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CitizenBus (Kreuztal)

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The first citizen buses were created in the UK by former public transport users in reaction to price rises and service cuts that followed the privatization of local bus services in 1980's. Rapidly, the idea travelled to the Netherlands and then to Germany, especially in the North Rhine-Westphalia Region which started subsidizing BürgerBus clubs in 1993. At present there are about 200 active clubs in Germany.

The system works in small cities in a range of 10,000 to 40,000 inhabitants. The lines connect the city centre to residential areas that are not served by regular bus stops. The timetable is set in such a way that all lines can be operated by one single minibus with a frequency of 6 to 20 trips per week. The minibus has eight passenger seats, a central corridor and an electric sliding door. Drivers are volunteering citizens who typically work twice a month, each time during two to four hours. Tickets are sold in the bus and in partner shops at a price which is similar to that of public transport lines.

In the case of Kreuztal, a particularly wealthy club, four bus lines are operated four times a day by about 30 drivers. Most drivers are retired persons aged from 65 to 75. Busses are renewed every five years at a cost which is covered by a regional subsidy and by sponsors who advertise on the bus. The club establishes the stops and timetable. It operates the lines. It recruits, trains, and supervises the drivers.

In Kreuztal, the number of trips stands at 10,000 by year. Nearly half of the passengers state that they use the minibus once a week. The predominant purpose of the trip is shopping, followed by leisure, and doctor visits. Most passengers are women older than 50 years. In the absence of minibus, most passengers would travel with members of their family or neighbours. The typical passenger does not own a car and suffers from having scarce personal contacts. S/he tends to be acquainted with the driver and the other passengers, something which is highly praised. Active younger people tend to use other transport modes, including regular lines even if their stops are more distant.

The ticket price and the public subsidy by passenger are similar to that of regular transport services but the concerned residential areas could not be served by large buses with professional drivers.

Sources

Interview with Achim Walder and visit to BürgerBus Kreuztal on 06/11/2014.

Documents and websites

- Guidelines for the establishment and operation of citizen buses. Pro-Bürgerbus NRW. May 2014
- www.buergerbusse-in-deutschland.de/
- <http://www.pro-buergerbus-nrw.de/>

Presenting the system

The CitizenBus system is presented hereafter in two steps: first we explain how it works in Kreuztal, a lead place among the hundreds of German cities implementing such busses, second we describe the broader picture at the level of the North Rhine-Westphalia Region and Germany as a whole.

Location

Kreuztal

Kreuztal is a municipality of 31,000 inhabitants located at a crossroad. The urban area extends along the four branches of the crossroad on a distance of about 5 km. Density is high (440 inhabitants / km²). Three of the four roads (North, East, and South) are served by regular public transport lines with 28 to 35 buses by day. The frequency has been reduced over the last years for financial reasons. However a significant part of the houses and services (such as the hospital) is located at more than 500 meters from bus stops.

North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)

NRW has the largest population (17 M inhabitants) among German regions¹ and the largest number of cities having a citizen bus in operation or in project (about 250). These cities are usually smaller than Kreuztal (typically 15,000 inhabitants) and their urban area is often larger (10 km or more), meaning that the density of their urban area tends to be smaller and that the public transport service has smaller coverage and frequency.

Other German regions and other German speaking countries

There are citizen busses in about 100 cities in other regions. Four regions have no citizen bus.

There are a few citizen busses in Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Austria.

Figure 1 – Citizen bus clubs in Germany



Existing clubs = yellow, projected clubs = blue - Access the [source](#)

¹ For international readers, the term ‘Region’ is used instead of ‘State’ which would better translate the German term of ‘Land’

History

Kreuztal

The citizen bus club was founded in Kreuztal in October 1997 and the first minibus was operated in March 1998 with 62 stops that were equipped with stop shields and timetable boxes. Initially, twelve voluntary drivers were recruited and trained (10 pensioners and 2 students).

North Rhine-Westphalia and Germany

The original idea emerged in the UK where the first ‘people’s buses’ were launched by former users of the public transport systems in reaction to the price rises and service cuts following the privatization of local bus services in the 1980’s. An almost unsuccessful Internet search suggests that these initiatives were not sustained. However the idea has remained in the minds as evidenced by the fact that a new people’s bus was launched in [Bristol](#) in 2011.

This idea crossed the Channel and was also implemented in the Netherlands where citizen buses have been operated since at least 1984 in the framework of the [Stichting Bij Bus](#) (Bus Foundation). At least 10 such local initiatives are in operation at present, some of them with four buses.

The system then moved to Germany through a cross-border line connecting Heek and Rosendahl (in NRW) and the neighbouring Dutch cities. Six pilot buses were launched in 1985 with an authorization of the Minister for Urban Development and Transport of the NRW Region. Then the Region decided to support the system proactively in 1993 and the number of active citizen bus clubs grew to 120 in 2013. NRW has a lead position among the German regions and this is in line with its lasting political orientation (socialist-green coalition).

The citizen bus system

Kreuztal

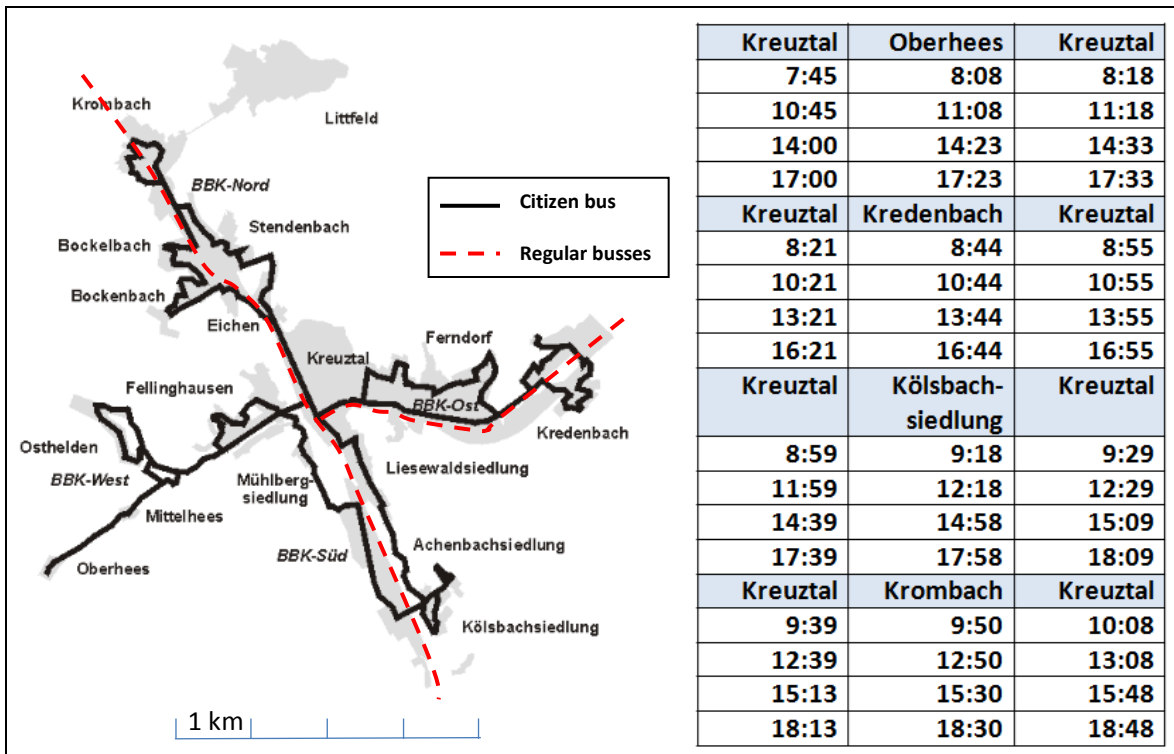
Four bus lines are established, away from the existing public transport lines. The minibus stops are located at 300 meters at least from regular bus stops. Lines connect the city centre to all dense residential areas within a distance of 5 km. Lines are 10 to 15 km long with one stop per km. A return trip on a given line takes about 30 minutes (see Box 1). Lines are operated four times a day (between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.) from Monday to Friday excluding public holidays. The timetable is set in such a way that all trips can be performed by one single minibus which travels about 800 km per week and 40,000 km per year.

The vehicle is a high-roofed minibus with eight passenger seats. The bus is equipped with an electric sliding door and a central corridor. The bus is maintained by the local Mercedes-Benz agency that lends a replacement minibus (not equipped) for free during the maintenance and repair periods.

Drivers are volunteering citizens. They must be 21 year old or more with a standard driving license, three years of driving experience, and a medical statement of health fitness. They pass a performance test at a certification agency (KÜV) and they get a light additional ‘European’ driving licence enabling them to conduct eight-passenger public buses. They learn how to deal with passengers, payments, operating rules, first-aid, and safety at bus stops.

Any passenger may use the lines without advance registration. Tickets are sold in the bus and also in some partner shops. The price is similar to that of public transport lines. Rebates are available through weekly cards and child tickets. If a user cannot embark in an already full bus, a taxi is called, the passenger pays the price of the bus ticket, and the Club pays the difference.

Box 1 – Line map and timetable



North Rhine-Westphalia and Germany

Citizen bus systems are similar to that of Kreuztal in many points but some differences arise from the fact that the covered urban areas tend to be less dense than that of Kreuztal. Hence the number of bus lines tends to be smaller (sometimes only one), distance from the city centre tends to be longer (up to 15 km), and the frequency tends to be lower (some lines are operated six times a week instead of 20 times a week in Kreuztal).

Less frequent are the following features:

- Bus lines in dense urban areas
- Bus lines running across two municipalities
- Bus purchased by the municipality
- Ticket system shared with the public transport system

Management

Kreuztal

The Citizen Bus Kreuztal **Club** constitutes the legal basis of the system. The Club created the lines and the timetable in agreement with the municipality and the company operating regular lines. It installed the bus stops and purchased three successive buses since the lines were created in 1998, i.e. one every five years. The latest bus was bought at a cost of € 35,000 and equipped at an additional cost € 10,000. The cost of the bus was covered by a subsidy and that of equipment by several sponsors who were offered to post adds on the bus. The Club recruits, trains, and manages the drivers. It operates the lines. It has an insurance contract for personal liability and legal expenses. It adheres to a professional association.

Figure 2 – Bus, equipments, and ads



In 2013, the operating cost amounted to € 10,000 including (by order of importance): fuel, maintenance, drivers' training (European driving licenses, TÜV tests, safety training, first aid courses), and accounting. The cost is covered by passengers (70 %), subsidies, and advertising spaces sold on the bus and tickets.

The **municipality** of Kreuztal approved the schedule according to § 42 of Passenger Transport Act as other public transport services. It is supporting the Club with a financial guarantee of up to € 5,000 but this guarantee has never been used.

The **Region** (Land of NRW) granted a € 35,000 subsidy for the bus purchase, plus € 5,000 per year for operating the bus.

NRW and Germany

As in Kreuztal, a well established BürgerBus Club is a prerequisite for implementing the system and establishing its legal base. Also as in Kreuztal, the system needs to benefit from a financial guarantee of the municipality.

A club of Bürgerbus clubs was founded in 1999 with the support of the Region: Pro Bürgerbus NRW. Its role is to exchange information, to advise local clubs, to assist in the development new clubs. Pro Bürgerbus NRW publishes a regularly updated 60-page [guide](#).

The NRW Region subsidises the purchase of a bus at a level of:

- € 40,000 for the first vehicle at the start a Bürgerbus project,
- € 35,000 for each following vehicle,
- € 45,000 for special buses equipped for disabled passengers,
- Additional funding for innovative and energy-saving vehicles.

The grant may be renewed every seventh year or when the bus has run 200,000 km. An additional subsidy of up to € 5,000 per year covers a part of the operating costs.

Bürgerbus clubs in other regions operate with different schemes of public subsidies at the level of municipalities or counties.



Actual practice

Kreuztal

Over its 15 years of life, the Citizen Bus Kreuztal Club has enjoyed a continued dynamism. The Club has 80 members and a two-year elected board of 7 persons who share the following tasks: chair and deputy chair, accountancy, drivers' schedule, bus maintenance, and social events. The heaviest workload rests on the president and accountant (5 hours a month or more) and the drivers' manager (2 hours a month).

In 2013, there were 30 volunteer drivers, most of them being men (80 %) and retired persons in between 60 and 80. They typically drive twice a month, each time during two to four hours. In the 15 year long life of the club, 70 persons have played the role of driver, of which about 5% were young people. During our visit to Kreuztal, we spoke with two drivers who were respectively 75 and 74 year old and who had been active for 15 and 11 years. Drivers give up for medical reasons almost exclusively, i.e. when they feel or when their doctor assesses that the job is becoming too heavy. Typically the Club recruits two or three new drivers by year in order to maintain its staff. This is done by passing an ad in the local newspaper and through the personal networks of divers and passengers. The Club has never faced recruitment difficulties. All candidates are accepted without selection if they match the criteria and pass the tests.

Every month, the Club allocates each two-hour round to a driver and a deputy driver. If a driver cannot manage in accordance to that plan, (s)he contacts the deputy driver directly. Incidents in implementing the schedule are extremely rare. As regards security, there has been no significant accident in 15 years.

Figure 3 – The drivers and the bus



In the beginning (1998) there were 40 passengers per week (about 2,000 by year). After three years (2001) the number of trips reached 8,000 per week and it stands at 10,000 by year currently, i.e. an average of 3 passengers by travel. Nearly half of the passengers state that they use BürgerBus once a week. There are more passengers on some lines (East) and on some days (market day) but demand is seldom larger than supply. Only one passenger by month has to be carried by taxi.

In 2014, the ticket costs € 1.80 (€ 1.00 for children under 12, nothing for children under 6). A four trip card costs € 6.50. There is a compensation of about 1.40 € granted by the Region for a severely disabled passenger. Some shops sell tickets at reduced price and pay for the rebate in order to promote city centre shopping.

According to a survey done about ten years ago, most passengers (77%) are older than 50 years and female (88%). They generally have neither driving license nor car. People between 61 and 70 represent 41 % of the users and those under 21 make up only 6 % of the passengers. Before using minibus, most passengers travelled with members of their family (37%) or neighbours (20%). The predominant purpose of the trip is shopping (45%), followed by leisure (30%), doctor visits (17%). Labour and training represent only 5% of the trips. Very few passengers use the minibus in combination with regular buses or train. This very specific use of minibus can be understood by the fact that younger and active people tend to use other transport modes, including the convenient regular lines even if their stops are more distant.

Figure 4 – A driver and his passengers



The citizen bus costs € 21,000 by year, including purchase, equipment and operation. Overall, this cost is covered by the NRW Region (57%), the passengers (33%) and sponsored ads (11%). The public subsidy amounts to € 1.2 by passenger. This figure is of the same order of magnitude for regular transport services but the concerned residential areas could not be served by large buses with professional drivers.

NRW and Germany

Across Germany, citizen bus clubs tend to be sustainable. In 25 years, only two clubs were stopped because the number of users was insufficient. However many clubs would not as wealthy as that of Kreuztal, which may be explained by two factors: (1) an exceptionally dynamic president with a 15 year lasting commitment and (2) relevant geographic conditions (crossroad, density). In the worst cases, other clubs face difficulties with finding a president, recruiting drivers, and/or balancing their budget. In such cases, they may be assisted by wealthy neighbouring clubs (in terms of advice) and by municipalities (in terms of budget). They may also purchase normal buses with no specific equipments at a cost of about € 20,000.

Motivation

Altruism is the first motivation of bus drivers. A second and connected motivation could be called “visible altruism”, a kind of social reward arising from the fact that volunteering drivers are both highly visible from and well known by many citizens, especially in small cities. There might be also a kind of self interest as explained by a former driver: “I have been a Bürgerbus driver for six years and I am now sitting in the bus as a passenger”.

The Club pays a lot of attention to maintaining drivers’ goodwill. Drivers attend a two hour meeting every second month (even more frequently in some other cities), drivers’ birthday is celebrated, and a big Christmas event is organised every year.

The typical passenger does not own a car and suffers from having scarce personal contacts. S/he tends to be acquainted with the driver and the other passengers, something which is highly praised. Passengers tend to provide one another with small services inside and outside the bus. Passengers praise these interpersonal contacts and the drivers are offered Christmas gifts such sweets or self-knitted socks.

In Kreuztal at least, the motivation of drivers and passengers is enhanced by very close media coverage of the Club’s activities: one or two occurrences by month in the local newspapers.

Perspectives

The citizen bus system has probably reached its cruise speed in the NRW Region and it may not progress fast elsewhere unless other regions decide to adopt a subsidy system similar to that of NRW.

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