

Brussels, 3 May 2013

Press release

Is free public transport sustainable? New Covenant of Mayors video in Tallinn

In January 2013, Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, became the largest city in the world to offer free public transport to its residents. Meanwhile, the city of Hasselt, Belgium, which was the first ever to introduce zero-fare public transport in 1997, just stopped the free-of-charge nature of the scheme for budget reasons. Is free public transport sustainable in times of crisis? The Covenant of Mayors just visited Tallinn to enquire.

In only four-month time, about half of the residents of Tallinn have used free public transport, and traffic has fallen by 15% from December 2012 to January 2013 with an increase in public transport use of about 14%. Approximately 7,600 fewer cars enter the city every day, reducing traffic jams and pollution.

“The Tallinn free public transport initiative strongly supports the concept of sustainable mobility. The objective is to encourage people to use public transport and not private vehicles for the short distances in the city. Reducing the use of cars will lead to reduced air and noise pollution for the citizens of Tallinn and bring long-term environmental benefits”, Edgar Savisaar, Mayor of Tallinn.

To cover for the extra costs of running a free public transport, the city counts on the personal income tax from new residents establishing their lives in Tallinn. Since January 2012, the city has already welcome 9,000 (as of April 2013) new residents. Every 1,000 new resident brings a €1 million personal income tax revenue to the administration.

Interestingly there seems to be a correlation between the access to free public transport and the attractiveness of a city. While Tallinn has been attracting new residents, in the past years Hasselt has turned into a tourist destination, becoming Belgium’s fourth biggest commercial center.

“For over 15 years, free buses have been touring the city of Hasselt. Before the implementation of the system, we used to carry some 1,000 paying passengers on our extensive bus network each day. Today, this number has grown thirteen fold. To this date, around 35 million passengers have used the free bus scheme in Hasselt”, Hilde Claes, Mayor of Hasselt.

Unfortunately, due to the financial constraints, this project is being replaced by a policy where only specific target groups are able to use the bus network free of charge. As of now, three audiences have been identified: youngsters until the age of 19, elderly people aged 65+ and everyone who qualifies for any form of social benefits. Everyone else will have to pay a fee of €0,60, which is still considerably lower than in the rest of Belgium.

Will free public transport prove sustainable for Tallinn? Only time will tell.

Watch the video: http://youtu.be/y_wMqviwP7k

The Covenant of Mayors is the mainstream European movement involving local authorities, voluntarily committing to increasing energy efficiency in their territories. To date some 4,500 cities and regions have committed to meet and exceed the European Union 20% CO₂ reduction objective by 2020.

More information: <http://www.eumayors.eu/>

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