

From... **THE SPOON**

Some Cities Are Pushing Back on Sidewalk Robots. Here Are Some Possible Ideas For Peaceful Coexistence.



by Michael Wolf

AUGUST 3, 2022 FILED UNDER:

LINK: <https://thespoon.tech/some-cities-are-pushing-back-on-sidewalk-robots-here-are-some-possible-solutions-for-peaceful-coexistence/>



While sidewalk delivery robots promise to help reduce carbon emissions and car traffic on cluttered city streets, not everyone is excited about them, including one city traffic administrator in the Yaffa municipality of Tel Aviv.

According to an article published this week in the English-language edition of Israel newspaper Haaretz, Ofir Cohen, the director of transportation, traffic and parking for Yaffa, sent a letter in early July to Israel's Transportation Ministry to convey his belief that sidewalk robots from Russian tech company Yandex were a nuisance to pedestrians.

From the letter:

“One of the ways we give priority to pedestrians is by limiting bicycle traffic on sidewalks,” Cohen wrote. “It’s understood that the robots, which are about 80 centimeters [31 inches] wide, could be a potential real nuisance for pedestrians on the sidewalks although we have also been impressed by the [robots’] smart-navigation capabilities.”

And then, on Sunday, less than a month after Cohen sent his letter, the municipality notified the Transportation Ministry it was terminating Yandex’s pilot program.

Cohen said he believed the robots should be removed from sidewalks because they made them a much less useable public resource. He also expressed concern about the impact of robot traffic on low-mobility pedestrians as well as the elderly and children.

These are essentially the same reasons that the city council of Toronto decided to issue a ban on the use of sidewalk robots late last year. The city’s accessibility advisory committee proposed the ban, expressing concern that the robots would be hazardous to those with low mobility and impaired vision, as well as elderly people and children.

“Sidewalks are an important publicly-funded public resource, created for pedestrians to safely use,” David Lepofsky, the chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance, wrote in a letter to the Council. “Their safe use should not be undermined for such things as private companies’ delivery robots.”

My guess is these rulings – which followed San Francisco’s ban on sidewalk robots in 2018 – will become more and more common as sidewalk robots go from trials to wider deployments. Because of this, it’s probably worth exploring ways to accommodate the increased use of robotic delivery vehicles and pedestrians.

One idea is simply to set limits on fleet size and traffic. In cities with lighter pedestrian traffic, having limits to ensure the sidewalks don’t become overburdened with robots makes sense. Another is to continue to push for guidelines and safety measures for robot fleets on pedestrian walkways. Guidelines put into place during the Toronto trial included a 6 MPH speed limit,

mandatory insurance for robot companies, audible signals, reflectors with lights, brakes, and a requirement that robots yield to pedestrians. I can see these being expanded further and putting the legal and financial burden on robotic delivery companies to ensure pedestrians are not obstructed in any way.

Finally, I can also imagine cities exploring robot travel lanes, similar to what you might see for bikes on streets and on the sidewalks themselves. And who knows, beyond that, we might even see some of them consider sending the robots underground into tubes.

What do you think? Are there other ways you can envision pedestrians coexisting with sidewalk delivery bots? Drop us a line and let us know or let us know in the comments.

LINK: <https://thespoon.tech/some-cities-are-pushing-back-on-sidewalk-robots-here-are-some-possible-solutions-for-peaceful-coexistence/>