

1. Videos

Why are free public transport initiatives gaining ground?

By
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In France, as is the case around the world, a growing number of cities have opted to launch free public transport initiatives. Why did they decide to offer free public transport? How do they finance it? Maxime Huré, lecturer in political science at the University of Perpignan, shares his views on the topic

On 1st September 2018, the urban community of Dunkirk will become the largest urban area in France to implement free public transport for its 200,000 inhabitants. Dunkirk's free public transport project is not the only one to be launched in France. Other initiatives have also been trialled, notably in Niort last year, in Aubagne in 2009; the resounding implementation, in Chateauroux in 2001, and even the first French urban area to adopt free public transport, Compiègne, back in 1975.

What does free public transport mean?

Free public transport is a policy launched by cities that decide to run their transport networks at no cost to users. A total of 36 free public transport networks currently exist in France and a number of trials are also underway. For example, a number of cities use free shuttle buses. Paris and Grenoble also trialled free public transport initiatives on days where pollution reached peak levels.

As such, a diverse range of free public transport initiatives have been trialled. Free public transport can also be offered to certain population groups, such as students or the elderly. However, today in France there are 36 free transport networks and they are often implemented in medium-sized cities - Dunkirk, the largest urban area to offer free public transport, has a population size of 200,000. These are medium-sized cities in which public transport systems are primarily composed of bus networks, with the exception of Aubagne, whose public transport system includes a tram network.

Other trials have also taken place in Europe and globally. Tallinn, in Estonia, is of particular significance. The city implemented free public transport in 2013 and has 440,000 inhabitants. However, other trials came before that of Tallinn, notably in Belgium, Italy and Bologna in the 1970s, and also Germany. There are also around forty small and medium-sized cities in America that have adopted free public transport initiatives.

How does the financing of public transport work?

In public transport funding, there's a budget for operating costs, and a budget for investments. Generally speaking, the investment budget is entirely, or almost entirely, financed by public funds, public

subsidies.

The budget for operating the network is split into 3 distinct parts: first, public funds, which partly finance operation of the network via subsidies. Second, there is a transport tax specific to businesses that goes towards funding network operation. The third part is supported by users who participate in funding via tickets or travel passes.

It is important to clarify that the user-funded strand is in fact partly financed by businesses, since businesses cover 50% of the cost of travel passes for their employees. Moreover, the user-financed part, in France and European networks in any case, is steadily declining. It can be seen that, even if the ideal scenario is for users to contribute to around a third of network funding, in reality, even in large cities, the actual figure already falls short of one third. In Lyon, for example, where the network is relatively efficient with a large number of users who pay for their travel, approximately 25% of the operating cost is covered by users.

In cities that have adopted free public transport, user funding largely falls below one third. For example, 9.2% of Dunkirk's public transport network was funded by ticket sales. Below 10% is a relatively low percentage in the overall funding landscape of public transport. It is also one of the reasons behind free public transport initiatives.

Why are an increasing number of cities opting for free public transport initiatives today?

First of all, it is important to clarify that adopting free public transport initiatives is above all a political measure, one that responds to various territorial challenges. For example, in Dunkirk, this could be the reinvigoration of the city centre. For certain German cities, as announced by its government, this could be fighting against atmospheric pollution. For other public transport networks, this could be social issues such as increasing the population's purchasing power. Or it could simply be a matter of responding to economic factors concerning funding and the social use of the network. This means that in certain cities, buses run with practically no passengers. So, rather than lose money on running empty buses, the network is made accessible to as many passengers as possible in the form of free public transport initiatives, in a bid to improve its social utility, and in some form, its economic viability.

Lastly, a number of reasons inherent to free public transport initiatives actually correspond to the promotion of a modal shift; the modal shift from cars to public transport in particular. Stringent policies for vehicles have long been in place in order to encourage a modal shift, in the form of increasing parking costs, and occasionally congestion charges, various taxes, etc. Today it has become apparent that these stringent policies may not be the only option or avenue to follow in order to reduce vehicle traffic. As such, free public transport initiatives are chosen as an incentive measure to really encourage the modal shift.

Another explanation could be linked to the context, which is also evolving, and could even be a paradigm shift in terms of public transport tariffs. It is important to clarify that in the 1970s and 1980s, a number of actors and transport economists and associations campaigned for what we refer to as social tariffs for public transport.

Social tariffs were implemented for individuals with low incomes and the elderly, but it has become apparent that significant limitations accessing social tariffs exist. Notably, some individuals can be so isolated from the job market or certain forms of socialisation that they do not seek out social tariffs. Others do not seek out social tariffs due to complex administrative processes. It has also become apparent that social tariffs came at a cost since specific processes and personnel were implemented in order to run them.

Today we are witnessing a move towards a paradigm shift in which the limitations of social tariffs are taken into consideration. This serves to show us that, ultimately, one of the ways of fighting against

these limitations and attracting individuals facing financial hardship and isolated from transport systems, is to open up the entire public transport network, and so we will potentially witness a paradigm shift, which could also be linked to a paradigm shift within academic research.

This new dynamic in favour of free public transport also gives way to new questions posed within urban research. It is important to be aware that questions concerning transport tariffs have long been analysed by transport economists who are relatively dominant in the academic field of transport. And today, new, more sociological and geographical as well as political science-based approaches have appeared, which focuses more on the effects of the implementation of free public transport in urban lifestyles.

It also concerns responding to a certain number of preconceived ideas that have been conveyed recently concerning free public transport initiatives, notably the fact that adopting free public transport could result in increased damage to and vandalism of public transport networks. Other preconceived ideas are that adopting free public transport could cause issues for future investment (therefore resulting in a deterioration of materials and infrastructure in the long-term), or even that the potential modal shift from cars to buses could be quite limited.

Find the second part of the video “The future of free public transport: Dunkirk today, Paris tomorrow?” on the Forum Vies Mobiles website

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