

Startup puts a Charge into e-scooter legalization

Company has deals to put docking stations in garages

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Startup company Charge has a plan to help New York avoid the roadblocks faced by e-scooters in other cities—if the devices ever make it here, that is.

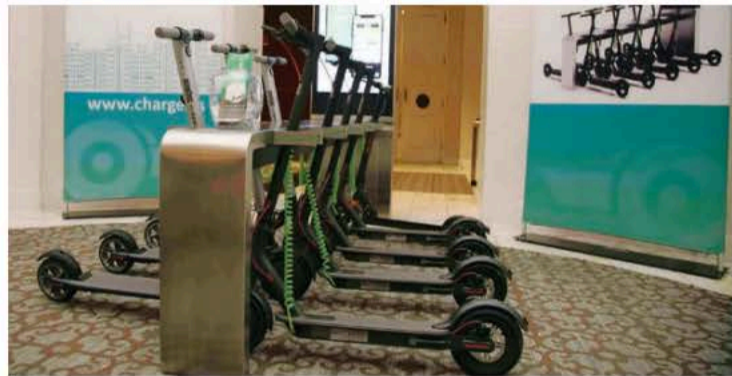
If e-scooters and e-bikes are approved to operate in New York, Charge says, its stations could pro-

vide docks for 10,000 scooters and bikes throughout the city. The company unveiled its docking model—designed by global engineering firm Arup—Friday during the Regional Plan Association's assembly in Midtown.

Charge is taking aim at the most significant obstacle for e-scooter and bike-share companies: the literal blocking of roads and side-

walks. It's a consequence of the dockless model, which has been popularized by companies such as scooter-focused Bird and bike operator Lime. That model allows riders to hop on a scooter or bike when they need it and leave it just about anywhere once they don't. But scooters have piled up on

See **STARTUP** on page 4



BUCK ENNIS

STARTUP

FROM PAGE 3

sidewalks from Boston to Los Angeles—and so have complaints from residents.

Andrew Fox, co-founder and CEO of Charge, called the issue of e-scooters strewn about on streets and sidewalks the business model's Achilles' heel. His docking stations could help persuade state lawmakers to support legislation legalizing e-scooters—which is expected to be introduced next month in the state Legislature.

Deals in place

"This is a problem around the world," Fox said. "Our thought was, Let's build a docking and charging station that would pass the litmus test of municipalities and help accelerate the advancement of micromobility instead of seeing its demise as people get frustrated by scooters thrown around the street."

Charge plans to launch electric charging docks for e-scooters and electric pedal-assist bicycles in close to 400 locations throughout the city. The company has negotiated deals to lease space in privately owned garages and commercial buildings to host the docks, which would recharge and shelter devices from e-scooter and e-bike operators such as Bird, Bolt, Lime and Spin. The docks could offer a new stream of share-economy revenue to garage owners, who face a loss of customers when Manhattan congestion pricing takes effect in two years and who already have seen their business eroded by ride-hailing companies, which circulate vehicles rather than park them. Fox and other Charge employees have spent the past few months signing long-term deals with early partners including LAZ Parking, Imperial Parking, Big City Parking and Little Man Parking.



CHARGING AHEAD: Fox and colleague Dan Waldman are looking to roll out an e-scooter system in New York.

Fox suggested that five years ago, garages were so flush with business that they wouldn't dream of sacrificing spots for two-wheeled personal-mobility devices. He can count on support from urban transportation wonks, whose influence in the city has grown during the past two mayoral administrations. They rave about how 15 scooters can be stationed in a single parking spot. Some have called for some on-street parking to be similarly repurposed.

It is not clear when the scooters and bikes might arrive in the city. Gov. Andrew Cuomo had included in his executive budget a provision letting localities allow the devices, but it was scrapped from the final budget approved April 1. The City Council has considered the idea, but Mayor Bill de Blasio has insisted it be dealt with at the state level.

Opposition is said to be greatest among politicians from Manhattan, where New Yorkers and tourists navigate sidewalks that seem to get more crowded every year. An obstacle course of tipped-over scooters could render walking through Times Square the pedestrian equivalent of driving crosstown at rush hour.

Public relations

Fox, who said Charge is planning to bring its docking stations to cities across the country, is crafting a multipronged advocacy campaign. He has retained Suri Kasirer, the city's top-grossing lobbyist, to hone Charge's messaging and political outreach, as well as Sal Cassano, a former FDNY commissioner in the Bloomberg administration, to work on safety issues.

The CEO is quick to point out that every element of his docking stations is manufactured in Long Island City, where he has an agreement with Boyce Technologies.

"We are going to check every box that we have to check," Fox said in an interview in front of a docking station that he had planted in the networking area of the Regional Plan Association event at the Grand Hyatt.

But in New York, even the best-planned campaigns often don't come to fruition. Not only Albany but the de Blasio administration figures to be circumspect. The city's Transportation Department has limited dockless bicycles to pilot projects in a few neighborhoods. Skeptics circulated photos of e-bikes piled up by the thousands in China, where some programs went awry.

"WE ARE GOING TO CHECK EVERY BOX WE HAVE TO CHECK" TO SUCCEED IN NEW YORK

And although the administration last year decided pedal-assist e-bikes are all right, it continues to confiscate e-bikes that can zip around at 20 mph without the rider moving a muscle. It could see e-scooters not only as a threat to pedestrians but to users.

Another issue is how users of shared, dockless e-scooters and e-bikes can be persuaded to lodge them in garages—which would remove the convenience of docklessness. One possibility is to reward riders—or anyone—for putting a device in its place, like the way street pickers are for returning nickel-deposit cans and bottles.

Charge's display was adjacent to a Lime booth with two of its signature green scooters—where Brett Swanson, Lime's community affairs manager, said he was optimistic the Legislature would approve the devices before adjourning in late June.

The proximity of the Lime and Charge setups was no coincidence, but what happened next was. As Fox returned to the lunch portion of the daylong gathering, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti happened to be talking about urban mobility trends in an on-stage interview with Janette Sadik-Khan, the Bloomberg administration's transportation commissioner. "In my city," the mayor said, "electric scooters are on every corner."

Fox, tickled by the timing, turned to a reporter and gave the look of a CEO who feels his product is arriving at just the right moment. ■

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