
THE QUIET TRANSITION

Europe's Small and Medium- Sized Towns and Cities Lead the Transition Towards Sustainable Mobility

By Marie Urfels

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Policies and practices for the green mobility transition are under way, and yet the car-oriented mobility continues to shape how we plan and experience urban life. Since the mid-20th century, rising car ownership has turned private vehicles into Europe's dominant form of passenger transport, making fuel-based road traffic one of the largest emitters in the sector. With the European Green New Deal, European cities and regions are urged to cut transport-related greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2050 as part of a broader shift towards sustainable, smart, and resilient mobility systems. Despite growing awareness of the problems linked to car-dependent cities - from air pollution and noise to streets designed for parking rather than people - car registrations in Europe have continued to rise [1], and emissions have so far not dropped [2].

The focus of the green mobility transition is disproportionately on larger cities, which also receive support and involvement in this transition through national programmes supporting Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) in developing mobility systems that are inclusive, accessible, climate-resilient, economically viable, and protective of public health. Nevertheless, a number of European frameworks, including the European cohesion policy, the Territorial Agenda 2030, and the European Green Deal, call for a territorial approach to the green mobility transition. This emphasises the creation of fair and just net-zero mobility options for all passengers in

all regions. Yet, a recent evaluation of SUMP since 2013 has shown that capacity and expertise, especially in small and medium-sized cities, remain an issue, as well as the lack of national involvement and support.” [3]

Despite these challenges for small and medium-sized towns and cities (SMSTCs), this article seeks to look beyond the dominant metropolitan focus and draw attention to the quiet mobility transition unfolding in SMSTCs across Europe. Although definitions vary, this article understands SMSTCs as urban settlements with populations between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. What began in Compiègne in 1975 - a town of around 40,000 inhabitants - has since spread across France and beyond: the introduction of fare-free public transport [4]. Globally, such initiatives have grown from 27 documented cases in 2000 to 99 in 2017 [5]. In the following, we highlight the importance and innovative potential of SMSTCs that deserve greater attention in the context of the green mobility transition.

Why we should talk more about SMSTCs

Why are SMSTCs so crucial for sustainability measures, and why do we so rarely talk about their efforts? First of all, they account for a significant share of urban pollution in Europe. According to the OECD Cities in the World study (2020), around 24.2% - roughly one quarter, or 8,350 cities - of Europe's urban population live in SMSTCs with populations of 5,000 to 50,000 inhabitants [6].

Despite this, SMSTCs remain largely underrepresented in academia [7], policy frameworks and public debate [8]. They often fall into a “policy gap”: too small to attract metropolitan attention and too urban to fit into rural agendas. Seen individually, their role in the sustainability transition may appear small, but viewed together, or within their regional networks, it becomes clear that they can be powerful drivers of change.

Recent EU policy initiatives increasingly recognise this. Stefan Kah, Research Fellow at the European Policies Research Centre at the University of Strathclyde, notes that frameworks such as the Territorial Agenda 2030, the Small Places Matter pilot, and the 8th Cohesion Report view SMSTCs as “anchor points” for regional development and sustainability [8]. The European Commission's Policy Atlas of Sustainable Urban Development for Small Urban Areas (2023) and the European Spatial Planning Observation Network's (ESPON) Policy Brief on SMSTCs (2024) further call for integrated, place-based policies combining investment, networking, and capacity building [8].

Yet, despite this growing recognition, Kah reminds us that many SMSTCs still struggle with limited staff, expertise, and funding to advance sustainability transitions. This is in addition to their structural challenges, such as ageing populations, demographic decline, and economic pressure to keep city centres vibrant. Strengthening these towns, he argues, is vital for achieving balanced territorial development across Europe. ▶



Nonetheless these challenges, many SMSTCs across Europe are making progress in mobility transitions. SMSTCs and their surrounding rural areas remain highly car-dependent, and although they are increasingly integrated into regional transport networks, the car continues to dominate both commuting and local travel. Reinforcing the use of public transport through fare-free programmes can significantly reduce emissions and increase social inclusion and participation, as we will see in the following two sections.

German small town becomes regional pioneer in fare-free public transport

On the 1st of September 2020, the small northern German town of Bad Doberan in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania launched a pilot project for a fare-free and net-zero city bus circulating through the main districts. With a population of just around 13,000 inhabitants, the town is small but has ambitious political leadership. In collaboration with the local public transport association Verkehrsverbund Warnow (VVW) and Rebus, the regional bus company from Rostock, the municipality implemented the pilot for an initial period of four to six months [9].

From the very beginning, the project was a great success, attracting significantly more users than before. As the mayor explained, the main goal was to encourage people to shift from private cars to more sustainable modes of transport [9]. In an interview, he shared that, since taking office, he

had always dreamed of introducing a free city bus, both as a step towards climate neutrality and as a way to strengthen social participation for all age groups in Bad Doberan.

He emphasised that for many residents, especially older people, the free city bus created new opportunities for mobility and connection. People could hop on the bus for a ride around town, meet friends, and visit places or local services that were previously difficult to reach. Beyond environmental and social benefits, the initiative also aimed to revitalise inner-city life and support local businesses.

Since its implementation in September 2020, the number of users has tripled. The service now operates every hour Monday to Friday and every two hours on Saturdays, running from morning until evening. Because Bad Doberan is compact, one bus can cover the entire route, circulating efficiently through all main areas. Over time, the city has also expanded stops and adjusted frequency based on demand.

The project is largely financed by the municipality itself at an annual cost of around €140,000, with additional support from two local housing companies contributing €3,000 each per year. Collaboration with the regional bus company was key to its success, particularly important given the challenges of staff shortages and limited resources. The mayor of Bad Doberan emphasised that small towns can leverage their well-established networks of local actors, built on trust

and close collaboration, to implement such ambitious projects.

Still, financing depends heavily on broader political and fiscal conditions, as well as on municipal tax income. For more affluent municipalities, such projects may be easier to maintain, but even they rely on national political will and budget priorities. The mayor stressed that, despite potential funding cuts, ensuring the continuation of the free bus service remains one of his top priorities.

Today, the bus is not just a means of transport and climate-neutral mobility; it has also lifted up parking pressure in the inner city, enhanced social connections and mobility of all ages, and has the potential to strengthen the local economy. In short, it represents what a small town can achieve through political leadership, the right prioritisation and trust within the local network.

From Compiègne to Bad Doberan: how Europe's SMSTCs are redefining public transport

How does Bad Doberan's example fit into the broader landscape of SMSTCs that have often been overlooked in discussions on sustainability and mobility transition?

One of the earliest and most enduring examples of fare-free public transport comes from Compiègne, a French town of around 40,000 inhabitants that, back in 1975, became the first city in France to introduce fare-free public transport for all, and has maintained it ever since [10]. Today, its



extensive bus network connects 22 municipalities across the Compiègne region, operating 15 lines and serving around 5.5 million journeys per year.

Just like in Bad Doberan, the initiative was driven by the vision of a forward-thinking mayor [10]. At the time, Mayor Jean Legendre aimed to bring residents from all neighbourhoods into the city centre to participate in urban life, a move that would benefit both residents and local businesses. In the 1970s, the policy mainly supported families who often owned only one car and faced difficulties moving within or around the city.

Today, however, the need for fare-free public transport has evolved. As cars have become the dominant mode of travel. Particularly in SMSTCs, the measure now plays a crucial role in reducing emissions and promoting climate-conscious mobility [10].

Initially, the service in Compiègne was financed through parking fees. Today, it is fully funded by a business tax known as the mobility payment, which is applied to about 470 local companies with more than 10 employees. The tax amounts to 0.7% of company profits and covers the total annual cost of approximately €9.2 million for operating the system [10].

The arrangement benefits both sides: businesses are permitted to provide fewer parking spaces, the bus schedules are adapted to employees' working hours, and they gain additional customers through the improved accessibility. The city itself contributes about €150,000 per year and receives departmental and regional subsidies to support the 28 buses, their drivers, maintenance, and insurance [10].

The success and positive public response to Compiègne's free bus network have inspired at least fifteen other SMSTCs across France to implement fully fare-free transport, including Chantilly (1992), Saint-Brévin-les-Pins (2007), and Gaillac (2014), as well as larger cities such as Dunkirk (2018, population 86,000) and Montpellier. In total, around thirty-four municipalities in France now offer either full or targeted fare-free transport measures [6].

Saint-Brévin-les-Pins, a municipality on the west coast of France with around 15,000 inhabitants, illustrates how policy can support such initiatives to evolve beyond the municipal scale. Introduced in 2007, the Brevibus began as a fare-free local service designed

to complement interurban transport and meet residents' everyday mobility needs. Legislative changes under France's 2019 Mobility Orientation Law later enabled the transfer of mobility responsibilities to the inter-municipal level (i.e. Communauté de Communes Sud Estuaire), allowing fare-free transport to be extended to the five neighbouring municipalities within the wider urban area. This shift also strengthened the system's financial base. The Brevibus is funded entirely through a mobility levy paid by local businesses, which is now shared across the inter-municipal territory. The model demonstrates how fare-free public transport can be scaled through regional cooperation, creating wider accessibility while maintaining financial stability.

Beyond France, SMSTCs in Poland have also joined this movement. Up to ninety-three municipalities, ranging from 5,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, have introduced fare-free transport, though these include both fully free systems and targeted schemes [5].

Other examples can be found across Europe: Valašské Meziříčí in the Czech Republic, Ikast in Denmark, Hallstahammar in Sweden, Skuodas in Lithuania, and Velenje in Slovenia. Notably, many of these local initiatives predate the more widely known national policies, such as Luxembourg's introduction of fare-free public transport in 2020 and Malta's in 2022.

While reducing emissions remains a key driver, the motivation behind fare-free public transport often extends far beyond environmental goals. For many towns in Poland, it is a question of social inclusion, reducing mobility-related inequalities and easing the financial burden on households, particularly families with children, residents without access to private cars or the older generation [11]. At the same time, fare-free public transport can make SMSTCs more attractive places to live, helping to retain or attract new residents and strengthen the local economy [11]. From an economic standpoint, the impact of removing fares is often less significant than one might assume. In many Polish towns, ticket revenues represent only 20–40% of total transport budgets, while eliminating fares also removes the administrative costs of ticketing and fare control [11].

The French town of Niort illustrates these benefits clearly. With around 50,000 inhabitants - or 122,000 including its wider urban area - Niort

introduced fare-free public transport in 2017 [12]. Since then, the results have been remarkable: 85% of new bus users previously travelled by car, ridership has increased by 24% compared to the previous year, and the trend continues upward. Today, half of the town's residents report rethinking their travel habits, and nearly one-third have already changed how they move through the city.

Lessons from SMSTCs: what Europe's mobility pioneers can teach us about change

Although each case is shaped by its regional, political, and economic context, several lessons emerge from the experiences of SMSTCs that have introduced fare-free public transport.

First, political leadership is essential. Fare-free public transport, like any sustainability measure, must be a political priority to be realised and maintained. In Bad Doberan, the mayor had long envisioned a free city bus because he understood its potential to strengthen social inclusion and participation in urban life, not only for older residents but for many others as well. Similarly, in Compiègne, the political will to improve mobility and participation for households with limited means was the driving force behind the city's pioneering move. Evidence from research and practice suggests that political commitment often outweighs financial concerns, particularly given that fare revenues typically account for only a small share of total transport budgets [5][11]. This insight also holds for larger cities such as Dunkirk, a city in northern France with around 86,000 inhabitants, where fare-free transport was introduced in 2018, and ticket sales accounted for only about 10% of total funding.

Yet it is equally important to address financing. A municipality's ability to sustain fare-free transport depends largely on its fiscal capacity and access to stable funding sources. In Bad Doberan, relatively strong municipal tax revenues enable the city to finance most of the services itself, with additional contributions from local housing companies. Yet even this model remains partly dependent on regional and national subsidies, which may fluctuate with changing political priorities. Ensuring long-term stability will therefore require diversified and resilient funding mechanisms.

In France, with dense municipal networks, inter-municipal cooperation emerged as a particularly powerful ►

financial enabler. Compiègne and Saint-Brévin-les-Pins demonstrate how a regional approach, built on close collaboration between neighbouring municipalities, can make fare-free public transport viable across a wider urban area. In both cases, fare-free transport is organised at the inter-municipal level and financed through a mobility levy paid by local businesses. This arrangement has enabled the service to be fully funded while maintaining broad accessibility. Importantly, in 2023, the Communauté de Communes Sud Estuaire, to which Saint-Brévin-les-Pins belongs, actively assessed whether reintroducing fares would optimise the service. The difficulty of creating a dedicated ticketing system, coupled with low revenue coverage of operating expenses (given moderate ridership) and fears of a decline in ridership due to the end of free travel, led to this option not being considered in the short term. As a result, the priority has remained on cost control and budgetary balance within a fare-free model, while leaving room for future reassessment if conditions change. Managing services at this scale allows costs and benefits to be shared, significantly expanding the reach and effectiveness of such initiatives.

SMSTCs with fewer financial resources depend even more heavily on external support, not only in terms of funding but also guidance, technical expertise, and administrative capacity. This is particularly important when fare-free public transport serves broader goals such as strengthening rural-urban links

or enhancing regional competitiveness. Here, the role of European policy frameworks becomes crucial. Strengthening the implementation of instruments such as the Territorial Agenda 2030 and the New EU Urban Mobility Framework (2021) requires national and regional governments to provide more consistent, long-term support, especially for smaller towns experimenting with new mobility solutions. In this context, inter-municipal fare-free mobility networks offer a promising pathway that could be tested and adapted in other regional settings. The key benefits of such initiatives are clear. Free public transport reduces car use, strengthens social inclusion and participation, and offers mobility to people of all ages and income levels. As the example of Bad Doberan shows, it is also seen as a tool to revitalise city centres, helping SMSTCs remain vibrant and competitive in the face of challenges such as online shopping and the economic pull of nearby metropolitan areas.

These successes can, and should, inspire larger cities. Examples show that fare-free transport can also work at scale. In Dunkirk, bus ridership has increased by more than 60% on weekdays and over 120% on weekends. More importantly, people's habits have changed: 50% of new users now take the bus regularly instead of driving, and 5% have even decided against buying a second car or sold their existing one, because the new services meet their needs. These are powerful outcomes at a time when

some larger cities continue to defend the car instead of supporting residents through a green mobility transition. Recent elections in Berlin (2023) and Copenhagen (2025) reignited familiar battles over car access and parking rights [13][14]. Instead of doubling down on car dependency, looking outward to small towns and to larger pioneers like Dunkirk could provide exactly the kind of inspiration and leadership needed.

This quiet transition unfolding in SMSTCs across Europe deserves far greater recognition within the broader mobility debate. From France to Poland and beyond, fare-free public transport in SMSTCs has not only contributed to lower emissions but has also strengthened the resilience of regions outside major metropolitan centres. It reveals the transformative power of political will, innovation and collaboration in moving the green and resilient mobility transition forward. These examples demonstrate that if national and European authorities further expand their support for SMSTCs and actively encourage more towns to implement fare-free and net-zero mobility solutions, the impact could be substantial. Given that SMSTCs represent around one quarter of Europe's urban population, their contribution is far from marginal. Strengthening mobility transitions in these towns would significantly accelerate progress toward the European Green Deal target of reducing transport-related emissions by 90% and support more resilient, balanced territorial development across all regions and for all people. ■

