

Why NGOs for passenger interests believe to be ahead of thinking in transport planning

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Introduction

If we think of the usual non-governmental passenger organisation we have in mind people who are complaining about

- Timetables
- vehicles not being on time
- cleaning state of vehicles

or people who are enthusiastic about old transport vehicles. This could be enthusiasm for buses, vessels, trains or horse coaches.

What about the people who are complaining? We state, that there is simply an infinite small number of passengers complaining – not because there isn't much to complain about – but because complaining usually does not solve their problems. The reason for that is rather trivial: Unless not many passengers complain the companies do not realize that there are serious problems that affect many passengers or many potential passengers. This behaviour is rather human like: Why to care about difficulties that seem to be minor or require too many efforts?

You may put this statement into question. To really experience that this is true you must get convinced of possible more successful ways to deal with difficulties. My topic today is about a special type of people who make thoughts about the public transport structure – in other words: people not complaining about the first user affected problems like being late, having wrong timetables – but people criticising the organisational form of public transport.

Topics could be

- laws for the public transport sector
 - cofinancing public transport (e.g. “Regionalisierungsmittel” financing local public transport on rails)
 - passenger rights (e.g. law from 1938 which excludes rail companies from guaranty)
- organisational form of governmental owned public transport companies (e.g. Deutsche Bahn AG, separating the operator part from the infrastructure part)
public transport system in total (e.g. services offered at the same time at the same route, coordination of connecting services)

I present you examples of the state Mecklenburg-Vorpommern where the organisational form of public transport is criticised by the NGO “PRO BAHN e.V.”, if this is successful, what the reactions of responsible people are.

1 Problems with ticket rate systems in Vorpommern

The new created ticket system for trains which includes buses inside the area “Vorpommern”:

- Tickets are valid inside buses, but people only can buy the tickets at train stations.
- Tickets inside the validity area are more expensive than tickets bought from outside this area to any destination inside.
- Timetables of buses and trains do not fit.

Usual complains:

- “I start my journey with a bus, have to buy a normal bus ticket and then at the train station I have to buy a ticket that had been valid inside the bus.”
- “I arrive at a specific station by bus/train but the train/bus just left.”
- “The higher price of this new ticket system is not justified when I can not use the buses that are included.”

After making this to a topic:

- local politicians agree that this needs to be changed and they would like to intervene.
- governmental institutions who have to authorize ticket systems claim that by law there is no possibility to deny such a system or to force a correction. It is the responsibility of the operator.
- The operators claim that these difficulties are due to the new introduction of the system. It will be extended and improved.

BUT: 12 months later; the same problems still exist.

2 Problems with being on time at the former east-west main route Hamburg – Lübeck – Stettin (Szczecin, Poland), nowadays a single track instead of double track.

The problem is localized in missing passing tracks. Due to the organisational form of German Rail the subsidiary companies for stations (DB Station & Service AG) and for tracks (DB Netz AG) took any infrastructure out of order that is not used by scheduled services. Two examples:

- At the station “Blumenhagen” the main track of the passing tracks was renewed, by a mistake the platform for this track was destroyed. The result: Two passenger trains can not pass for exceptional reasons. If there are general problems on the route by the end of the day there is a 40 minute delay.
- The station “Güstrow” was renewed for the year 2000 to an “environmental friendly station” having 3 renewed platforms with 5 tracks. After the installation of an electronic signal box in 2002 only 4 tracks could be used. The result: One train of 6 can not enter the station while the passengers can change trains between the others. Using trains in one relation and direction (Bützow – Güstrow – Waren) is not possible.

After making this to a topic:

- Local politicians realize there needs to be done something but they do not see possibilities to intervene.
- Governmental institutions who are ordering local public transport on rail are “surprised” that the public transport they order is simply not possible (e.g. Güstrow). They offer to finance the platform for the second track at the station “Blumenhagen”.
- The infrastructure subsidiaries plan to rebuild the second platform for “Blumenhagen”. For “Güstrow” they asked for an unacceptable high price to include the fifth track again into the infrastructure.
BUT: 3 years later still nothing has been done.

3 Problems with too small elevators at the completely renewed main station in “Rostock”

When the plans for rebuilding the station were published in 2001, we criticised the missing moving staircases. Instead just one or two lifts per platform were planned.

When the new station was inaugurated in 2003 the public found extremely long staircases and too small lifts. In the lifts hardly fit bicycles. I mention bicycles because to this area a lot of tourists travel by train with their bikes.

Till 2005 the weak lifts deny operation many times. Now, two years later, the responsible people accept the problems and promise to extend the lift capacity by accelerating the lifts and to order more reliable electronic steering devices.

4 Problems with coordination of timetables of trains, buses, schools, working hours and events

The usual approach is that local authorities, politicians, event managers, employers plan and build their institutions somewhere and expect that the public transport operators offer the appropriate services.

BUT: For SOMEWHERE an attractive public transport service is simply not possible. Either it is too expensive, or takes too much travel time; simply it can not be attractive.

For the low dense populated area like “Mecklenburg-Vorpommern” combining the transport wishes of many small groups to the same time is on the condition that public transport can be offered.

In addition the public transport system on rail is based on a rough highly synchronized timetable including long distance trains. The problem with long distance trains in Germany is that they are not ordered by the state governments or their institutions to do so – they have to be run by the operators own risk. In the state “Mecklenburg-Vorpommern” it is clear due to the low population number that the majority of the long distance trains do not make profit and that they are run only for political reasons.

Therefore PRO BAHN states for “Mecklenburg-Vorpommern” that in the long run an attractive rail system is not realizable with the current rail privatisation law. PRO BAHN therefore is promoting together with the BUND (German friends of the earth member) a highly synchronized timetable system (www.mv-takt.de) that includes long distance trains in the system of state ordered trains and recommending also to order these trains by the state to ensure that their timetables ensure connections with other services.

The promotion for the highly synchronized timetable system just started. The rail timetable for next year (2006) even strongly recommends for the promotion: The long distance trains are shifted by nearly half an hour; connecting services do not work anymore.

If one reviews these examples one could say: Is this not selfevident to solve these problems for all people working in public transport? – Unfortunately it is not, due to the established system. The situation is somehow stuck: On the one hand even in the state “Mecklenburg-Vorpommern” the operators and governments make enormous investments buying new vehicles, renewing stations. But on the other hand if one looks into the details, the huge projects like renewing Rostock main station, one realizes that the investment was exaggerated by more than half of the invested sum. Small projects are neglected although they require only small amounts of sums e.g. for reliable services like building passing tracks.

Real efforts have to be made for coordinating public transport to ensure connecting services. This requires a new way to deal with each other: The local governments, schools, transport operators do need to be convinced that excellent coordination will be a gain for everybody. To achieve this, structures for financing public transport has to be changed

NGO’s for passenger interests are free from all laws, financial support and dependent relationships. From this is clear: They can suggest unified solutions whereas governments, operators and the ordinary users are stuck in their own framework and usually have difficulties to demand for a change in the system.

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