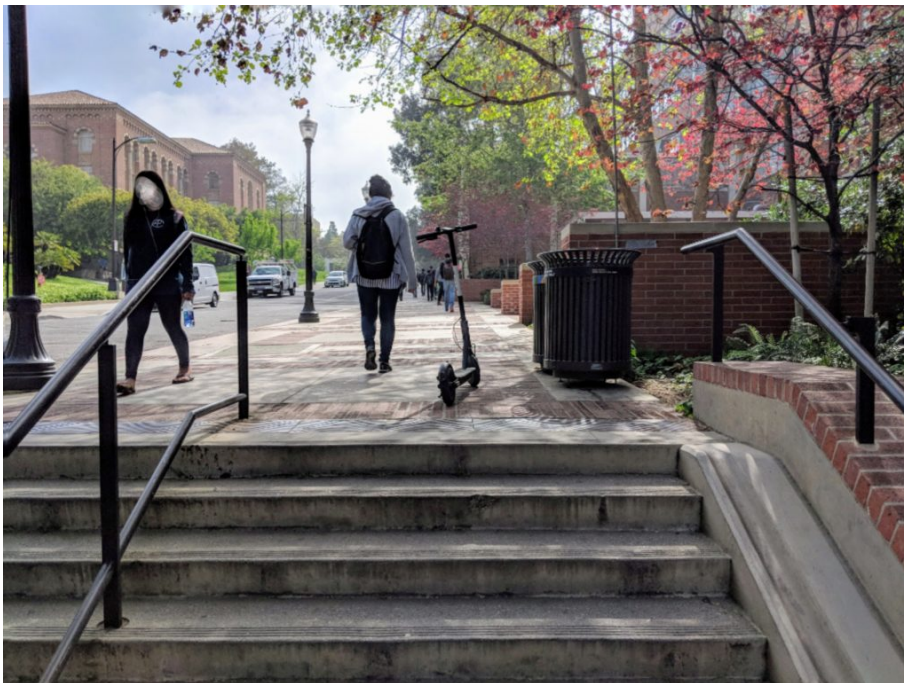


If you live in a major city on the West Coast or in handful of cities on the East Coast, you probably have an opinion on the electric scooters that have been dropped haphazardly onto your local streets and sidewalks. And it's probably not a positive one. But I'm here to tell you why scooters might just get us to our climate change goals, and reduce pedestrian fatalities at the same time.

Like many of you, my first reaction to the flocks of [Bird scooters](#) dropped onto [UCLA's campus](#) in January of this year was unadulterated hatred. My very first sighting was a scooter screaming past me on the sidewalk only to slam on the brakes to narrowly avoid careening directly into a pedestrian. Sidewalks and building entrances looked like graveyards for abandoned scooters, creating massive accessibility barriers. They were everywhere, a 21st century iteration of Hitchcock's *The Birds*. I took to photographing the most annoying scooter parking jobs:



Bird scooter blocking a sidewalk on UCLA's campus (April 2018)

But a few weeks ago, I talked to [CNN Business](#) about whether Los Angeles was neglecting its climate change obligations by imposing regulations on the number and operation of electric scooters in the city. I pointed out that redesigning our streets to be more friendly to non-vehicular forms of transportation (walking, cycling, and yes, **scooting**) had to be a key part of any plan to reduce our carbon emissions.

Was I now (*gasp*) **pro-scooter**? What had changed?

For one, I'd been converted by smart writers and urbanists like Alissa Walker at Curbed who have correctly reframed the issue to focus on [our poorly designed streets](#). Rather than blaming scooter riders (scooterists?) for riding on the sidewalk, why not look askance at our flawed street design that prioritizes cars to the exclusion of all other modes of transportation?

This summer, City Councilmember Paul Koretz penned a [ludicrous](#) Letter to the Editor in the LA Times defending his decision to introduce a ban on scooters and decrying the danger to pedestrians from the scooter "infestation." (This, of course, would be the same City Councilmember who has personally [blocked](#) adding new bike lanes to Westwood Boulevard near UCLA's campus, and just last year called for [banning all bikes](#) from that same street.) StreetsBlogLA had [the perfect rebuttal](#). If you replaced references to scooting with driving, Koretz's letter made a whole lot more sense:

Every day my staff receives complaints about ~~riders not wearing~~ helmets **texting while driving**, ~~riding on the sidewalk~~ **driving in bike lanes**, being too young **intoxicated**, and even ~~riding two on a scooter~~ **driving without wearing seatbelts**, all in violation of state law. Pedestrians are having to jump out of the way and ~~cars~~ **responsible drivers** have to swerve to avoid ~~them~~ **other drivers**, not always successfully, leading to ~~injuries~~ **244 of my fellow Angelenos killed each year in traffic violence, including 135 pedestrians**.

Screenshot from StreetsBlogLA (Fixed Your Times E-Scooter Infestation Letter For You, Councilmember Koretz)

Now, [a class action lawsuit](#) has been filed against Bird, Lime, and other scooter companies, claiming that "scores (if not hundreds) of riders and pedestrians and members of the public have suffered, are continuing to suffer and will continue to suffer egregious and avoidable injuries and damage to their person and property" as a result of scooters.

But like Paul Koretz's letter, this lawsuit misses the point. What's really responsible for the most pedestrian deaths? It's not scooters. The real culprit is poor street design prioritizing cars, which have been killing pedestrians in record numbers. 134 pedestrians were killed by Los Angeles drivers just last year, [a 15 year high](#). [Traffic collisions](#) are now the **leading**

cause of death for children in Los Angeles. And the county is [regularly named](#) the worst in the country for cycling thanks to 180 cyclist deaths in the last 5 years (a higher total in Los Angeles County than all but three states in that same time period).

Coincidentally, the best measures to address these safety concerns *also* will help us meet our climate change goals: **by getting cars off the road**. City Councilmember Paul Buscaino agrees, and in a rebuttal to Councilmember Koretz in [the LA Daily News](#), points out that the best way to reduce traffic fatalities is by getting cars off the road, not by over-regulating alternatives means of transportation:

[W]hile I get the concern for safety on scooters, it strikes me as misplaced to blame the scooters rather than the 4,000-pound steel machines that are actually hurting people.

...

We need to reduce traffic congestion not by building more traffic lanes, but by reducing car trips and that means creating multi-modal options that make public transportation available to more of our population.

Imagine if our cities were filled with streets that prioritized non-vehicular modes of transit: [repaired and widened sidewalks](#), [parklets](#), traffic lights with [leading pedestrian intervals](#), [scramble crosswalks](#), [protected bike and scooter lanes](#), [curb extensions](#) and [bollards](#) to slow down traffic. Los Angeles (along with many other cities) already has a plan to implement these kinds of “road diets” throughout the city: the [Vision Zero](#) program, which has the goal of eliminating all traffic deaths by 2025. And CARB has already published significant research demonstrating that these kinds of strategies to promote [walking](#) and [cycling](#) have a measurable impact on reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT).



Rendering of the MyFig project to redesign Figueroa Street in Downtown Los Angeles

Reducing VMT is a key part of any plan to reduce our transportation emissions, now the largest single sector of carbon emissions. CARB is calling for a substantial reduction in total light-duty VMT as part of the state's 2016 [Mobile Source Strategy](#) — setting a goal of 15% reduction in total light-duty VMT by 2050 versus the currently expected baseline. Without increased focus on strategies to reduce VMT, [CARB predicts](#) “growth in VMT [will] outpace[] vehicle fuel efficiency improvements” by 2030. In other words, even in the most optimistic scenarios for low- and zero-emission vehicle sales, carbon emissions from vehicles will continue to grow in the near term because people keep driving more and more, increasing VMT.

The IPCC's new report indicates that our emissions must peak no later than 2020 to avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change. This means that the actions we take in the next 15 months are crucial. We're certainly not going to get to 100% ZEV adoption by 2020, so focusing on VMT strategies like road diets that can be implemented relatively quickly are absolutely critical to reducing our near term transportation emissions. (See also Alissa Walker's [excellent new piece](#) today on successful VMT reduction measures in Sacramento and Davis)

So here's where I get back to scooters. Bike lanes in Los Angeles have not traditionally been met with great fanfare. Just in the last year, multiple road diets that involved trading car lanes for bike lanes were [reversed](#), one after Westside residents threatened to [recall](#) City Councilmember Mike Bonin for his role in approving the bike lanes. The new protected bike lanes on [Figueroa](#) and [Spring](#) streets downtown are [regularly blocked](#) by parked cars.

But now scooterists are a rapidly growing new constituency using Los Angeles roads. Bird alone reportedly had **15,000 scooters** in use across the city before [a convoluted cap](#) imposed by the Los Angeles City Council went into effect. And government representatives have been hearing from this new constituency. When Santa Monica was considering its regulations, scooter companies banded together for a "[Day Without A Scooter](#)" protest and coordinated riders to email city leaders and testify at the public hearing (Santa Monica's Planning & Community Development Department would [eventually approve](#) a scooter pilot program). Likewise, the Los Angeles City Council received [more than 2,300 letters of support](#) while debating scooter ban versus cap (the Council would eventually approve a cap rather than an outright ban).

It's my hope that this newly engaged constituency, some appearing to be first-time participants in local government planning, will use this muscle to fight back against the car-centric voices that have dominated local politics for so long. Cyclists have certainly been drowned out, failing to push back in any meaningful way to the public outcry against road diets on the Westside. After years of stagnation and outright backsliding on bike lanes in the city, I take it as an encouraging step in the other direction that city leaders in both Santa Monica and Los Angeles have voted to maintain, or even expand, the number of scooters on our streets.

That's not to say there aren't legitimate concerns about scooters. Companies have been rightly criticized for [failing to share data](#), making it difficult to determine whether scooter rides are displacing car trips or walking/cycling/transit trips. Some [posit](#) that because the average scooter trip is just over a mile, they are more likely to be displacing walking trips. But given that [the majority](#) of trips less than one mile in the US are driven, I think it's more likely scooter trips are displacing car trips and helping make last mile connections from transit than displacing walking trips. There are also concerns about their carbon neutrality given the [cutthroat underground market](#) that has developed in which people **drive** around collecting scooters to charge them overnight (and new plans for [doorstep delivery](#) of scooters). The requirement to have a driver's license, credit card, and smartphone in order to rent a scooter, and the disproportionate numbers of scooters in places like Santa Monica versus lower income areas, also raise serious equity and accessibility issues (some of which are now being addressed as cities begin to regulate scooters). On the other hand, scooters

are a cheap alternative to Uber and Lyft that [could benefit](#) neighborhoods poorly served by public transit as a last-mile connection (and one that has the added benefit of not polluting the neighborhood with more fossil fuel combustion).

FULL DISCLOSURE: the author has yet to actually ride a scooter, preferring the dependability of her road bike. But that just means you can trust me as an unbiased observer, right?