

How bad is Boston traffic? It's on the sidewalk now.

As the micro-mobility movement gains popularity, sidewalks have become a free-for-all with powered bikes, electric scooters, and those one-wheeled things. But where are people supposed to go?

By [Beth Teitel](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 6, 2023, 6:05 a.m.

Even by Boston Driver standards, Boston Drivers have gotten out of control. Not content to rule the roads, they are now determined to command the sidewalks, too, or at least their mini-me's are.

Fast, annoyed, and passing on whichever side they darn well please, they're riding electric scooters, bikes, [e-bikes](#), motorized bikes, electric unicycles — weaving in and out of pedestrian traffic, often at speeds the T can only dream about.

"It's almost like a zero sum game," said Jake Wilson, a councilor at large in Somerville. "So many people seem very self-centered in their approach to getting where they're going."

What? I can't hear you with my noise-canceling AirPods on.

In the North End, Tallak Meland, a systems engineer from Washington, D.C., in town on a work trip last month, encountered so many vehicles on the sidewalks that he found himself nervously checking over his shoulder before stopping or making a turn. "As if I'm on the road," he said.

On the temporary bridge between the North End and Charlestown, bright orange signs tell cyclists to dismount and walk their bikes on the sidewalk. Yeah, right!

"If they're polite they ring their bells, otherwise they just breeze right past me," said a friend who commutes on foot over the bridge. She's gone from swearing under her breath to outright

swearing. “I don’t like who I’ve become,” she said.

In Back Bay the other day, a guy riding a motorized bike honked at me — on the sidewalk. When I jumped out of the impromptu fast lane, he honked at the next pedestrian.

On one hand: what the heck?

On the other: We want people to use lighter, more environmentally friendly forms of transportation, but too often they have nowhere safe to travel. What are people who need to get somewhere supposed to do?

The T has turned against us. Traffic is killing our souls and the climate. The bike lane situation has certainly improved, but there’s a long way to go. The micro-mobility movement has created an army of adult scooter riders, some riding what look like muscle scooters at speeds that can hit 20 miles per hour or more. Bluebikes mean that tourists who once walked obliviously on the sidewalks are now doing the same thing on wheels. Our existing infrastructure isn’t meeting today’s needs, and it’s all spilling over onto our sidewalks.

“There’s a ripple effect,” said Miles Howard, a journalist who mapped an unofficial [27-mile walking trail in Boston](#). Cyclists and scooter riders are bullied on the roads by cars and trucks, he said, and in turn, do the same thing to pedestrians on the sidewalks.

“It’s unfortunate,” he said. “In theory, we should all be in this together.”

In Somerville, the sidewalks are so attractive to cyclists that more than a decade ago, the city stenciled “no bikes” symbols on curb cuts in several business districts. But even so, the city’s mobility director, Brad Rawson, is empathetic to the riders who end up there.

“Cities have an obligation to keep people safe by providing separated bike facilities on busy streets,” he said. “How can we blame somebody for riding on the sidewalk if they’re worried about getting run over by a giant pickup truck on Highland Avenue?” he said.

As transportation options grow, so too does confusion. Some pedestrians mistakenly think bikes shouldn’t be on the sidewalks at all, for example.

Here's the deal: Under Massachusetts law, human-powered bicycles can be ridden on the sidewalks outside of business districts when it's necessary for the safety of the cyclist, said Jascha Franklin-Hodge, chief of streets for Boston. E-bikes and motorized bikes are not allowed on sidewalks.

But electric scooters are not clearly defined in state law, he said, calling it a gray area. "However," he added, "as with e-bikes, the city believes they should not be operated on sidewalks."

Some of the worst offenders, Franklin-Hodge noted, are delivery food drivers, who speed along on motorized bikes. But, he added, "doing delivery in a car is not a good option either."

So where are e-bikes and scooters supposed to go? E-bikes can be operated in bike lanes and in regular traffic, just like bikes, Franklin-Hodge said, adding that because electric scooters aren't well-defined in Massachusetts law, "it's a bit unclear what their legal standing is."

As frustrating as the sidewalk situation is, Franklin-Hodge and bike advocates all emphasize — and emphasize again — that cars pose a far greater danger to pedestrians. "While a bike can still injure a person, the vast, vast majority of our serious injuries and deaths are a result of walking and being hit by a car," he said.

The state and many local jurisdictions are building new or additional safe travel spaces for people using different modes of transportation, said Galen Mook, executive director of the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition. But, he said, the immediate goal is "humanity."

"We need to remind people that no matter how slowly someone is going, they are still a person."

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