

“Citizens bus around citizens” in rural Brieselang

Received via Governance International

Published On: 30 November 2015

Organisation: BürgerBus Brieseland e.V.

Country: Germany

Level of government: Local government

Sector: General public services

Type: Partnerships, Public Service

Launched in: 2006

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

In 2006 a number of citizens got together and decided to do something about inaccessible transport issues in Brandenburg. It had become evident that neither of the key public transport agencies in the area – the transport company run by the district authority and the regional public transport network - could solve this unsatisfactory situation. The result was a new community association and a new mini-bus to complement the existing public transport offer in the area.

Why the innovation was developed

- Like many rural areas elsewhere, the local authority of Brieselang (with about 11,000 inhabitants) in the Land (state) of Brandenburg, close to Berlin, suffered from poor public transport.
 - In particular, elderly people living in two outer areas called Bredow and Zeestow, had difficulties getting to the town centre to access shops and public facilities and the train station which connects with Berlin.
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Objectives

Improve access, Improve service quality, Improve social equity, Improve user satisfaction

- Promote mobility.
 - To improve access to public facilities.
 - To complement the offer of public transport.
 - To connect local areas better with each other.
 - To get citizens to deliver services for each other.
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Main beneficiaries

Elderly people, Low-income groups, People with disabilities

- Elderly residents in Brandenburg
 - People that rely on public transport
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Results

Effectiveness

- Since the beginning of service, more than 17 000 passengers have been carried. At the moment, capacity usage is over 50 percent. The association now has 3 female and 23 male drivers, who have already driven a total of 59,000 km.
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Service quality

Accessibility:

- The citizen bus service came into operation on 10 December 2007 - it seemed just like a Christmas present to everybody involved! The bus runs from Monday to Friday from 7.45 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. and serves two routes.
- Take-up by citizens has been increasing over time and is currently 45-50%. Older inhabitants cannot imagine living in Brieselang any more without the bus. We often get comments from passengers that “It is so great to know you are there when we need to use you,” or “Now, I can even make a sightseeing trip around this area, instead of just staying at home” are two typical statements often heard from our passengers.

Development

Design

To implement their ideas, a new transport co-delivery scheme with volunteers had to be developed. It was quickly obvious that this would also require the foundation of an community association (in German law "eingetragener Verein").

The citizens involved therefore had to gear up on the legal issues related to founding a new association, the tax implications, etc.

Implementation

Tools used:

- All future drivers had, by law, to pass physical and medical examinations to assure passengers' safety. Moreover, the association had to guarantee a reliable failure-free service, eight hours a day, five days a week.
- So one of the most important challenges was to organize a system of motivated drivers and also a foolproof system of automatic substitution procedures for those cases where some driver unexpectedly did not turn up. Furthermore, we had to work out a way of dealing with drivers who didn't have enough discipline to keep to the agreed timetables – and those who just found that driving the mini-bus was too hard for them.
- Clearly, there also had to be a practical system for providing a replacement when the bus broke down or had to be maintained. And, in the future, we will have to find a way of buying a new vehicle, when the old one becomes unserviceable.
- Future challenges are the extension of the timetable to week-ends and to new routes. It will also be essential to recruit more drivers, so that the burden can be distributed between more volunteers.

Resources used:

- The average operating costs of the citizen bus is about EUR 23 000 per year. About EUR 5000 can be covered by from ticket sales. The remaining costs are shared by the district authority and the local council.
 - A bus ticket costs EUR 1.30 for the first 3 km, EUR 1.50 Euro for longer journeys within the local area – once passengers buy a ticket for journeys that go outside the local area but remain inside the region-wide transport system of Berlin-Brandenburg (VBB) (including the whole of the city of Berlin), this costs from EUR 3.00 to EUR 3.50. So the local bus service is integrated within the overall capital city transportation system.
 - The bus drivers are insured through the volunteer insurance policy of the state of Brandenburg.
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Challenges and solutions

- The challenges of implementing a good idea within a complex legal framework became quickly evident. In particular, the association had to convince both the company registration and taxation authorities that it was not aiming to become profit-making, but rather was just looking to provide basic rural transport services.
- Eventually, all the obstacles were overcome and the new association was founded in June 2007, with 41 local residents as individual members. The local council became an associate member (without voting rights), which ensured that the (directly elected) mayor, or a representative, would take part in the meetings of the association, which was important to improve coordination and partnership working with the local council.
- The next challenge was to get funding to buy and operate an 8-passenger mini-bus and to get an operating license. This involved filling out many forms and making a lot of visits to public agencies.
- Two public funders were eventually found - EUR 35 000 came from the state government lottery, while the local and district authorities agreed to share the operating costs of the bus. The income from ticket sales and from the community association's membership fees also contribute to the operating costs. After the first year, financing rules changed and so the business plan had to be redone, bringing in one different funder.
- In November 2013 a new vehicle was bought with a price of EUR 45 000. The new bus was financed by the district authority and the local authority in Brieselang. Actually already 170,000 km were driven since November 2013.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- CitizenBus Brieselang benefitted a lot from early contacts with similar associations in North Rhine-Westphalia and by learning from lessons learnt elsewhere. Nevertheless, it still found that there were considerable challenges in overcoming legal, financial and cultural barriers.
- In the developing phase of the initiative we had to find answers to issues such as: How to be taken seriously by public agencies? How to convince funders? How to convince licensing agencies? How to get other volunteers and users on board? How to deal with criticism?
- Most importantly, how not to get discouraged when we didn't appear to be making progress. After more than two years of the project, we can say that co-delivery of public services by citizens does work but it takes a long time to become accepted by professional service providers.
- It is also important to be realistic as to what volunteers are willing to do and are able to achieve. In particular, professional support with project management is vital at all stages (design, planning, delivery and sustainability).
- Although the public position is always that ideas from citizens about becoming more engaged are always welcome, there is a long journey from being perceived as a "trouble maker" to being accepted as a genuine partner of public agencies.

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