

Public transport in Finland: today and tomorrow

The common threat of global warming faced by all humankind requires Finnish society to implement massive changes in its goals and actions. Traffic accounts for approximately one fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions. The transport sector has both the potential and an obligation to combat the constantly growing impacts of global warming.

The problem here lies in conflicting social and economic interests, particularly in the short term. Finnish transport policy must undergo a distinct change of direction if we are to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions from traffic. The most pressing question is whether we are actually prepared to take this step. Ultimately our political decision-makers are responsible for the direction of Finland's future but there are also choices each and every citizen can make.

Public transport in the transport system and as part of society

Public transport can be profitably operated wherever there is a large enough public to be served. Sparsely populated Finland poses a problem in terms of public transport provision. At 65 percent, the urbanisation rate of Finland is low in the European perspective. The concentration of population into urban regions, where public transport is developed, is still underway in Finland. The detrimental impacts of traffic such as congestion, number of traffic accidents, air pollution and noise must be alleviated through a focused transport policy.

The main way to deliver a properly functioning transport system throughout an urban region is to provide the conditions for public transport to grow.

International examples are encouraging. Experiences in Central Europe demonstrate the power of goal-setting and effective investment. When demanding, politically binding goals have been set for the modal share of public transport, effective tools and resources to achieve these goals have also been identified.

It is important to understand that public transport strives to offer efficient travel facilities as part of people's everyday wellbeing. At the same time, it can be used as a tool to achieve the development goals of an entire urban region. Only along these lines can fast connections between districts and from districts to a city centre be arranged, the adverse environmental impacts and safety risks of traffic be reduced, a favourable business environment created and an enjoyable milieu ensured for all.

Unfortunately, public transport is not always recognised as the powerful tool that it is when determining the goals of strategic development in urban regions, which may also explain the reluctance to allocate sufficient funds to its development. The cities of Vienna and Linz, for example, have successfully invested in public transport and the related promotion of pedestrian and bicycle traffic at the expense of other modes of transport. Their examples show that major leaps in increasing the popularity of public transport cannot be achieved without significant commitment.

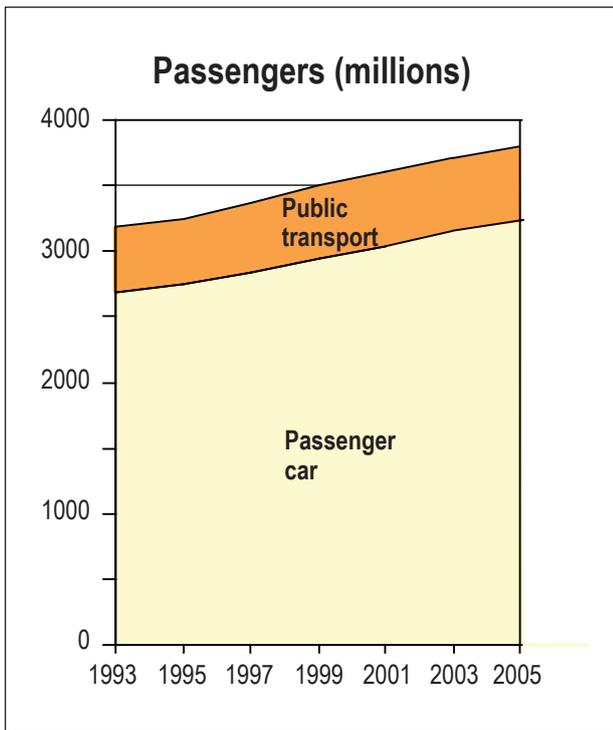


Figure 1-1. Passenger transport growth in Finland between 1993 and 2005, million passengers/year (Mass transport performance statistics 2005, draft from January 2007).

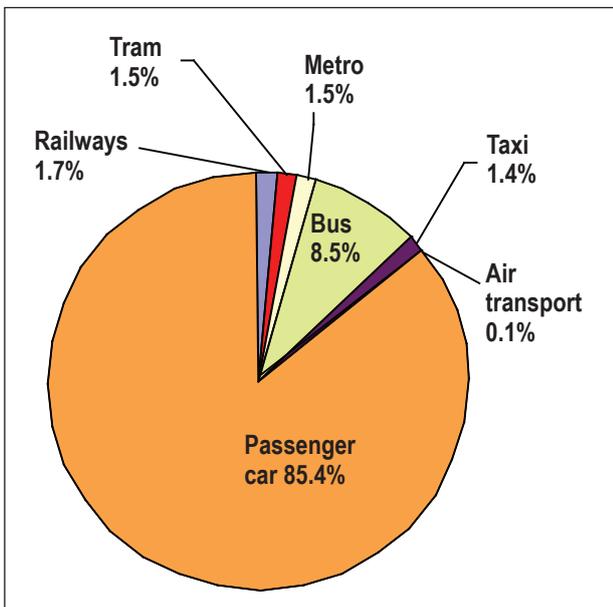


Figure 1-2. Market shares of mass transport and passenger car transport passenger volumes in Finland in 2005 (Mass transport performance statistics 2005, draft from January 2007).

Public transport in figures

Finnish society spends well over 2.5 billion euros each year on the construction and maintenance of thoroughfares and on all transport services. Public transport and person transport account for some 600 million euros of this sum in the form of various kinds of transport services and subsidies provided by society. Even this sum is insufficient to guarantee an adequate standard of quality and service in public transport to all passengers.

Passenger transport in Finland has seen an intense increase in motorisation since the 1960s. Today, well over 80 percent of Finns live in households that own at least one car. Passenger transport on the whole is divided into private transport and public transport. Private transport comprises the aforementioned growing passenger car transport along with pedestrian and bicycle traffic while public transport encompasses all other public transport and special transport provided to citizens. Taxis are nowadays also considered part of the public transport system, especially when used instead of buses in rural areas where transport demand is low.

Nearly nine percent of the total passenger volume is transported by bus, 1.7 percent by rail and only 0.1 percent by air. Air traffic within Finland mainly serves as feeder traffic for international flights. Most of these depart from Helsinki–Vantaa Airport, although many of the larger cities also offer direct international flights. Budget airlines have launched a new wave of growth in the air transport industry, primarily by attracting new groups of customers. On the other hand, global insecurity and the threat of terrorism are increasingly undermining the position of air transport. Passenger transport by sea is of little significance in Finland, as passengers are mainly transported on the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea.

The public service network and its standard of service in Finland rate fairly high by international standards. Citizens in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area are provided with a wide range of public transport services used for approximately one million trips each day. Train and bus traffic between major urban regions, serving commuters in particular, enables easy mobility also between different parts of the country.

Statistics show that the standing of public transport is constantly deteriorating in rural areas. In mid-sized urban regions, public transport is at risk of decline unless significant action is taken and the proper concerns addressed.

Congested urban regions and declining rural areas

The future of public transport in Finland is beset by great challenges in two respects. On the one hand, public transport needs to be made more attractive in growing urban regions. Meanwhile, public transport is declining in rural areas due to low demand and lack of funds. Public transport is no longer economically viable in areas of declining population. New forms of service integrating the affordability of public transport and the flexibility of passenger car traffic need to be identified for these areas.

The goal of current transport policy has been to provide residents of sparsely populated rural areas with service between rural areas and urban centres in accordance with demand. A new policy introduces the concept of public transport provision in keeping with a basic standard of service. This means safeguarding certain minimum opportunities for travelling to local centres and back. Rural areas have become highly motorised, as the supply of public transport is scant due to low population and low demand. In future, the passenger car may well be the only possible solution for many rural households. A vicious cycle has been born.

Future concerns include especially the ageing population, non-car owning citizens and schoolchildren, who cannot drive or who do not have regular access to rides. The solution to these concerns should be sought from the integration of different travel needs, which would give rise to demand sufficient for reasonable public transport provision. Outside major cities, many municipalities spend more money on statutory transport in the sectors of education, social services and health than they do on universal public transport. In terms of the individual passenger, travel needs are the same regardless of the type of service supply used to meet demand.

Another significant concern lies in the fragmentation of community structure in growth centres. The highest population growth is seen on the outskirts of cities and in surrounding municipalities, increasingly farther away from jobs and services. The conditions for public transport and pedestrian and bicycle traffic deteriorate in a fragmenting community structure while total traffic volume and its adverse impacts increase. The current situation of national, regional and local decision-making operating on different time spans along with a fairly incoherent administrative structure hardly contribute to any speedy resolution of the issue. The same applies to traffic and land use planning, both of

which are key stages of planning in respect of public transport. The interests of the parties impacting on public transport may also cover different timescales, thus further contributing to friction in furthering the achievement of common goals.

The keys to successful public transport in urban regions lie in land use planning and town planning. The conditions for public transport can also easily be destroyed if the matter is paid no heed in land use planning. The worst-case scenario involves land use planned primarily around passenger cars. The United States provides a concrete example of the kind of community structure to which a policy focusing on the passenger car has led. Decisions to base mobility on passenger cars were taken in the United States already in the early decades of the 1900s. The developments there are thus anything but the results of aimless drifting. The intense growth in car traffic and the serious problems to which it would give rise could not be seen at the time but now, it is painfully obvious how difficult it is to modify community structure towards one more amenable to public transport. Due to the longevity of the built environment, it should be possible to anticipate decisions concerning traffic for decades into the future. Change is slow, difficult and expensive. The planning stage is of vital significance. The linkage of public transport development into wider development efforts in urban regions and on the national scale has produced good results.

The benefits and necessity of public transport

The favouring of public transport delivers solid benefits that foster the goals of sustainable development, high standard of environmental quality and good living. Public transport is significantly safer than driving. In addition, lower energy consumption and emissions levels per passenger can be achieved through the sufficient load factor of public transport. The problem is that neither individual citizens nor even decision-makers prioritise the adverse environmental impacts caused by traffic. In densely built urban regions, the issue of rational space use also comes into play. Public transport is capable of transporting many times the number of persons in a passenger car along the same physical thoroughfare in the same amount of time. The driver is very often the only person in most passenger cars: the average load factor of passenger cars in Finland is approximately 1.3 persons.

Moreover, the maintenance of public transport supports social equality and the general wellbeing of citi-

zens. The mobility of non-car owning citizens mostly depends on public transport or the help of friends and neighbours. We need to determine the value of the mobility of the less advantaged in transport policy decisions. Shall we support the mobility of the poor and elderly in sparsely populated areas or shall we leave it to others to help them?

Public transport as well as walking and cycling in growing urban regions must be supported if we are to restrict motor traffic in the long run. The goal is to halt the growth of increasingly congested passenger car traffic and even reduce it in the longer term. The ultimate underlying goal of all action is to slow global climate change. The alternative is taking radical steps to curb energy consumption and traffic already in the relatively short term.

Future tools for increasing the share of public transport

Means of increasing the share of public transport in the modal split are constantly being studied in Finland. The most effective method has been found to be the focused combination of several tools, encouraging passengers to abandon their cars in favour of public transport while also restricting passenger car use. The new possibilities in transport service provision must be thoroughly studied. Public transport can be provided by other than traditional means. Everything starts with the determination and identification of passenger needs and the integration of the needs of different passenger groups whenever possible. Once needs have been identified, it is basically a technical matter to dimension transport. Taxis the size of passenger cars are ideal for low demand. A wide range of vehicles between passenger car and bus is available for a rising scale of capacity requirements. Public transport entrepreneurs and the local government possibly subsidising the transport system each have their own economic viability criteria. What is of prime importance is that the laws and decrees governing public transport do not hamper rational operations. Legislation tends to lag behind development.

The networking of operators to serve customer interests is an important stage in the planning and implementation of innovations. The same applies in urban regions and rural areas alike, yet goals vary greatly in different parts of Finland. The key aim in urban regions is to create a public transport system ideal in terms of the user that would increase the share of public transport in all trips taken. Creating a network of operators seeks to give rise to a working ur-

ban region and enjoyable urban environment. Insight into the needs and preferences of different groups of customers is vital if service of a high standard is to be provided to meet the specific needs of each passenger and passenger group. The modern passenger's choices are hardly predicated on the general good alone.

Although passengers value the high level of road safety enjoyed by public transport, lack of security on public transport has recently become a real concern. It has been observed in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (HMA) that public transport loses a number of passengers at certain times because it is perceived as insecure. Determined intervention in the problem by the authorities has already delivered promising results. Similar problems have been observed in other urban regions as well.

It is up to the network of operators to provide public transport services with a high level of security. A sense of insecurity may arise even when the actual risk is low. The sense of insecurity is always real to the individual and as such should constitute sufficient grounds for action to be taken. When the sense of insecurity results in passengers foregoing public transport, what is at issue for public transport is a genuine fall in demand.

Greater effectiveness must be squeezed out of the resources invested by government in the transport system. Sufficient resources must be channelled into the proper allocation of resources. The financial support given to transport must not be allowed to end up benefiting individual operators only, thus sidelining the issue of benefit to society. Methods of measuring the effectiveness of public transport undertakings should indeed be improved substantially. The grounds for calculating effectiveness must be called into question if the outcome of their application is the seeming unprofitability of just about any investment in public transport.

Who uses the public transport of the future, and where?

Public transport must stay in tune with the times if it is to be successful. The living conditions of people in the future must be taken into account. Focus on the individual, rising expectations as to the quality of travel, rapid advancements in technology and the growing relative proportion of the ageing population in rural areas are features typical of the change in society. Global warming has already entered the list of people's concerns and even business has gained awareness of the issue. Before long, we can expect this to

influence also the transport choices of decision-makers and citizens.

The future of public transport in rural areas seems grim. Universal public transport is withering away for lack of passengers. The frugal level of basic service determined in transport policy is ensured through purchases of transport services because demand is insufficient to maintain even the most essential connections. Travel dispatch services are used to steer statutory travel towards public transport. The goal is to win over new passengers for public transport while also gaining savings on person transports.

On the other hand, the private car user in growth centre regions values individuality, comfort, speed and freedom of choice. Since the time use of the public transport passenger of the future is fragmented, he also appreciates speed as well as comfort and reliability. Enhancing the speed, reliability and enjoyability of public transport thus becomes the key goal. Tech-

nology can be used to provide information of a high standard, while intelligent transport systems help create a transport environment functional also in terms of public transport.

People of the future will want to be able to flexibly combine different transport modes in their travel. Public transport must fit seamlessly into the overall transport system and also be supported through park-and-ride systems for pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The relentless pursuit of economic growth will, however, lead to a substantial rise in traffic volume, which in turn is on a direct collision course with the goal of sustainable development. It would seem that the emissions reductions imposed on traffic are impossible to achieve without restrictive measures. In all likelihood, even financial steering mechanisms will prove insufficient on their own and will need to be supplemented with other restrictive means, which may vary according to time, location and technology employed. ■

Sources

Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland. Julkisen liikenteen suoritetilasto 2005. Luonnos tammikuu 2007. [Mass transport performance statistics 2005. Draft from January 2007]

Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland. Liikenne 2030. Asiakaslähtöistä ja innovatiivista liikennepolitiikkaa [Customer-driven and innovative transport policy]. Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland strategy documents. Draft of 26 January 2007.

Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland (2006). Linja-autoliikenteen rahoituksen uudistaminen [New finance methods for bus and coach transport]. Working group report. Publications 24/2006

Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland (2006). Pääkaupunkiseudun työssäkäyntialueen lähijunaliikenteen julkisen rahoituksen uudistaminen [Reform alternatives for public financing in train transport in the Helsinki metropolitan commuting area]. Working group report. Publications 1/2006.

Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland (2006). Uuteen käyttäjälähtöiseen ja innovatiiviseen liikennepolitiikkaan [Towards a new, user-driven and innovative transport policy]. Ministry of Transport and Communications Finland future surveys for parliamentary parties 30 June 2006.

Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council YTV (2005b). Liikennejärjestelmän kannalta hyvä yhdyskuntarakenne ja maankäyttö [Good infrastructure and land use from the transport system perspective]. YTV Publication B 2005:11. Helsinki.

Finnish Association of Civil Engineers RIL. (2005). Liikenne ja väylät [Traffic and thoroughfares] I, RIL 165-1, Helsinki 2005.