

## PRESS RELEASE

### A first step in reviving rural public transport



Photo credit: Nola Bunke

[Krakow, Poland - 1 February, 2015] In a small community in southern Poland, public transport fell victim to the usual problem confronting rural markets: declining ridership, funding problems and a service that was less than barebones. Eventually the service operator gave up on the area. What remains is a car belonging to the parish priest, and now used to ferry local elderly to and from medical appointments.

This was a typical story shared by Polish participants at a recent seminar in Krakow on “proactive marketing for sustainable rural transport”. The event, delivered as part of the EC-funded project SmartMove, gave advice to local authorities and others about the use of individualised marketing to maximize patronage of rural transport systems on tight budgets. About 40 people attended the event, including several local politicians and public transport stakeholders in Poland.

The main thrust of the seminar was a method of customer outreach called “active mobility consultancy”. In this, the public transport service is marketed through sharply focused campaigns targeting individual households within a certain catchment area of a transport line. The campaign seeks to engage each household—through phone calls, events, and home visits—in order to identify the reasons car users don’t use public transport. Once this is done, tailor-made information is provided to enable people to switch modes.

Prior experience shows that a lack of information is indeed a big barrier. Many rural residents don’t even know public transport serves their area. Some might be aware of the service but don’t know the location or timetable of their nearest bus stop. Some may know where their nearest stop is, but don’t know of a convenient way to reach it (e.g. by bike or a neighborhood carpool).

Active mobility consultancy can work. The SmartMove project is based on a successful pilot project carried out in 2009 in a rural corner of northeastern Austria called Waldviertel. As presented at the Krakow seminar by Roman Klementschtz of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna, the case involved a rural public transport system that was typical of many others in Europe. Patronage was declining and funding wasn’t assured for the future. “We told people, if you don’t use it, you might lose it,” Klementschtz recalled. “We told them that even if you don’t use it now, you might want to use it in a few years when you’re retired.”

The Waldviertel campaign targeted nearly 900 households. To start, the campaigners contacted households by phone to see if they were interested in a campaign that would provide them free individualized information about the public transport service in their immediate surroundings. More than three quarters of those contacted chose to take part, and the campaign led to great results: ridership on the bus line in the target area saw an increase of patronage of about 33 percent, far above the average growth in the Waldviertel region (19 percent).

Indeed, several of the Polish seminar participants are in search of such remedies. Take the village of Macharz, just outside Krakow, for example. According to a seminar participant, public transport operators say the community's population of 4,000 simply isn't sufficient to support public transport.

Another participant said public transport in a suburb of Warsaw had such a dubious cost/benefit ratio that the local mayor cancelled its service contract with the capital city's PT operator. Local residents responded by voting the man out of office, but public transport remains a vexing question there.

In short, rural public transport in Poland faces familiar problems. Supply is poor and budgets are often too tight to increase it. Active mobility campaigns offer a cheaper alternative—a way to get more passengers onto existing (perhaps partly empty) vehicles.

Wrapping up the meeting, SmartMove project coordinator Oliver Roeder, also of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna, said that running a successful rural public transport system is a puzzle, and that SmartMove offers one piece of the solution. SmartMove is a first step to see how you can attract more riders with a given supply that is far from ideal.

"Waldviertel is similar to many rural areas all over Europe – it's an area with some very small villages and a very limited public transport supply – but it boosted public transport use significantly."

For more information on this release or the SmartMove project, please see:

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