Scootergate Explained

Expanded use of e-scooters and motorized skateboards across campus has caused concern in the UNH and Durham community, prompting the need for updated safety regulations

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Beginning in September, the University of New Hampshire’s “Monthly Updates,” courtesy of President James Dean, have all had a common reminder: to please take care while walking, riding and driving on Main Street.

While this may seem like common knowledge, there is a reason for the recurring message. It largely stems from the surge in use of electronic motorized devices, like e-scooters, and the subsequent uptick in near-traffic accidents around campus, according to UNH’s Student Senate. The issue has raised flags for both the UNH and Durham police departments, as well as the Durham community at large.

“The issue is: how do we humanize the problem, set realistic expectations of what it means to ride and how do we create a consistent enforcement pattern?” said Student Body President Joseph Skehan.

The dilemma, he explained, centers around conflicting rules and regulations by the Durham and UNH police departments. UNH police are mandated by New Hampshire but also instructed by the town of Durham. This gives them the power to follow state legislation and enforce Durham’s town code at will.

“That’s why UNH police is saying they can understand why a student would need to use the sidewalk (with a scooter) to get to a class, while Durham police is saying you’re not allowed to be on the sidewalk and a ticket is warranted,” Skehan said.

The Student Senate passed a resolution on Nov. 5 to call for the town and both police departments to ramp up the conversation. It also expresses the general questions posed by students while still speaking to both police departments’ expectations of Durham residents.

A focal point of the resolution debunked a common campus misconception.
“We were under the impression that e-scooters were given to athletes directly from the university. This was something we brought up to President Dean during our meeting,” said Kyra Zamborsky, Student Senate’s Judicial Affairs Chair. “He said that was a complete rumor and wanted us to dispel that. There is no storage locker with e-scooters waiting to be passed out.”

Zamborsky stated that President Dean acknowledged the fact that athletes’ tend to utilize these devices more than the average student, and attributed this to their schedules, in which they are expected to attend multiple practices a day, often during times when Wildcat Transit is not running.

“These athletes have also asked for parking accommodations [for scooters], in a lot during practices, but the university said no,” Skehan said. “So, it’s not surprising that they find these alternative routes to bring them closer to where they need to be.”

This problem is not just relevant to UNH. Action against e-scooters have taken place nationwide, making the fear of a blanket ban reasonable: just before the start of the 2023 fall semester, Yale announced that electric vehicles would no longer be allowed in or on any University residential properties. Yale’s statement comes less than two years after Columbia University’s ban in 2021.

“The trend of these cities that can't figure it out is a blanket ban,” Skehan said, acknowledging that he and the student senate believe scooter-riders and pedestrians can coexist at UNH. “Traveling on these e-scooters is realistically what commuting to class is going to continue to look like in the future. We want people to be able to take advantage of these new technologies and do so safely.”

UNH dining halls have already prohibited e-scooters from their premises, attributing it to the devices' lithium batteries, which have been known to become a fire hazard.

The solution is a culture shift, Skehan said. Understanding motivations of reckless riders will be key in this process and hopefully lead to the detangling of scooters and the potential for danger. The aim isn't a full-scale crackdown and selective bans, he noted, and he hopes that continued advocacy will bring change.

“It’s not the goal of our police department to live in an authoritarian state. They don’t want that,” said Skehan. “They told us there's no value in enforcing their way out of this. They could pull over every scooter, but that's not going to work.”