

Tilman Bracher

Abstract

In late January 2011, the third conference of the series “kommunal mobil” organised by the Federal Environmental Agency and the German Institute of Urban Affairs took place under the heading “Sustainable Mobility—Local Authorities Take Courage.” The event gave local authorities the opportunity to present and discuss their urban and transport planning approaches to sustainable mobility and to gather ideas on the subject. With 15 papers and some 50 contributions to discussions, lively use was made of the occasion. The pleasant venue for the conference was the modern building of the Federal Environmental Agency in Dessau-Roßlau with its high ecological and energy-saving standards together with the Bauhaus.

Not only the positive impacts of mobility in daily life but also the negative effects are apparent in cities. Excessive emissions of harmful greenhouse gases and air pollution by urban traffic continue to impair the quality of life in the city. Private motorised transport still occupies too much valuable urban land. The dramatic advance of climate change offers opportunities and calls for a new departure.

The subject of sustainable mobility was treated in all its facets by reputed practitioners, scientists, and politicians. The president of the Federal Environmental Agency, Jochen Flasbarth, pointed to the persistently high environmental pollution from urban traffic and discussed various approaches to the problem. For instance, half of all journeys by car could easily be undertaken by bicycle or on foot, so that a shift to non-motorised transport is a promising approach, which, however, requires planning and realizing a “city of short distances.” In Flasbarth's view, the environmentally and climate-friendly redevelopment of the city offers many opportunities for making cities more beautiful and attractive than today, and hence for enhancing the quality of life.

Parliamentary secretary of state in the Federal Ministry of the Environment Ursula Heinen-Esser made it clear that, in the framework of its climate protection policy, the Federal Government had committed itself to markedly reducing carbon dioxide emissions in the transport sector, too. She presented projects of the Ministry under the National Development Plan for Electric Mobility, drawing attention to a new development programme for local authorities under the National Climate Protection Initiative.

The second day opened with greetings from the mayor of Dessau-Roßlau Klemens Koschig. The director of the German Institute of Urban Affairs Klaus J. Beckmann then gave an overview of the major challenges facing local authorities owing to their financial straits and demographic change. Among other things, he pointed out that the declining dependence of the population on the car opens up new degrees of freedom and opportunities.

In the course of the conference it became clear that transport and environmental experts were meanwhile well aware what concepts can enable “sustainable mobility” to be achieved. The proceedings of the first two “kommunal mobil” conferences document starting points for health, environmental protection, and climate protection. In practice, however, the problem lies in implementation. New technical solutions are often not needed as much as committed and courageous action by decision makers.

It was abundantly clear that the way to largely climate-neutral urban transport—by 2050 a reduction of up to 95 per cent in carbon emissions is required—calls for far-reaching changes in lifestyle: residential patterns involving short distances, mobility with less private motorisation, different working and leisure-time patterns. But how are we to achieve such changes in lifestyle? Far too little is yet known about the structures that “obstruct” changes in lifestyle. It was pointed out, for example, that arguments in favour of dealing cautiously with automobility had failed to reach certain people at all and that the high cost of motorised traffic was ignored.

The first topic block was “Climate Change—Opportunity to Rediscover the Quality of Life.” The attractive and liveable city needs nature and climate protection. Birgit Georgi of the European Environment Agency in Copenhagen, Bernd Schott from the university city of Tübingen, and Andreas Berk from Heilbronn argued convincingly that integrated approaches were highly promising. Georgi made it clear that mobility is an important, integral part of the quality of life and that cities have a key role to play in maintaining it. Cities offer good preconditions for energy efficiency and economical land consumption. Under the motto “Blue Mobility,” the university city of Tübingen pursues a bundle of detailed measures reaching from parking space management and inner-city improvement up to redesign of the mobility hub around the railway station. In Heilbronn, the Stadtbahn (combined tram and urban rapid transport) is being planned and built in the context of the inner-city redevelopment campaign and is the main driving force. It is a catalyst for new urbanity: the Stadtbahn as inner-city development axis. The hurdles to northward expansion of the system have meanwhile all been successfully taken. The example of the Blue Zone in Tübingen provoked debate on whether it is useful to develop existing environmental zones into “climate protection zones” to foster non-motorised mobility, public transport, and low carbon vehicles.

The topic block on “E-Mobility” reported on the success and prospects of the current initiative of the Federal Government to develop electric cars to market maturity; doubts were also expressed on the rationality of the present electric mobility debate, since conventional, heavy cars cannot operate ecologically even with electric propulsion. Whereas the modern trolley bus of Mattis Schindler (Salzburg AG) was presented as an ecological alternative to hybrid and diesel buses, and Münster's leading transport planner Michael Milde discussed the considerable potential of pedelecs (bicycles with electric pedal assistance) in regional commuter traffic in the Münsterland region, Felix Huber from the University of Wuppertal addressed, among other things, the potential of electric mobility for the car. He saw it above all in a trend towards smaller vehicles and in local carsharing and less in substitution of the classical car. In the ensuing discussion on e-mobility, it became clear with regard to pedelecs that the infrastructure was still lacking for such an improved and faster bicycle and that new areas of conflict could be expected on cycle tracks, sidewalks, and in traffic calming areas. The notable gist of the Salzburg trolley bus success story was that we would now have more electric public transport if politicians were to take a long-term perspective.

In the topic block “Urban development—Mobile with Less Automobility,” Gerd-Axel Ahrens from the Technical University of Dresden discussed empirical findings that the affinity of the urban population for the car will decline in the long term and is even now significantly lower among young adults. Town planner Norbert Schröder-Klings from Freiburg talked about practical experience in new residential areas with changing infrastructure provision concepts in which car-sharing, public transport, and bicycle transport predominate.

Just how important the element “communication” is for a new culture of mobility was demonstrated by Frank Jülich from the Nuremberg transport planning office and Oscar Reutter from the Wuppertal Institute, who presented examples of campaigns at the local and national levels. The successful communication campaigns “Nuremberg in the Saddle” and “Head On: Engine Off” show that the infrastructure and changes in behaviour are topics for communication and

that campaigns are a suitable means for attracting attention and bringing transport policy topics home to the public, politicians, and decision-makers. That communication is vital for questions of spatial mobility has been repeatedly shown recently in very emotional debates on transport projects. In this connection, Reutters key statement is also interesting, namely that the time of money and construction is now over in transport policy, and that we are witnessing a shift in paradigm.

The “kommunal mobil” conference aims to make good practices known and provide ideas for promising approaches. It sees itself as a link between theory and practice. Good science raises questions. The “kommunal mobil” conference thus invites thoughts about a number of questions:

- Much more difficult than introducing new fuels or modified vehicles is transforming daily mobility patterns in the interests of achieving greater ecological sustainability. What answers can we offer to this challenge?
- Should environmental zones be redefined as climate protection zones or as zones for low carbon vehicles far beyond their present relevance in combating pollution?
- How can we manage to tap new sources of finance for the new challenges, for example for new pedelec infrastructure or for urban development through urban planning?

In conclusion, the organisers wish to thank all speakers and participants for their contribution to the success of the conference. One speaker wrote to us that he found the conference very good, the contributions well balanced, the atmosphere perfect, and the time frame so well organised that sufficient time remained for deep and far-reaching discussions. We are extremely gratified by this response; it gives us every incentive to continue the “kommunal mobil” series.