



Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST)

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Rural-Urban Governance Arrangements and Planning Instruments

Styrian Integrated Transport Association

Metropolitan Area of Styria, Austria

1. Overview

In Austria the organisational and financial basis for the operation of public transport is regulated by the Federal Law of “Local and Regional Public Transport”. The “Styrian Integrated Transport Association” (STA) was founded in 1994 as the cooperative institution of financing authorities, regional administration and individual transport companies in Styria. To support activities of the transport association, the Federal Ministry signed a basic charter agreement and financing contract with the province of Styria and the city of Graz on which the organisation and financing of the transport association is based. A financial subvention from the three regional authorities enables the agency to keep transport fares low.

One of the key achievements since the existence of STA is the introduction of a “zoning network” and a travel pass that covers all transport agencies and operators in these zones. The Styrian Integrated Transport Association network enables people to use the services of about 60 transport companies and their approximately 500 network lines at standardised prices.

2. Main Challenges

The STA is responsible for planning the regional bus network with its main tasks being the timetable arrangement, new transport services, passenger information, complaints handling and a standardised price regime. Challenges for detailed timetable planning include changes in the passenger flows and in the utilisation rate of the bus services, as well as identifying new transport connections.

For example, several municipalities in the area are particularly affected by suburbanisation and sprawl effects and therefore have increasing traffic volume. In particular, the southern part of Graz, but also other towns like Leoben, Bruck and Kapfenberg have strong urban-rural connections and thus the need for public transport beyond the city borders is constantly growing. These suburban areas developed at a very fast pace and the travel demand potential is still high and has to be satisfied.

Furthermore, the Styrian Municipal Structural Reform, which mainly means amalgamation of small units, came along with many administrative changes at local level. Within a few years (2013-2015), the number of Styrian municipalities was halved due to municipalities merging with one another. This administrative change entailed infrastructure adaptations, like reducing local services and closing local schools. Since pupils are, next to commuters, one of the main target groups of the STA, the smooth organisation of transporting pupils between home and school is one of the key challenges for the regional bus network. Therefore, the STA has to work closely with the municipalities and schools to adjust bus timetables and to react swiftly to changes in demand flows.

3. Main Insights

3.1. Insights related to the broad area of “network governance”

The STA works in close cooperation with the province of Styria as its contracting authority and the municipalities. The municipalities play an important role in the process of timetable arrangement. In many cases, the mayors and the administrators of the municipality, but also the regional transport companies, know about the problems and requirements in the public transport network. In some municipalities, citizens are invited via the municipal newspaper to submit suggestions and report transport problems and service gaps. Examples for reported problems are crowded busses or private cars parking in a forbidden area. Adaptation needs might thus include additional bus services and extended Park & Ride facilities.

The planning department of the province of Styria and the STA meet monthly to exchange on the needs, challenges and potentials of the municipalities, and consult about the strategic approach and necessary measures. On an informal level, the exchange between these two institutions takes place even on a daily basis.

3.2. Insights related to mechanisms of cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation

Intercommunal cooperation plays an important role in public transport. In Styria, already in 1996, five municipalities in the ‘Aichfeld’ region (Knittelfeld, Judenburg, Zeltweg, Spielberg and Fohnsdorf) established the first common bus service network to improve public transport offer. Nowadays, intercommunal cooperation is still a highly relevant strategy within STA, especially the cross-border-traffic between Graz and surrounding municipalities.

Intercommunal transport is often shaped by the transport zoning system, implemented in Styria since many years. For municipalities this is a very sensitive and intensively debated topic as many feel disadvantaged. During the Styrian Municipal Structural Reform (of the years 2013-2015) merging of municipalities allocated to different fare zones was particularly challenging. One example is the municipality Gratwein-Straßengel which in 2015 was merged out of four municipalities, all located in different fare zones. However,

the new municipality decided to equalize fares for its citizens and to come up for the price differences (between cheaper and most expensive zone). Hence, municipalities are not only financing directly public transport cost by bearing a certain percentage of the implementation costs, depending on the co-financing model, but also indirectly by fostering the purchase of tickets.

3.3. Insights related to the role of (actual, potential) social, organizational, institutional innovations

The central achievement of the STA is the continuous enhancement of the public transport connections and the timetable. A necessary innovation in the operation quality is the implementation of the online information system (in the web and through an app). There are also plans to launch a Real-time Passenger Information System. In particular, this implies that all means of transport will be equipped with a GPS to track the bus connections and to automatically integrate delays into the Real-time System at the stations. In 2023, every bus in the regional transport network should be equipped with both a GPS-connection and passenger counting tool. Through these technological developments, boarding and alighting analysis, transport service occupancy rate, and real-time information about travel time and connections will be possible for the entire public transport network.

4. Effectiveness Indicators

The effectiveness of the STA is reflected in its high level of bus capacity utilisation. If the busses are not used in a satisfactory way, the connections are analysed to determine how adjustments should be made. Influential changes in school locations and organisation, in enterprise location and working hours, as well as connections and thus travel chains of every target group, are main sources for the detailed planning process. Resulting adaptations contribute to an efficient transport system (of STA) with very few 'empty vehicle kilometres'. This also means that the communication with the affected stakeholders, like representatives of the municipalities, schools and large companies is a decisive factor.

According to the traffic planning expert at STA, personal relations, face-to-face meetings in particular, enhance the effectiveness of communication. Moreover, the awareness about consequences in case of miscommunication is very important. For instance, if representatives of a municipality don't convey information about construction work on the route, the bus service is directly affected and has to take a detour. Consequently, customers have to be informed, and timetables, rosters and break schedules cannot be met.

Overall, the purpose is to raise awareness for the importance of public transport. This includes the need to support the possibility to participate in the planning process and to impact the implementation aspects as well. Beyond clear and useful communication, it implies a commitment to promote the positive impacts of public transport. For example, new connections to recreational areas can be advertised in the municipal newspaper, but also the regional management agency has a role in promoting public transport strategies.

5. Illustration and further information

The STA clustered the transport network of Styria into several planning regions. A specific bus company is selected through a competitive process in each region. The STA assumed responsibility for the detailed planning in the dedicated regions just for two years. Previously, the transport companies had arranged timetables only with the municipalities and the STA published them. Nowadays, the planning process is centralised and carried out in close cooperation with the municipalities and starts about two years before the bus companies start operating transport services. After the first regional meeting, where the STA provides general information about the association, overall mobility concepts and visions for the public transport network, the planning region is further divided into smaller transport planning regions. In these regions, usually with less than ten municipalities, the detailed timetables and individual connections are planned. During this planning period, transport planners from the STA are on the site and exchange about acute problems and requirements. Since the STA relies on the feedback of the representatives of the municipalities in order to arrange the timetables, day-to-day contact is crucial.

Detailed timetable planning is based on the following data:

- Regional mobility plans (statistical data),
- information from the representatives of the municipalities,
- information from the local population through calls for participation in the regional newspaper,
- history of travel schedule development.

References:

The report is based primarily on the information of the website of the STA and an extensive interview with a traffic planning expert at the STA.

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