

Public Transport Can Be Free

Monday 9 September 2019, by [KEBŁOWSKI Wojciech](#) (Date first published: 24 August 2018).

We don't put coins in street lamps or pay by the minute in public parks. Here's why we can make subway and bus fares a thing of the past.

If we are to believe transport experts and practitioners, abolishing fares for all passengers is the last thing public transport operators should be doing. For Alan Flausch, an ex-CEO of the Brussels public transport authority and current Secretary General of International Association of Public Transport, “in terms of mobility, free public transport is absurd.”

According to Vincent Kauffmann, a professor at University of Lausanne and one of key figures in sustainable mobility, “free public transport does not make any sense.” Getting rid of tickets in mass transit is judged “irrational,” “uneconomical” and “unsustainable.”

However, if we turn to commentators from outside the field of transport, the perspective on fare abolition changes radically. Social scientists, activists, journalists and public officials—often speaking from cities where fare abolition has actually been put to the test—fervently defend the measure.

For Judith Dellheim, a researcher at Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung in Berlin, providing free access to public transport is the “first step towards socio-ecological transformation.” For Michiel Van Hulten, one of the earliest proponents of free public transport in Europe, “it is about returning to the commons.” Finally, according to Naomi Klein, this is precisely what cities around the world should be doing — “to really respond to the urgency of climate change, public transport would have to become free.”

Fare-Free Experiments

In spite of the controversy that it apparently creates, the number of cities experimenting with fare-free public transport (FFPT) is on the rise. In 1980, there were only six. By 2000, the number had grown to fifty-six. Today, FFPT exists in “full” form in at least ninety-eight cities and towns around the world. Full fare abolition means that ticket-free rides are available for the vast majority of local public transport routes and services, for the vast majority of users, and for most of the time. In several hundred more cities, fares are suspended in a partial way — either in specific city areas or modes of transport, or in specific periods of the day or year.

The United States is where the first reported case of full FFPT system occurred — in 1962 in the town of Commerce, in the Los Angeles suburbs — and where most FFPT programs could be found throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. At that time, the proponents of fare abolition in North America relied on social and political arguments, pointing to the anticipated social benefits of abolishing fares, and claiming that zeroing out fares could help increase the use of public transport and counter the high investment in automobile infrastructure.

The largest cases of that time — now discontinued — were located in Mercer County (New Jersey) and Denver (Colorado). Today, FFPT exists in twenty-seven localities across the United States: small urban/rural areas (e.g. Edmund, Oklahoma; Kootenai County, Idaho), university campuses (Chapel

Hill, North Carolina; Macomb, Illinois) and natural parks and tourist resorts (Crested Butte and Estes Park, both Colorado).

The first European experiment with abolishing fares began in 1971 in Colomiers, in the suburbs of Toulouse (France), and was soon followed by Rome and Bologna. Perhaps the most renowned historic case of fare abolition is that of Hasselt, in Belgium. Faced with the problem of high traffic congestion, its mayor declared in 1996 that “we don’t need new roads, we need new ideas.” Hasselt dropped plans for constructing a new ring road and instead eliminated fares and reformed the network of collective transport, giving it clear priority. Increases in operational costs and changes in the local government have subsequently led to the cancellation of Hasselt’s fare-free policy in 2014.

Ever since the 2000s, a plethora of fare-free systems emerged in Europe, where most (fifty-six) of the world’s cases of full FFPT are found. A particularly large number of them are located in Poland (twenty-one, all of which have emerged since 2010) and France (twenty). Many European municipalities justify FFPT as a strategy for reducing car usage (e.g. Avesta, Sweden; Bełchatów, Poland) and car-related pollution and noise (Tórshavn, Faroe Islands). In many towns, socio-political arguments are used: FFPT is explicitly conceived as a social policy aiming at helping disadvantaged groups (as in Lubin, Poland; Colomiers and Compiègne, France), or as an attempt to re-define collective transport as common good (Aubagne, France; Mława, Poland).

The geography of fare abolition thus embraces small or mid-sized towns with less than one hundred thousand inhabitants. Most of them rarely make the news — have you ever heard of Kościerzyna or Vitré, Hallstahammar or Lugo, Velenje or Akureyri? An important exception is Tallinn, the Estonian capital, which is the largest city (440,000 inhabitants) to currently host a ticket-free program, providing a strong argument that FFPT can work in a larger urban areas.

Still, transport experts seem convinced that fare abolition is irrational, senseless, and irresponsible. How to understand the fact that it nonetheless exists in nearly a hundred cities worldwide? Below I turn to the debate, and illustrate some of the arguments with examples from actually existing FFPT programs in Tallinn (Estonia) and Aubagne (France). The choice of these cities is not accidental; each of them is important in studying FFPT. Aubagne, located in the suburbs of Marseille, is among the most widely discussed cases of fare abolition in France, an important centre of FFPT. Tallinn, meanwhile, promotes itself as “the capital of free public transport,” and is actively promoting this policy domestically and abroad.

Harmful and Irrational?

Most transport academics and practitioners discuss FFPT in terms of its utility, efficiency, and contribution to economic growth (or lack thereof). The idea of abolishing fares is criticized for threatening the financial stability of public transport networks. Free access to buses and trams eliminates revenue from tickets while increasing the cost of maintaining security and responding to higher passenger demand. As a transport official from Montpellier (France) explains, zeroing fares is a policy that “deprives public transport of resources essential for its development.” Furthermore, according to many transport engineers and economists, public transport should function as a self-funded or for-profit agency subject to market mechanisms.

FFPT is therefore a “fake good idea” based on the illusion that “there are goods or services that have no cost.” In other words, reducing the price to zero allegedly devalues the service to both its operators and passengers-clients. Finally, FFPT is often portrayed as an irrational idea. Supposedly, fares are not only a source of economic revenue, but also as a mechanism that controls passenger behavior. Without tickets, passengers would make trips that engineers deem marginal, “non-productive” or even “useless.” Put simply, the existence of tickets is what keeps passengers from

going insane.

However, some analysts point out that abolishing fares can help decrease equipment and personnel costs. Getting rid of the various devices and machines used to sell, validate, and control tickets saves money. No money has to be spent on secure cash management systems that include counting rooms, cameras, cash pickup, and deposit services. No commission is paid for third-party ticket sales, paper or electronic tickets, and accounting services.

At the same time, the lost revenue from ticket sales usually constitutes only a part of total public transport budget. This means the actual costs of maintenance and investment in a public transport system are never fully covered by its passengers — the public subsidy plays a much more important role in this regard.

These arguments are supported by the evidence from Tallinn and Aubagne. Before Tallinn switched to a fare-free system, only one-third of the operational budget of its public transport network was covered by revenue from fares, while the remaining two-thirds were provided by a direct municipal subsidy. Crucially, free fares are offered only to registered residents of the city.

As a result, between May 2012 (seven months before the implementation of FFPT) and May 2016 the number of Tallinn residents increased from 415,000 to 440,000, visibly attracted by access to free rides. Since Estonian municipalities have the right to collect part of their residents' personal income tax, and the average tax contribution per resident amounts to €1600 per year, gaining twenty-five thousand new residents meant generating €40 million of additional revenue per year. This largely covered the money lost from fares (€12.2 million) and investments made to respond to increased demand (€11.7 million). As a result, instead of losing money, Tallinn gained €16.3 million per year.

In Aubagne, revenue from fares was even less (8.6 percent of the operational budget) and fare-dodging was common. A switch to FFPT in part enabled local authorities to increase the *versement transport* — a tax that French municipalities can collect from local companies with more than eleven employees. Following French law, the tax could be increased from 1.05 percent to 1.8 percent once Aubagne committed to building a right-of-way tram line — a project that should be seen as integral to the shift to a fare-free network, which, besides zeroing fares, meant a thorough redesign and improvement of public transport services. The increase in the *versement transport* raised revenue by €5.7 million, which together with operational savings (€160,000) largely covered the cost of fare abolition (€1.57 million).

Unsustainable?

Another set of arguments regarding FFPT revolves around the question of its capacity to contribute to “sustainable” mobility. In this perspective, transport is seen as key component of the “good city,” which is not only economically strong, but also socially cohesive and diverse, environmentally friendly, healthy, and participatory. To increase “quality of life” and “livability,” the proponents of sustainable mobility focus on the challenge of facilitating a shift from cars to public transport and “soft” modes such as cycling and walking.

From this perspective, sustainable transport researchers claim that disincentivizing the use of cars — through parking policy, congestion charging, or increasing fuel taxes — is more effective in terms of regulating car mobility than abolishing fares in public transport. Moreover, it's assumed that new passengers attracted by FFPT are pedestrians and cyclists, rather than car drivers. Consequently, for many public transport operators, reducing the price of tickets to zero works against efforts to increase the quality of their service.

None of these claims seem valid when looking at the data from actual cases of FFPT. First of all, each and every fare abolition program appears to generate a significant increase in the number of passengers. In Tallinn, within three years of fare abolition the number of passengers increased by 14 percent. In the same span of time in Aubagne, whose public transport network had clearly been underused, the number of passengers went up by a stunning 135.8 percent. Can such an increase in passengers — whether they previously used cars, bicycles, or walked — be considered a negative phenomenon?

Although it was clearly not the among the main aims of the policy, FFPT nonetheless attracted some car users to public transport. In Tallinn, the share of public transport increased by 9 percent, and that of cars decreased by 3 percent. In Aubagne, although no precise data is available, a smaller shift to public transport has been observed in passenger surveys: 20 percent of new passengers who used to drive claim to have abandoned their cars precisely because of free rides. Finally, while in Tallinn as well as Aubagne the quality of public transport significantly increased before fare abolition, it continued to do so not just despite, but precisely *because* of FFPT. Providing free rides to passengers generated even stronger political support for developing public transport, which in both cities stands at the center of the political agenda.

Socially Just, Politically Transformative

The third set of arguments in the debate about FFPT views the policy not in terms of its economic viability or contribution to sustainable development, but its potential to facilitate a profound and long-term social and political transformation. The fundamental value of fare abolition lies in simplifying the way public transport is used: it can be taken by anybody, at any time, according to any needs they may have. Public transport is thus imagined not as a commodity, but as a “common good” — similar to many other public services such as health care, education, parks, roads, sidewalks, cycling paths, streetlights and lampposts, libraries, schools, kindergartens, or playgrounds.

Just as in the case of these services, we could imagine public transport being continuously provided free of charge, regardless of whether it’s needed in a given moment or not. After all, you don’t have to insert coins to light an individual lamp posts on your way home at night, or pay for every minute spent in a park or library.

In this sense, FFPT introduces a different logic into transport. It moves away from the market-oriented focus on profitability and demand management. It directly challenges a free-market dogma that “continues to envisage payment as a way of assuring that infrastructure is respected.”

For some municipal officials, it fits the socialist vision of transport as a public, accessible and affordable service. For others, it expresses a more radical, anticapitalist principle of de-commodifying common goods and services, and signals a transition from “customer-passengers” to “citizens.” Abolishing fares may be seen as way of challenging bio-political control over passengers exercised through ticketing and surveillance, which is often accompanied by policing strategies that focus especially on undocumented users.

Finally, providing unconditional access to public transport has been praised for directly addressing the issue of social exclusion, inequality, and transport poverty. Increasing accessibility for lower-income passengers means creating a more socially just transport system. A fare-free network “shows solidarity with the weak, with those who cannot afford a car, with those who are dependent on public transport, who are particularly affected by its drawbacks.”

That outcome is clearly visible in Tallinn. Providing unconditional access to public transport resulted

in increased use among the unemployed (32 percent) and low-income groups (26 percent among residents with income less than 300 euros per month). Buses and trams are used more heavily by residents on parental or home leaves (21 percent), and pensioners (17 percent). This phenomenon is visible across age groups, and particularly among the youth (21 percent among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds), the middle-aged (16 percent among forty- to forty-nine-year-olds) and the elderly (19 percent among residents between sixty- and seventy-four-year-olds).

The use of public transport has increased in post-Soviet housing estates where a large share of Russian-speaking Tallinners live, facilitating integration for that ethnic group. At the same, use has also been on the rise in middle-class neighborhoods, showing that free rides are not just attractive for the poor.

It is clear, however, that FFPT “would not solve all of our problems; rather, at best it would represent the first step” towards a wider transformation of the power relations that shape transport. Against mobility experts who claim that passengers are more concerned with issues of safety, frequency, reliability, and availability of transport, a variety of organizations and movements have campaigned for fare abolition.

One of their many examples is the *Movimento Passe Livre* (“free fare movement”) that emerged in Brazil during protests against an increase of public transport fares across the country in June 2013. The question of increased ticket prices was important not only as a sign of stark inequality between highly mobile car-driving urbanites and the urban poor who have no choice but to use public transport. FFPT also constituted a rallying cry against the continuing commodification of public services and their imposition of purely economic, “rational,” and “sustainable” considerations.

What About the Workers?

In addition to this debate, the issue of FFPT reflects on the position of transport workers. How does a switch to a fare-free system affect them? In many cities, including Tallinn and Aubagne, FFPT has been applauded by drivers for improving their labor conditions. Even if working hours and salaries remained the same, drivers no longer have to sell and monitor tickets, which used to be a source of considerable stress.

The shift to FFPT also means that drivers no longer have to count cash at the end of their working day. In Aubagne, one driver told me that FFPT “is heavenly. It means no more stress . . . about fare-dodging, checking tickets . . . With [FFPT] the driver can focus on driving and welcoming passengers, that’s it.” The policy “transformed the the job of the bus driver, who now has only one question in mind: driving the bus well.”

The shift has not been entirely positive for all workers. In Tallinn, as many as seventy out of eighty ticket controllers were made redundant. In Aubagne, ticket inspectors were made responsible for maintaining security aboard buses, since initially there were widespread concerns that fare abolition would result in vandalism. Once security issues were quickly understood to be minor, inspectors were further directed to supervise the drivers’ attitude and performance — instead of monitoring passengers, they now monitor other workers.

The decreased scope of duties under FFPT leaves the position of drivers within their respective transport agencies the same, if not weaker. In Tallinn, although drivers can join a company-based trade union, their actual capacity to engage in collective bargaining continues to be severely limited by a system in which individual salary bonuses aren’t awarded to employees who raise objections to company policy. As one driver told me, “with or without fares, there is fixed bonus every month: if you drive on time, the bonus comes, but if you make a [complaint] then the bonus can be reduced.”

In Aubagne, FFPT was introduced in the context of a shift from a family-like business to a privatized network run by a local branch of Veolia, a French transnational company. For one local trade unionist, there is “a major contradiction between abolishing fares and letting a private company . . . manage it.” Although Veolia adhered and adjusted to FFPT, it simultaneously implemented a series of measures “rationalizing” the PT network. For instance, drivers’ individual punctuality began to be measured by a GPS system, and their responsibility for managing the company gradually diminished. The introduction of FFPT complicated their situation rather than empowered them in their struggle to join trade unions of their choice, and to have a voice in the debate about the company’s policy.

Transport Is Not (Only) About Transport

The controversy created by the question of fare abolition reveals a wider problem regarding how urban transport is conceived and analyzed. The debate about transport seems to be dominated by technical and economic narratives, while the explicitly social and political dimensions of mobility are often sidelined. In the particular case of FFPT, approaching the policy as a transport mechanism generates a series of myths and misunderstandings that are not substantiated by the evidence from actually existing cases of FFPT programs. Although fare abolition is assumed to break the bank, in reality it may help generate new revenue, by attracting new tax paying residents (Tallinn), or raising local taxes (Aubagne). While it’s attacked as a measure that fails to make cities more sustainable and livable, there is evidence that free rides are to some extent attractive to car drivers, and thus help increase the use of public transport, which in turn means less air pollution and noise. The quality of free transport services is not necessarily worse than paid transport — FFPT can act as a powerful symbolic statement of political support for collective transport.

In other words, transport policies are not (only) about transport. It is when looking at FFPT as an *urban* policy rather than a *transport* policy that we can begin to fully understand its ambition and impact. This requires seeing it not in a vacuum of mathematical modeling or analysis of traffic flows, but in the context of the specific place in which it is designed and put into practice — undergirded by power relations and political struggles, interacting with its spatial and social context, affecting the labor conditions of its workers. This means that, while the policy of abolishing public transport fares is obviously related to the field of transport, it cannot be understood as a transport policy alone.

Republished from [LAVA](#).

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