

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Use of public and private transport in the urban and periurban environment'

(2000/C 168/02)

On 21 October 1999 the Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 23(3) of the Rules of Procedure, to draw up an opinion on the above-mentioned subject.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for drawing up the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 6 April 2000. The rapporteur was Mr Tosh.

At its 372nd plenary session (meeting of 27 April 2000), the Committee adopted the following opinion unanimously.

1. Introduction

1.1. This own-initiative opinion comes as a response to the Committee's concern as to the level of congestion now being experienced in virtually all urban and periurban environments to greater or lesser degrees, the key impact of high traffic levels, the relatively random patterns of car usage and the adequacy and responsiveness of public services. Specifically concerning are:

- the impact and proximity of emissions and noise on the most densely populated areas reducing the air quality for both residents and commuting workers;
- the impact on the economy where both journey times and congestion gridlock have increased transportation costs and decreased performance and de facto damaged competitiveness;
- the impact on mobility for individuals where access times for work, social and leisure pursuits are lengthening and where current modes perform indifferently.

1.2. The Committee considers the right of access to urban transport a basic right of all individuals⁽¹⁾. Where constraints become necessary due to social, economic, environmental or other reasons, the trade-offs must be designed to recognise the need to improve the urban environment and create an environment where business can sustain and co-exist competitively with people whose quality of living is measurably enhanced. Access to mobility does not necessarily imply unbridled mobility by car.

1.3. The Committee's opinion signals its concern, together with its observations and suggestions, which should merit consideration in the formulation of policy and budget priorities for transportation in the next spending round, both for Member States and, importantly, for enlargement candidate countries.

2. Underlying features of the present situation

2.1. The Committee recognises the complexity of the matrix components that have subscribed to the current status of transport and traffic flows in urban and periurban areas. Principally:

- wider car ownership and the affinity to car usage for personal transport with its perceived advantages;
- the legacy of insufficient investment in infrastructure and public transport modes in some Member States, at times resulting from a lack of provisional planning. Logistics management systems for moving goods and people should be optimised in all Member States in order to create genuine options as demand has changed;
- the nature of spatial planning with re-generation concepts slowly beginning to re-define urban environments where hitherto urban sprawl prevailed. Recognition of the interdependency of spatial and transport planning is fundamental;
- the increased affluence in different regional urban environments, which permits lifestyles with wider choices and attendant mobility requirements;
- the concern for personal safety in urban areas, where such fears are confirmed by rising crime statistics and survey outcomes;

⁽¹⁾ See also ESC opinion on 'Services of general interest', OJ C 368, 20.12.1999.

— the scarcity of available space, where supply is constrained. Pricing mechanisms and/or fiscal measures will become necessary to assure a balance between use, demand and supply of road or fixed track space available.

2.2. The Committee faces difficulty in measuring the extent and character of congestion and the outcomes and costs attributable to it. There are various interest group evaluations, e.g. those of the Confederation of British Industry who claims that the additional cost to UK business from congestion is £ 16 bn annually.

2.3. It should be recognised that congestion results not only from network overload, which may well account for only one third albeit almost all in urban and periurban areas, but also from unsatisfactory traffic management, road-works, accidents, special events, weather conditions, public demonstrations, etc.

2.4. The Committee realises that solutions will be unique to each region's urban areas and that there can be no overall panacea. For this reason regional local dialogue should influence decisions. The following elements of this opinion comment on priorities the Committee believes to be relevant but do not attempt to feature every issue exhaustively.

3. Traffic Features

3.1. The compound aggregate growth in new vehicle registrations experienced in the 1960s through to the 1990s at annual levels of 6 % in Member States has now fallen to, at present, 4 % and is predicted by the Commission to decrease further to 1-2 % during the next 10 years. The reductions are not uniform and contain wide deviations. In faster growing countries such as Greece, Spain and Ireland 12 % annual growth in passenger cars per 1 000 inhabitants appears in the 1990s. In the UK and Germany car growth remained in the 4-6 % range annually up to 1997 (see appendix).

3.1.1. The evidence that a plateau in vehicle density is approaching at 500 cars per 1 000 inhabitants is less than convincing. Vehicle number registrations have seen a 250 % growth in the 30 years to 1999 and EU projections show a 30 % compound growth from today to 2020. The present congestion problems may not be accelerating to gridlock but nevertheless remain serious, because Europeans live in urban and periurban environments.

3.2. Improvements can be noted in vehicle safety standards and engine performance where new cars must meet more stringent pollutant and CO₂ emission limits (e.g. 140mg/km for CO₂ by 2008). Lower pollutant emissions will progressively deliver improved air quality to urban areas but without it becoming satisfactory.

3.3. Noise level growth and the visual impact of car-jammed roads, especially in periurban areas, remain as unattractive impinging features.

3.4. Public transport options are of serious concern to the Committee but instead of anticipating both cross-urban and intra-urban mobility they tend in practice to operate along radial routes. Only minibuses and taxis seem to move to demand and this is the attraction for car use also. Public systems could similarly be more flexible and demand-led. The possibilities of navigational management systems such as GPS and Galileo to improve average journey speed and to improve allocation and prioritisation of road space for public modes remain largely unexploited. Champions do exist in Munich, Turin, Zurich, Vienna, Grenoble, Copenhagen and Amsterdam.

4. Land-use Planning

4.1. The growth of cities has led to much more complex journey patterns with much suburb to suburb traffic which is not congenial to fixed route public transport.

4.2. Expedient planning decision-making or the lack of it has seen urban sprawl contributing to and inducing increased mobility needs, to access schools, hospitals, shopping centres and new housing markets. The relationship between design, density, land-use mix, energy consumption and mobility is poorly understood. However, the compact city, or its urban form with its various self-sufficient subcentres, contributes to shorter journey lengths and substantial reductions in individual car use.

Recommendations

5. Environmental

The Committee believes:

5.1. that tough standards for air quality and noise levels in urban environments should be enforced and deviations addressed with the appropriate benchmark remedies;

5.2. that town centre management needs to embrace and champion transportation as a key success entity. The wider use of closed-circuit television monitoring and community policing will help increase safety;

5.3. consideration should be given to preferential status and/or limited access to inner urban areas for public transport and low emission vehicles whose whole-life impact of energy consumption and emission levels will be the determinant choice factors.

6. Congestion

The Committee believes that the EU should seek to influence Member States to:

6.1. create a uniform measure by which urban and periurban congestion will be determined and set minimum regional levels of service for both public and private transportation modes. Quantitative measures of the cost to the economy, of mobility levels, air quality and noise levels associated with such aspirations will serve to convey their value to the public;

6.2. extend current best practice initiatives to develop telematics⁽¹⁾ to improve management of roads and rail assets for urban areas and through traffic;

6.3. seek to capture the interest and commitment of local Communities to encourage and assist modifications in journey patterns to work and school in order to balance resource use;

6.4. balance the allocation of road area for all users — cars, delivery vehicles, buses, motor-cyclists, cyclist and pedestrians — stagger use over a wider daily time-frame and optimize allocation to public modes;

6.5. employ more sophisticated urban delivery systems and practices and utilise logistics for all goods movements;

6.6. use best affordable construction and surfacing materials and maintain them properly. Pavements should incorporate 'smart' provisions to recognise their role for utility services;

6.7. engineer realistic shifts to walking and cycling for appropriate journeys;

6.8. adopt and enforce priority measures including high-occupancy vehicle lanes and other lane-management measures on motorways which can represent an alternative to road user charges by facilitating the allocation of limited road space favouring most efficient modes;

6.9. consider introducing zonal parking space charges and restrictions on parking duration;

6.10. review the possibility for public transport and/or pedestrian-only areas in inner cities where this is the only sustainable option.

7. Land-use Planning

The Committee's concerns would be allayed if regions:

7.1. sensitively addressed the development and re-generation of urban areas and made it possible to recover marginal brown-field industrial lands for next generation investment locations;

7.2. advocated the evolution of subcentres and suburban development where mixed housing, entertainment and leisure facilities, retailing and general services were provided to re-establish urban and periurban communities, which would be largely self sustaining and planned for public transport;

7.3. reflected on the extension of out of town shopping and leisure centres, particularly to motorway served greenfield sites, which are obviously private car-use inducing and difficult to service with buses, excluding non-car owners in the process. This evolution is reminiscent of American sprawl with its attendant high energy consumption and environmentally damaging land-use. The availability of low-price fuel in the precincts of these out of town shopping centres further increases their attraction.

8. Green Modes

The Committee sees simple and low-cost improvements which are available to Member States through the:

8.1. creation of cycle ways and the improvement of walking surfaces, where possible located apart from motorised modes;

⁽¹⁾ See ESC opinion on 'Telematics applications for transport in Europe', OJ C 18, 22.1.1996.

8.2. encouragement of children and parents to develop walking habits, e.g. on the way to school where this is demonstrably safe;

8.3. encouragement of employers to adopt incentives/best practice methods for workers to car-share or use public transport and discourage 'sole occupancy' of company car parking spaces. The example of orange travel cards subsidised by employers can be seen operative in Ile de France.

9. Public Transport

This opinion focuses on initiatives to combat congestion and improve mobility and would comment that:

9.1. it has been asserted in previous opinions⁽¹⁾ that better quality public transport is an imperative to support mobility per se, and it needs asserting;

9.2. some restrictions including clear regulatory measures on car access to inner cities must be seriously considered alongside improved park and ride facilities with exceptions for special cases. Other forms of inter-modality such as 'hybrid' solutions and new forms of car ownership as they are found in Germany and Edinburgh, are equally important;

9.3. links that recognise the greater complexity of journey patterns need to be established using appropriate buses or public modes. Public transport operates effectively only as a system. There is need for co-ordination and co-operation between operators and/or modes to offer potential customers the high quality of service the car provides;

9.4. the establishment and subsequent surveillance of priority routes and bus lanes at the edge of and into urban areas would ensure greater reliability and predictability in public transport performance and enhance it as an option. Consideration of prioritising through-traffic on freeways in the precincts of urban areas, would ensure their optimal use.

10. Final Comments

10.1. The Committee would signal that operating in the 21st century requires urban transportation solutions that reflect where and how society believes it must position itself, with mobility and the quality of air and life occupying prime consideration alongside sustainable competitive industry. Selective application of private car road and parking space user charges must be embraced in areas experiencing intractable congestion and/or severe environmental degradation, and where political, financial or economic constraints limit road capacity. Such areas would include both commercial and residential centres, historic cities etc.

10.2. Universal service obligations to provide transportation can not be overlooked. Solutions must distinguish between car ownership and car use to avoid demonising the use of the car given its role in generating mobility into work for those impaired and those living in rural environments where no public transport is available, and the social experience linked to the private car. For these reasons reliance on pricing methods alone is unlikely to be either fair or effective.

10.3. The Committee would further signal that if and when road pricing is adopted, then the excess funds generated locally should be ring-fenced for investment in transport initiatives in that local domain, whereby the process of hypothecation will ensure widest value impact for all urban users and prevent the diluting and diverting of funds for other purposes. Precedents exist in the German S-Bahn model.

10.4. It is all too routinely recognised that public transport is uncomfortable, under-developed, under-performing and failing in its role as prime people mover. Mending this needs equal measures of political will and public-private finance partnerships to back regionally developed infrastructure and systems investment which in turn dovetail into national and EU plans that further coherently environment-friendly transport. Regional fora that exist to manage socio-economic development should be the responsible management bodies. In this context the Committee supports the Commission in its planned revision of Regulation (EEC) No 1191/69 and the introduction of quality criteria for public transport. This opinion also intends to be a basic paper for the coming updating of the Commissions' Citizens' Network Initiative. Special attention must be given to the situation in the Central and Eastern European countries.

⁽¹⁾ See ESC opinion on 'Developing the Citizens' Network — Why good local and regional passenger transport is important, and how the European Commission is helping to bring it about' (COM(1998) 431 final), OJ C 138, 18.5.1999.

10.5. Integrated regional planning decisions need to show rigorous evaluation of the provisions and standards of use for public transportation for the lifetime of the submitted plans, which will include sensitivity analyses of the limits of use and standards that can be maintained.

10.6. The Committee believes that research, modelling the impact of Internet shopping, home-working, increased leisure

journey patterns, just-in-time deliveries, the development of social conscience and greening values on transport, in particular for urban areas, will be essential if the EU is to give positive direction to future policy. It would be unthinkable that 'old' experience would be applied to the transport spend for enlargement. The prospect that hyper-mobility might evolve unplanned as the monster to gridlock our major conurbations would be profiled and avoided.

Brussels, 27 April 2000.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Beatrice RANGONI MACHIAVELLI

APPENDIX

to the Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee

Motorization

Number of passenger cars per 1 000 inhabitants

	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK	EU15	Index 1970 =100
1970	214	218	194	26	70	234	133	189	212	197	160	49	155	284	214	184	100
1980	321	271	330	89	202	341	217	313	353	322	298	94	257	347	277	291	158
1990	388	309	447	171	309	466	227	483	480	368	387	187	389	421	360	401	218
1991	397	309	460	173	322	474	233	501	496	369	397	204	384	420	360	410	223
1992	400	310	471	177	336	476	241	518	512	373	410	205	384	414	360	418	227
1993	408	312	479	189	344	479	249	520	523	376	421	224	370	409	366	423	231
1994	422	312	488	199	351	478	262	540	540	383	433	242	368	409	372	432	235
1995	428	319	495	211	362	478	265	553	559	364	447	258	372	411	374	437	238
1996	435	330	500	223	376	477	272	571	558	370	458	277	379	413	388	447	243
1997	441	338	504	238	389	478	310	577	565	372	469	297	377	419	399	454	247

Source: DG Transport calculations