

Lobbying for public transport: What is important?

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1 Who decides what in public transport?

Local transport initiatives are created almost exclusively by local problems on buses and trains. Activists soon realise that a complex network of responsibilities and sources of finance exists, which controls local public transport in Germany, and that the situation for long-distance travel is completely different.

Taking the German Federal State of NorthRhine-Westphalia (NRW) as an example, we present an overview of the most important responsibilities and participants in local transport, with particular reference to special offers and fares.

Responsibility for local rail transport:

- 9 Administrative Unions
- Local Public Transport Agency NRW (a Limited Company founded by the Administrative Unions and the Province).

Transport enterprises in local public rail transport:

- German Railways (Deutsche Bahn Regio)
- 9 other rail companies (both private and public)

Responsibility for local public road transport:

- 54 administrative districts and autonomous cities, on request cities within administrative districts with their own public transport enterprises.

Transport enterprises in local public road transport:

- Approx. 50 (currently operative) publicly owned enterprises
- 6 state-owned bus companies based in NRW (some routes operated by foreign owners)
- Between 50-70 private enterprises operating as concessions, especially in rural areas, most of them very small.
- A few routes operated by Dutch and Belgium companies.

Responsibility for fares (community and union tariffs).

- Transport Authorities (Tarif levels set by the local Administrative Union)
- 6 Transport Enterprises (fares set by the transport companies)
- NRW “Authority Centre” for fares and marketing (located in Cologne)

Responsibility for monitoring, authorisation, regional planning and the setting up of the GVFG programme (details of GVFG given below).

- 5 District councils in NRW

This example of the division of responsibility is taken from my home town of Oberhausen

It is easy to visualise the number of interested parties whose views have to be taken into account when compiling time tables, making alterations to routes, etc. The passenger representative will

have to obtain an overview as to which protagonists are most important, both at the planning/administrative level and the political level, and find who is most approachable for suggestions and ideas, or who will provide the best information. As yet there is no legal requirement to involve passenger representatives, e.g. in the setting up or revision of local traffic plans, although many political decisions have been made, relative to the subject, by numerous local transport authorities.

In addition to the legal requirements, very varying practices in the control of public transport have developed at local level. In many large cities the local public transport enterprises make the decisions as to the direction which will be taken, which is then implemented by the cities acting as the local transport authority. In other cities there is noticeable friction between the local transport enterprises and the public transport authorities. Local politicians are often responsible for two key aspects: budgeting and planning. This means that passenger initiatives must keep in contact with all parties, transport enterprises, authorities and politicians of all political persuasions, in order to assess how much room for manoeuvre is actually available. Local politicians, even the opposition, usually take the side of the administration. Contrary views must be based on very sound principles, and supporters must be prepared for very lively, even absurd, argument.

2 Vast sums of money flow into public transport – from whom, where to and why?

In discussions on public transport amongst interested parties, finance always plays a leading role. From the very first discussions the passenger representative will realise that financing for public transport is a very complicated affair, with stark differences existing from city to city and province to province. He, or she, is introduced to concepts like GVFG-foerderfaehig (GVFG is an abbreviation of „Gemeindeverkehrsfinanzierungsgesetz“ – Local Authority Public Transport Finance Law – which allows for local public transport to be subsidised by central government, although it is not exactly as simple as that! „Einnahmeaufteilungsvertrag“ is a contract between operator and authority for sharing the revenue from ticket sales. „Querverband“ means public transport and energy suppliers working together and cross-subsidising, something now restricted by the EU. „Bestellerentgelte“ is the money the transport operators receive from the transport authority – usually from public funds. There is only one solution: the representatives must not lose their heads – rather fill them with relevant facts and figures. It must be accepted that it will take time to achieve this. Good sources of information are the annual local authority budgets, annual reports of companies concerned, Administrative Unions and allied societies. Relevant laws and legally binding public contracts should also be examined closely. Financial regulations are in a state of continual change because of regular changes in EU law, but these alterations can be easily followed from the records kept by political bodies. If information on any changes is not available on the internet, a politician should be asked either to look up the decision or to pin-point the internet site.

The most important decisions for local transport financing are made according to both Federal and State law, but these laws are not necessarily long-term. They are subject to lobbying from both local and national interest groups who can be very influential. If contact with Ministers and Parliamentary Parties can be made, it can also be possible to take part in the decision-making process, be it through press releases, writing letters or attending parliamentary sessions and meetings. To be really effective a detailed knowledge of the relevant laws and budgeting situation, together with planned changes, is necessary.

3 Which arguments will be successful?

At both Federal and State level, decisions are very often reached on a global basis. It is very informative to examine the financial effects of changing State decisions in individual districts or on transport enterprises. Politicians will only be influenced by concrete facts, not by slogans such as „Priority for public transport“!. It is also important not to hammer one particular point in an argument, but to show a good grasp of the whole picture.

It is useful to compare the local public transport situation with other cities, particularly with regard to special offers and financial arrangements, as long as the two are genuinely comparable. Key data are the relation of vehicle-km to inhabitant and spending per inhabitant. In this regard, particular attention must be paid to hidden costs like cross-subsidisation which must be taken into account. There is nothing which needles a politician more than comparison with a neighbouring town!

It is only in very rare cases that improvements in public transport are possible without extra revenue, i.e. increased costs must be covered by increased fares. In order to be credible, passenger representatives must be prepared to accept cutting, or reducing, services on little-used and otherwise unimportant routes, if it means improvements in other areas. Taking the stand that passenger representatives are not responsible for closing lines or services, does not help anyone, and militates against being accepted as a serious participant in discussions with politicians on the future of public transport.

4 Important strategies for the work of the Administrative Unions

The significance of Federal and State policies on local public transport means that other organisations also need to work in close cooperation at both Federal and State level. In setting up a network it is necessary to take account of both the content of the activities and the geographical areas. Only by doing this is it possible to get a professional element into voluntary work. Press coverage is of vital importance for public relations, so keep an eye on how press releases are handled. The journalist who just accepts a text as given, is not necessarily the best. It is far better to find someone who will, if necessary, undertake further research in the subject and who will also incorporate new information.

It is important to be accessible for further questioning. If good contacts have been made, one must be ready to be quizzed by journalists at any time. Facts and figures can be far more easily presented in discussions than they can be in a press release. If the exact answer is not known, refer the questioner to a better informed colleague who does know. It is important not to concentrate on just one aspect, but also try and avoid waffling about every small point. Above all, remain diplomatic and, in particular, do not indulge in personal attacks.

If confidential information is provided through good networking, always respect the confidence. Passing it on to the Press or raising it in internet discussions, (even internal systems), can quickly result in your sources running dry and ruin the chances of your initiatives having any influence.