

Local initiative in Poland uses public bikes to get students to class

Bikes bridge the gap

By Michal Beim

At the end of September, the Polish city of Poznan launched a free street-bike system that could be the first successful public bicycle scheme in Central and Eastern Europe. Poznan's system was established following the opening of a new university campus in city's northern suburbs. The campus lies about one kilometre as the crow flies from the end station of the Poznan Fast Tramway, but that short journey takes 10 minutes by bus because of train tracks lying between the tram stop and the campus, and the lack of a convenient level crossing. Because an extension of the tramway to the campus will happen only in the distant future, the public bike system seemed a sound alternative.

Original plans calling for 200 bicycles were seen as too costly given the expected benefits. In the end, a bike path, including a level crossing over the train tracks, was built between the tram stop and the campus and 25 bicycles were put at the disposal of pass holders of MPK, the city's transport company. Use is free of charge for those who hold a normal MPK pass. Users need only to sign a special agreement outlining the programme's rules. Bicycles are given out as in a traditional bike hire after the user presents his or her MPK smart card containing bike credits. During the system's first month of operation, nearly 300 users signed up. Except during bad weather, almost all the bicycles are used all the time.

MPK sees the system as a social experiment. Depending on its popularity and how the bicycles are used, it will be further developed or shut down. One suggestion has been to limit the programme to spring through fall and suspend it during winter. The biggest disadvantage is at the point of hire. When someone borrows a bicycle, they get a key to its U-lock, and they must lock up the bike wherever they park it. This limits the rotation of bicycles from user to user.

Central and Eastern Europe's first public bike system, inaugurated in Vilnius, Lithuania in June 2001, lasted only a couple days before most of the bikes were stolen. Development of community bicycles in other Polish cities depends on the success of Poznan's experiment. As part of the CIVITAS-CARAVEL programme, Krakow is planning to introduce a system similar to Poznan's. It is too early to know if community bicycles will catch on throughout Central and Eastern Europe but the early results of Poznan's programme are encouraging. ■

FREE RIDE: For no extra charge, public transport pass holders can get a key to a public bike and ride a kilometre to Poznan's new university campus.



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► toward introducing new practices in local planning. So they can't be so easily dismissed as a red herring. But is there anything else to be done about making local development planned through LEAPs more sustainable, or in other words, even less red? (We dare not say "rosy," yet.)

Revisiting LEAP methodology is one of the first items on the list and there are three ways to go forward. The first way is to incorporate a clear definition of sustainable development into LEAPs. This definition practically becomes the vision of sustainability for the local community. The planning process will consequently assume social and economic community goals and/or targets derived from such a vision. The second way deals with the assessment practices in LEAPs. Such practices should ensure that principles of sustainable development are met. Using a criterion-based assessment for sustainability might prove to be an appropriate tool. Such a tool is not complex and easily distinguishes sustainable development from traditional forms of development. The third way forward is to examine the sustainability of actions proposed by LEAPs against a set of criteria. This does not mean that replacing or working on those criteria that are missing or exhibit a poor record will ensure sustainability, as the mere fulfillment of requirements does not ensure that planning systems will deliver sustainable outcomes.

Finally, the fish that more than 150 local communities in Central and Eastern Europe have caught during the last decade — with a little help from the REC — seem to have had an effect. Most of those communities have continued working on the well-being of their citizens. They have chosen their development paths and LEAPs helped them to acknowledge what a community has and needs, and what will be the long-term consequences of short-term choices identified in environmental planning processes.

Nice end to a story, but what about James Lovelock, one might ask. To paraphrase from *Revenge of Gaia*, instead of running for the hills "in need of a sustainable retreat, as it is much too late for sustainable development," you might be better advised to run for a LEAP. Or forget about the fish and start a cattle farm. The choice is really yours. ■

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