

Free public passenger transport: an appealing but useless idea with underestimated perverse effects

In 2012, the Mayor of the Estonian capital city, Tallinn, decided that local public transport would become for free for residents in the city only, but not for people living in surrounding areas, neither for visitors. In 2015, three years later, figures show a frustrating and disappointing result in terms of ridership, since public transport system has just achieved a slight increase of 7% of more passengers.

The European Passengers' Federation (EPF) says that the proper public policy for achieving a shift from car to sustainable modes of transport is restricting car capacity and use in urban agglomerations, while, at the same time, investing in capacity, quality, speed and reliability of public passenger transport. On short and middle terms, free public transport is detrimental to community's and users' interests. Free public passenger transport does not exist: transport has to be paid either by the customer, the taxpayer or indirect beneficiaries, or by a mix of those.

The Baltic experience in Tallinn – where in counterpart the population accepted a significant increase of local taxes - joins its ranks to other scarce but interesting experiences of free passenger transport in Europe. Bologna (1973, Italy) and Hasselt (1997, Belgium) were two more successful experiments than the Baltic one. In those cases, there was initial significant increase of passengers but after 3 to 4 years, figures were stabilized. Experiences were stopped in both cities. But in both cases, apart from the gratuitous transport system, there were significant investments (e.g. bus fleet doubled in Bologna). Both experiences showed that a free transport policy may be interesting to be applied for a short period of time for boosting public transport use. But this worked under the condition that big investments and traffic priorities for buses (dedicated lanes or corridors, preferences at traffic lights, bus rapid transit system...), and additional actions to control or reduce private car usage (parking policy, traffic restrictions) were made. Free public transport cannot replace political will and courage.

Apart from these cases, other experiences have been made all over Europe, but generally in **small cities with a very low number of passengers** and very low levels of passenger revenue or a poor cost/revenue ration, and results were insignificant, as free transport attracted users from non-motorized modes (cyclists, pedestrians,..): free public transport stimulates mobility of “captive users” only.

Free public transport is not appropriate **in cities with a mature transport system**. In the short to medium term, it can only lead to offer and investment restrictions. Priority has to be given to significant investments which can cause massive behaviour changes among car drivers.

In public passenger transport, today's challenge is **gaining new solvent customers**, i.e. car drivers to ensure the necessary modal shift in cities and urban regions. To this category of clients, service quality and reliability is the most important expectation, not price: car use total price in urban areas is in average three times more expensive than using public transport. As for people with low level of resources, as well as for students, elderly people, etc., **social inclusion can be ensured through social tariffs** and financial support from competent bodies.

Considering the context of growing scarcity of public funds, customers' contributions, even though low, provide additional money to be invested in public passenger transport developments. In addition, the principle of **"copayment" by passengers** justifies from them **requirements for quality standards**.

In limited and specific situations, free public transport may help in a temporarily way along with other measures to promote car usage reduction and modal shift: in this case, this is more an element of the "marketing mix" than a part of a long term mobility policy.

EPF is therefore critical to the free public transport principle which does not appear as an efficient tool to promote sustainable mobility. What customers and citizens are expecting from their political representatives is a long term vision on urban mobility together with political courage to implement effective measures with a view to livable and well-functioning cities.

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