“Early in July, Oakland’s Department of Transportation issued permits to four companies renting a total of 3,500 electric scooters in the city. Those companies — Bird, Lime, Clevr, and Lyft — will be required to enforce rules against sidewalk riding and unpermitted parking, and to eventually provide alternative payment options besides just smartphones.

“Meanwhile, with just 1,250 of the devices serving a much larger population in San Francisco — not to mention an even larger commuter population — scooters are less reliable, and virtually none are available outside of denser neighborhoods close to downtown. Not surprisingly, scooter usage in the city shows little signs of expanding beyond the tech community.

“How did San Francisco get transportation equity so wrong? And what has Oakland learned from the larger city’s mistakes?

“Oakland’s permit application expressly forbids scooter companies from restricting their operations to ‘certain geographical areas of the City’ without written permission. Additionally, each permit requires that 50 percent of all scooters be allocated to ‘communities of concern’ — a regionwide measure of racial and economic disparities outlined by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

“That stands in stark contrast to San Francisco, where scooters are allowed in less than a third of the city. For instance, according to 2017 census data, the city’s Bayview and Mission Districts feature three times as many bicycle commuters as the rest of the city overall, but scooters are still not available to rent in those areas.

“Oakland’s Department of Transportation noted that its new limit of 3,500 scooters was set not in response to complaints, but to correspond to its anticipated staffing capacity for enforcing permit requirements.

“Still, equitable scooter distribution remains an uphill battle. Activists fear that current measures can’t truly ensure an equal distribution of discounted scooters in disadvantaged neighborhoods. For instance, critics say the ‘communities of concern’ measure is too broad, because 55 percent of Oakland’s total land area falls under that classification — including downtown Oakland. Oakland’s Department of Transportation hopes to refine this measure, which is intended to be ‘representative of Oakland as a whole.’ ”

Read the full article here.