

Enjoy a free ride!

Tallinn, Estonia

Mayor Edgar Savisaar

In January 2013 Tallinn became the largest city in the world to introduce free public transport for its residents. So far 75% of the Tallinners are happy with the initiative and half of them have used the system, which has already helped reducing traffic congestion in 15%. The Estonian capital city is seeking to become European Green Capital in 2018 given its efforts in providing environmentally friendly standards of living for its residents.

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



Photo: Kristi Eerik

Facing an important congestion problem, Tallinn has been looking at different options to deal with traffic since 2005. In 2012, following a referendum, the city council came up with a solution: incentivize drivers to leave their cars and rather use public transport. The cherry on the cake: make public transport free for residents! In practice this meant enlarging public transport options and facilities - the city purchased 70 new buses and 15 new trams - and develop real-time information system for passengers and common ticketing facilities. Some measures also aimed at discouraging the use of private car, for instance the access to some streets has been restricted and parking fees have increased.



In only four month-time results are visible. About half of the Tallinners have already used the system. Traffic fell by 15% from December 2012 to January 2013 with an increase in public transport use of about 14%. This means approximately 7,600 fewer cars enter the city every day, reducing traffic jams and pollution. Interestingly the population of Tallinn seems to have been growing since the end of 2012, showing a correlation between the access to free public transport and the attractiveness of the city. A good news for the municipality who needs to cover up for the revenues previously earned with ticket sales.

In 2012, income from ticket sales amounted to €12 million, accounting for 35% of the system operating costs. Since January 2013, 70% of the costs are funded by the city, representing a 2.5% extra expense on the annual municipal budget and a quarter of the annual public transport budget. To cover for the extra costs of running the free public transport system, the city anticipates an increase in the personal income tax of €17.5 million 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 1000 new residents brings to the city budget €1 million euros in personal income tax.

The concept of cities offering free public transport is not new. Several smaller cities in Europe and throughout the world have been doing so more or less successfully. It is the case of Hasselt (73,000 inhabitants) in Belgium – another Covenant of Mayors Signatory City - or Aubagne (46,000 inhabitants) in France, which are now working with Tallinn on a European free public transport network to be spread throughout Europe. Is this system sustainable? In the Belgian and French cities it seems to be. For a large city like Tallinn only time will tell.

Tallinn – Key facts

- Total population: 425, 000 inhabitants
- Total area: 159,2 km²
- 40 km² of green areas (parks, forests, etc.)
- 214km of light traffic roads
- Free public transport network budget: 12 million euros
- Population satisfaction rate with the service: 75%
- Joined the Covenant of Mayors on 5 February 2009

As a signatory to the Covenant of Mayors the city of Tallinn commits to reducing its CO₂ emissions by 20% by 2020

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