On 14 September 2001 the Commission decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the White Paper on European transport policy for 2010: time to decide. The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 19 June 2002. The rapporteur was Mr García Alonso.

At its 392nd Plenary Session on 17 and 18 July 2002 (meeting of 18 July) the Committee adopted the following opinion by 53 votes, with two votes against.

1. General comments

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee notes with interest publication of this White Paper, which seeks to provide a comprehensive response to the challenges the sector will face over the coming decade and examines the interrelationship between transport policy and other Community policies, specifically the internal market and the environment. It also creates a frame of reference that takes account of the likely expansion of the European Union.

1.2. The Committee supports many of the viewpoints and proposals put forward in the White Paper. In the interests of brevity, observations on the latter will thus focus on those aspects where the EESC takes a different view from the Commission, and will seek to enrich the debate with a view to finding the best solutions in a climate of compromise.

1.3. To ensure a systematic analysis of the White Paper, this document will start with some general points where the EESC considers that a constructive contribution is needed. It will go on to make new constructive comments, following the structure of the White Paper.

1.4. In the opinion of the EESC, the main problem with the White Paper, which is at the heart of most of the suggestions put forward, is the excessively uniform treatment of the problems discussed and the solutions proposed, both on a territorial and on an economic, social, environmental and cultural level. The 15-member EU — not to mention the future Union of 27 members — is not a homogenous area. Situations and circumstances vary across the fifteen Member States, and different approaches are thus required wherever possible.

1.5. While the White Paper does recognise the existence of pronounced regional imbalances across the European Union, the approach taken and the measures proposed do not take account of the need to attempt to tailor transport solutions to the specific characteristics of each country and region, given that the Union differs in geographical, orographical, territorial, economic and demographic terms. It is a fact that the problems of the countries of central Europe are totally different to those of the outermost and island regions, and that any kind of uniform approach which seeks to find excessively homogenous solutions in the field of transport may cause instances of discrimination and result in harmful consequences for all countries concerned.

1.6. The first observation, which is a critical one, concerns the marked change in direction of this document in relation to the 1992 White Paper, which was strongly in favour of attempts to open up the sector to competition and encourage competitiveness in the interests of furthering the internal market. The EESC shares the view that public authorities, both at national and Community levels, have adequate legal powers to organise and regulate the market to the benefit of operators and consumers, and to monitor both its operation and compliance with competition rules. However, it considers that the measures proposed to shift the balance between modes of transport must not distort competition. The Committee shares the view, however, that the principle of 'regulated competition' should apply to services of general economic interest, including the various forms of public transport which, under Article 16 of the Treaty on European Union, occupy an important place in our common values, and which are essential to the promotion of social and territorial cohesion.

1.7. This leads to a contradiction between an interventionist and uniform policy favouring certain modes of transport through various economic and fiscal measures, and support
for a policy of liberalisation and competition within each sector. Competition between modes of transport is ‘channelled’, while full competition is demanded within each sector. There is no recognition that certain criteria, such as environmental impact and quality and safety of service, should apply in all areas.

1.8. Secondly, in addition to citizens’ right to travel, the EESC also wishes to emphasise the strategic importance of goods transport for countries’ development and in supplying mountainous, isolated or very remote regions or areas with lower economic potential. It thus calls on the Commission to ensure that incorporating transport into sustainable development policy in general and into the sustainable development strategy in particular does not, under any circumstances, lead to a reduction in economic opportunities or in the potential for harmonious development in such regions; rather, emphasis should be placed on steering demand towards the most underused, safest and most environmentally-friendly modes of transport, with a view to achieving a more balanced modal distribution.

1.9. Thirdly, with regard to the mobility of persons, insufficient account is taken of the role of public transport in relation to the use of private vehicles in terms of redirecting demand towards the former, and there is no clearly defined policy to promote use of the means of transport best suited to the distance travelled. In this regard, the EESC considers that attempts must be made to promote alternative means of transport to private road transport, rather than penalising either private road transport or buses as a means of public passenger transport.

1.10. Fourthly, the White Paper makes the common error of identifying the external effects of transport with the negative effects it produces, while ignoring the benefits obtained. In this regard, it should be emphasised that, apart from the fact that transport as an activity contributes to the economic and social growth of a country and enables the market to operate effectively and efficiently, infrastructure contributes to genuine convergence and full employment, increasing the productivity of the private sector, the competitiveness of the service sector and the mobility of persons and, specifically, domestic and international tourism.

1.11. Finally, purportedly for environmental reasons, the Commission text proposes certain economic measures with little or no consideration for the ways in which technological progress and the implementation of stricter rules on emissions are helping to cushion the environmental impact of different modes of transport. In this connection, the Commission should make improving energy and transport efficiency a stated objective of transport policy and action programmes, and should propose or adopt measures aimed at gradually increasing the number of more efficient heavy goods vehicles which consume less fuel and create less pollution, and the use of alternative fuels (such as biofuels), etc. The Committee believes that such actions are more effective in reducing environmental impact than many measures which seek to alter the modal distribution of the transport system in an arbitrary fashion.

2. Shifting the balance between modes of transport

2.1. The problem of congestion is one of the central themes of the document. But there is no recognition that this problem really affects only a small part of the territory of the Community, specifically areas with very high population density (which is one of the causes of the problem) and those with a particular environmental impact (such as the Alps and Pyrenees). It is thus inappropriate to draw up a general, uniform transport policy for the Community as a whole, as has been pointed out on previous occasions. What is really needed is a specific policy for each of these areas.

2.2. The White Paper does not explore in sufficient detail the differences between the various countries of the Union; rather, it outlines general solutions that heavily penalise the outermost countries and, within these countries, the ‘remote areas’ — the ‘edge of the edge’. It fails to suggest any means of enabling them to become both better integrated in the Community and more competitive. The EESC proposes that consideration should be given to economic measures that might help such areas become more competitive.

2.3. Secondly, the text fails to make an adequate assessment or appreciation of the role of the three main traffic-generating categories — private passenger transport, public passenger transport and goods transport — in producing congestion. It must also be recognised that the impact of each is different across the Community (that of passengers is greater near urban centres), and that variations in schedules and of a seasonal nature also occur. Use of the existing infrastructure could thus be improved by prioritising on the basis of time or space — aspects which the White Paper refers to only in connection with gradual charging for the use of infrastructure.
2.4. Furthermore, the suggested means of shifting the balance between modes of transport focuses almost exclusively on increased use of goods transport by rail, yet as the EESC highlighted recently, the practical problems of multimodal transport which are at the root of the lack of alternatives to road transport (which is able to compete with them on flexibility in particular, as well as cost) are still without a satisfactory solution.

2.5. The criticism repeatedly, and even unduly levelled at the road haulage sector (breaches of the law (which are) too common’, ‘precarious financial position of many haulage companies’, ‘tends to keep prices (of other modes of transport) down’), in no way helps in the search for a sustainable medium-term solution. In this regard, it would be more worthwhile to recognise the efforts and progress made over recent years in terms of training, professional qualifications, improvements in management techniques, use of new information technologies, etc., and to stress the need to continue to adopt new measures to eliminate situations like those described.

2.6. The Commission communication on the second railway package, entitled ‘Towards an integrated European railway area’, examines the reasons why the railways have been unable to respond to the continuing decline in their share of goods transport. The Committee is currently examining the second railway package, and will shortly issue an opinion on the Commission proposals. However, it supports all measures aimed at improving the operation of national and international rail passenger or goods transport, be it through increased competition between operators or abolition of the numerous technical and regulatory barriers that currently exist, provided that this does not lead to a deterioration of existing social conditions.

2.7. As stated in a recent Committee opinion, there is also an urgent need to revitalise maritime and river goods cabotage, with the appropriate investment in infrastructure and promotion of measures to ensure that the sector is streamlined and competitive. The Committee thus agrees with the Commission that such modes of transport must be made more reliable, efficient and accessible, and supports the measures proposed in this regard. Likewise, it wishes to highlight the fact that the Community fleet is crucial to ensuring the continuing supply of energy and raw materials in the EU and is essential to sea rescue services in the event of emergency. Although the White Paper makes a passing reference to the strategic implications of maritime transport, recognising both its advantages and its role in emissions from ships, it fails to suggest any measures in proportion to its importance since it does not propose any specific measures that would enable a shift from land to sea transport.

2.8. With specific regard to maritime cabotage, the EESC supports the White Paper’s proposed development of ‘motorways of the sea’ as a competitive alternative to the overland transport of goods, and integrating them into trans-European networks. Likewise, the proposed regulatory framework for safety checks for passengers embarking on ships offering European cruises in order to combat the risk of attacks, similar to those carried out in air transport, is to be welcomed.

2.9. The EESC views the need to ensure that Community know-how is maintained as a further challenge for the coming decade, and would repeat the proposals it made in its opinion on the Communication from the Commission on the training and recruitment of seafarers.

2.10. Air transport must be seen as a high-quality mode of transport, associated with long-distance travel and closely linked with high speed rail services or public passenger transport services. In this context, the EESC also supports most of the initiatives proposed in the White Paper on air transport, and those designed to promote better management of the resources available (airports, airspace) combined with maximum respect for the environment (particularly on emissions and noise) and feels that owing to its specific nature, market forces must determine its future shape, although the current regulations for services of general interest (particularly island or very isolated regions) should be maintained. There is thus an urgent need to make airspace more efficient and to increase airport capacity to enable both to absorb the expected increase in air traffic. The Commission must likewise urge the Member States to respect planning in their airport zones.

2.11. Finally, on the subject of multimodality the Committee supports both the initiatives set out in the Marco Polo programme and the inclusion of investment for multimodality in the trans-European transport networks and Community regulation of the profession of freight integrator to promote the latter’s role across the Union.

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(2) OJ C 40, 15.2.1999, p. 3.
(3) COM(2001) 188 final.
(4) OJ C 125, 27.5.2002.
3. **Elimination of bottlenecks**

3.1. Although the initiative on trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T) was clearly an excellent one, it has fallen far short of its ambitious objectives. This has been due to their very long-term nature, the need to reach agreement with national, regional and even local authorities in various countries and, in particular, budgetary limitations at a time of severe restrictions on public spending to comply with the Maastricht convergence criteria. In addition, in many instances the private sector was not offered sufficient opportunities to become actively involved.

3.2. Thus, as the White Paper states, any initiative aimed at spearheading renewed progress on trans-European networks must tackle these fundamental problems. Although the Committee supports the strategy for action proposed in the White Paper, it considers the proposed increase, a maximum Community contribution of 20% to cross-border rail projects which bridge natural barriers, to be adequate. It also believes that such aid should also be extended to other modes of transport and that cross-financing for projects of this kind should only apply in very specific cases, as pointed out in point 3.4.

3.3. There appears to be a particularly pressing need to increase capacity on crossings through the Alps and Pyrenees using transport formulas that are, as far as possible, completely environmentally-friendly. This should be combined with maximum use of alternative means, such as sea transport of goods, together with improved safety in new and existing tunnels. The EESC awaits with interest the proposal which the Commission intends to submit with a view to improving safety conditions in tunnels. However, the EESC believes that the Commission proposal on the construction of a new rail route to facilitate transport through the Pyrenees is inadequate. This measure would require a long timeframe for design, social acceptance and implementation, together with new road access points to help absorb over the medium term the large increase in traffic between northern Africa, the Iberian peninsula and the rest of Europe, and between the Italian and Greek peninsulas and the rest of Europe.

3.4. The Committee has grave reservations concerning the cross-financing arrangements referred to in this chapter of the White Paper, which are analysed in more detail in the following chapter. As a general rule, it is opposed to any kind of cross-subsidy or cross-charging, except in cases which are truly exceptional by virtue of their scale, for example, routes across the Alps or other bottlenecks on the main transport links, and where the countries most directly affected are in agreement.

3.5. The EESC also believes that there is a need to develop and implement new and innovative formulas for Community funding and aid which will enable the trans-European transport network to be completed more quickly, without imposing new charges or taxes on road transport which might distort the conditions of competition between different modes of transport. In this regard, one suggestion is the creation of a transport infrastructure fund, funded by each Member State through a small percentage levied on GDP or the annual increases therein (which would partly result from this investment in improving transport infrastructure). The fund could be used gradually to co-finance transport projects in each Member State, or could serve as a guarantee and leverage fund to encourage the involvement of private investors, promoting the development of public private partnerships (PPPs).

4. **Placing users at the heart of transport policy**

4.1. The Committee is somewhat surprised by the inclusion of road safety issues and the internalisation of costs under the same heading, since the two issues are not comparable and do not bear any particular relation to the title of the chapter.

4.2. On the question of safety, the Committee supports most of the measures proposed in the White Paper, including harmonisation of sign-posting, the spread of best practice in accident prevention and the development of new technologies. In the interests of subsidiarity, however, it opposes harmonisation in areas such as blood alcohol levels or speed limits. The Committee would thus propose the use of a Recommendation adopted jointly by the Council and the European Parliament, to give national governments some flexibility to decide on the advisability and timetable of any possible harmonisation.

4.3. The EESC does, however, support progress in harmonisation of the type of penalties in certain areas, such as maximum speed limits and vehicle immobilisation. In this regard, the Commission could define a range of offences to enable Member States to introduce effective penalties where these are committed.

4.4. The Committee considers that with regard to road safety, insufficient attention is paid to the protection of pedestrians, and especially cyclists. Attention should be drawn to the need in many countries for more cycle lanes to encourage cycling as an alternative form of short-distance or urban transport.
4.5. The Committee welcomed the recent Commission communication ‘Towards an integrated European railway area’ (1), the main objective of which is the continued reform of the rail sector, which proposed the development of a common approach to rail safety and the creation of a European Rail Agency responsible, inter alia, for finding common solutions in the area of safety.

4.6. The Committee fully supports the Commission’s approach to safeguarding the rights of users (information, complaint procedures, compensation, etc.), such as exist in the case of air transport, and asks that those rights be extended to other modes of transport.

4.7. The Committee supports the view, set out in the section entitled ‘The facts behind the costs to the user’, that ‘the thrust of Community action should (therefore) be gradually to replace existing transport system taxes with more effective instruments for integrating infrastructure costs and external costs.’

4.8. It also supports an approach designed to gradually replace taxes based on a fixed payment system with a differentiated charging system according to criteria based on use, area and environmental impact. This would facilitate a more flexible and adaptable European transport policy, as called for by the Committee in its initial comments.

4.9. However, in this regard the Committee would draw attention to many aspects of the Commission document on which it has well-founded doubts, or which it considers might be contrary to the desired objective. These are set out below.

4.9.1. Nowhere is sufficiently clear reference made to the need to ensure that the measures proposed are tax and revenue-neutral. Many of the existing taxes on transport were designed to meet criteria based strictly on revenue rather than environmental criteria. There is thus a danger that new charges which seek to internalise costs could be seen as an addition — rather than a complement — to existing taxes, allowing tax receipts to be increased.

4.9.2. Secondly, any infrastructure payment system established at Community level — even one, as the Commission favours, which allows the Member States a great deal of flexibility in implementation — must be applied simultaneously to all modes of transport, and not just one or a few. Likewise, it is particularly important that the electricity used principally by the rail sector should properly reflect the taxation and environmental externalities which apply to alternative modes.

4.9.3. The EESC questions the White Paper’s proposal that private vehicles should not be included in charges for infrastructure use on the grounds that this is a matter for national or local authorities rather than the Commission, since this may constitute positive discrimination in favour of the former. The steady growth in private vehicle traffic has an obvious impact on driving conditions for commercial traffic, both at national and intra-Community level, and distorts conditions of competition. Furthermore, its significant impact on external effects — accidents, congestion, pollution, emissions of pollutants, etc. — is clear, given that private vehicles account for 90% of the total distance travelled by all vehicles in the EU (but a significantly smaller proportion of the various pollutants emitted).

4.9.4. Pending publication of the proposal on diesel for professional use announced by the Commission, the Committee favours reducing excise duty on diesel to compensate for the introduction of the kilometre tax under consideration by the Commission — otherwise the result will be dual taxation and a considerable increase in taxes and charges on HGVs, which will have a negative effect on transport costs. Furthermore, the Commission’s proposal to harmonise upwards excise duty on diesel would have an extremely negative impact on those countries where the level of excise duty is lower than the Community average.

4.9.5. The Committee is extremely concerned at the possible creation of so-called ‘surplus revenue’ from infrastructure use. Firstly, infrastructure management is often in private hands, and a system such as that described in the proposal, as well as being complicated, would also mean complex fiscal controls over their activities. Secondly, the management of these ‘captive’ surplus funds would create grave conflicts of interest between modes of transport and between national, regional and local authorities.

4.9.6. It thus believes that any charges for infrastructure use (over and above tolls, which are paid to the toll operator), should be entered as current revenue in the budget of the national or regional government (according to each country), and the funding of new infrastructure should likewise be
completely transparent on the basis of public budgets. The sole possible exception to this rule, and this on an extraordinary basis, should be certain projects such as routes across the Alps or Pyrenees, or projects which have a clear Community dimension and interest involving at least three Member States.

4.10. The Committee welcomes warmly other proposals contained in this chapter. The ideas for promoting intermodality for people and the creation of a Charter of rights (and obligations) for passengers on various modes of transport are particularly interesting. However, it considers that in addition, specific measures aimed at improving access and transport conditions for users with reduced mobility should also be proposed, and thus urges the Commission to include in its proposals appropriate measures in this regard, and even to produce a specific Communication on this matter in the framework of the 2003 European Year of People with Disabilities.

4.11. Of particular relevance, and in line with the views expressed repeatedly by the Committee, is the confirmation of the public service nature of public passenger transport. The Committee urges the Commission to go further along this road and take care to avoid measures that may be contradictory, such as the recent proposal for a regulation on public transport (now amended), of which certain articles of the initial version hindered and even prevented full implementation of this principle (1). It thus supports a more flexible system for notifying State aid for passenger transport companies, under certain conditions related to public service obligations and below certain financial thresholds.

4.12. With regard to the question of rationalising urban transport, the Committee feels that clear priority should be given to the promotion and exchange of good practice (especially since this is an issue for local authorities), and thus would support the creation of a Community programme to create a formal framework for development of these good practices and to provide information to European citizens, without whose support and cooperation they cannot succeed. It also feels that there is a need for investment and transport plans to improve the quality of transport in the large congested conurbations, which should be financed from Community funds.

5. Controlling (organising) the globalisation of transport

5.1. The Committee is surprised and disappointed at the negative title of this chapter, particularly since the content of the chapter does not reflect this cataclysmic vision. The EESC would have preferred 'Organising and leading the globalisation of transport'.

5.2. The EESC also feels that it is wrong to include a reference to the issue of enlargement under this section. The applicant countries could feel excluded from a White Paper which covers a period extending well beyond their possible accession date.

5.3. With regard to a transport strategy for the applicant States, the Committee has made its views known on many occasions. The main points of the strategy should be as follows:

— To eliminate bottlenecks at borders between these countries and with the existing EU Member States.

— To combat unfair competition by road transport, tackling both social and vehicle safety aspects.

— To combat organisations which engage in the trafficking of immigrants.

— To promote a framework for competition and competitiveness for their rail systems which enables them to retain their current share of the haulage market.

— To integrate fully these countries in the Community multimodal transport network and develop their river networks.

— To demand rigorous implementation from the moment of accession, without any kind of transition period, of Community legislation on maritime safety and port control.

5.4. The Committee feels that international transport policy is an integral part of trade policy and even, in some respects, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It thus believes that in this area the Commission should have powers similar to those conferred on it by the Treaties for the negotiation of international trade agreements. The Commission should have powers to negotiate international transport agreements in order to meet its obligations arising from secondary legislation and from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The Commission, acting on the mandate of and under the guidance of the Council, should represent the Union on questions of transport in all international

organisations competent on transport policy issues and should have the power to negotiate transport agreements with third countries on behalf of the fifteen Member States.

5.5. Finally, the Committee welcomes the Barcelona European Council’s recent approval of the Galileo Programme, for which it has expressed its total and unreserved support on several occasions. It reiterates its view that this programme is essential both from a strategic and an industrial perspective, and as an effective means of developing new technologies to improve the management of the global transport system.


The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Göke FRERICHS

APPENDIX

to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee

The following amendment, which received at least one quarter of the votes cast, was defeated in the course of the debate.

Amendment 3:
Delete point 1.7.

Result of voting
For: 18, against: 26.