

Fast forward through the ÖffiCON*

From March 18 to 21, 2021, the Bremen-based initiative Einfach Einsteigen hosted the conference "ÖffiCON* - Rethinking public transport!". With almost 450 registrations and a colorful, international program, the event was a complete success. The central question of the conference was how socially-just and ecological innovations in local public transport can be designed, especially in the context of a reorientation after the Corona pandemic.

The opening

The ÖffiCON* started in the late afternoon of March 18, 2021 with introductory words of the hosts. Greetings came from high-profile guests such as Dr. Katrin Dzienkan, Head of the Department "Environment and Transport" of the Federal Environment Agency and Mirko Schulte, Head of the Mobility Division of GLS-Bank. Dr. Andreas Bovenschulte, Mayor of Bremen and President of the Senate, kicked off the event.

For him, the challenges surrounding the climate crisis and the current problems posed by transport, not only due to the Corona pandemic, the mobility of our society is a "big issue." He emphasized that transport is so "highly complex" that "many adjusting screws" have to be kept in view at once in order to bring about positive change - but a central goal must be, without any question, that public transport in particular must become an even greater guarantor of socially just mobility than it already is. For this reason, Bovenschulte signaled that he did not want to conceal his sympathy for the introduction of a local public transport system financed on a pay-as-you-go basis, as has been demanded for some time by the Einfach Einsteigen initiative.

Mirko Schulte (GLS Bank) emphasized the importance of local transport for consistent climate protection and thus compliance with the Paris climate targets. In this context, he said, it would not be expedient to replace the current number of registered motor vehicles one-to-one with electrically powered alternatives: Instead, he advocated linking the various means of transport more closely together and thus defining the concept of local public transport even more broadly than at present, in order to save on conventional private transport.

Katrin Dziekan then commented on the position of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) on the transport transition: UBA's research focuses on the issue of climate and environmentally harmful subsidies for car traffic. She advocated a change of direction in car subsidies and using the freed-up funds to promote alternatives to private motorized transport instead. Furthermore, she said, one should not be deceived by the temporary reduction in pollutant emissions during the Corona pandemic: If no action was taken now, this reduction would have no lasting effect. The issue of mobility, Dziekan said, is still too often a closed store in public discourse, largely dominated by economic and technocratic conferences. That's why she praised Einfach Einsteigen, in "shaking up the scene" by daring ÖffiCON* to offer new, fresh and more diverse perspectives on the future of mobility.

The Highlights

The ÖffiCON* program was thematically oriented around five thematic strands: "New ways of financing", "Policy and implementation", "Environmental effects", "Diversity and participation" and "Culture, philosophy and art". In addition to the aspect of internationality, this made the program as diverse as possible and also gave the audience insights into topics that many might have previously thought could not be linked at all to questions about public transport.

The first keynote of the ÖffiCON* was delivered by Einfach Einsteigen founder and speaker Mark Wege, in which he explained Bremen's position in the transport transformation in a sweeping blow: Compared to other German cities with a population of over 500,000, Bremen is particularly far ahead in terms of cycling, but has even more catching up to do in terms of local public transport. Admittedly, the socio-ecological transformation of the transport system of any large city is complex, but it would take too long, especially in Bremen, and must be accelerated in view of the climate crisis. He concluded his speech with the demand that the most cost-effective and healthy mobility possible should be established as a human right.

On the evening of March 18, a top-class panel discussion awaited the ÖffiCON* audience right at the start: In "The future of public transport and sustainable mobility after COVID-19", Katrin Dziekan (UBA), Phil Washington (CEO of the Los Angeles Metro), Esseline Schieven (Director of Mobility and Public Space in Amsterdam) and François Bausch (Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, Minister of Mobility and Public Works in Luxembourg) discussed future concepts of public transport in their regions. While Washington impressed by adopting a surprisingly activist style as CEO, calling several times for "fare-less" mass transit for Los Angeles, Dziekan

contributed with an outlook on how the economy and transportation will change as a result of the Corona-driven home office experience. Esseline Schieven contributed with a redefinition of the value of public space, while Bausch tried to convince the audience and his panelists that introducing free mass transit was not about Luxembourg's wealth, but a matter of prioritization.

Also on Friday, ÖffiCON* featured two high-profile panels: titled "Fewer cars, more life: The art of transforming cities into sustainable, vital urban spaces," Anabel Gulías Torreiro (spokesperson for the city of Pontevedra, Spain) Elizabeth Deakin (professor of urban and regional planning at Berkeley) and John Niles (transportation expert from Vancouver) discussed how reducing the number of cars in cities could make them more sustainable and livable.

In addition, "New ways of financing public transport" dealt with the question of how public transport could be financed alternatively. Participants were Allan Allaküla (representative for the city of Tallinn, which has had tax-funded public transport for some years), Dr. Oliver Mietzsch (Chairman of the Zweckverband für den Nahverkehrsraum Leipzig), Arnaud Passalacqua (École d'Urbanisme de Paris) and Mark Wege from Einfach Einsteigen. In addition to presenting their various approaches to solving the problem, the stakeholders exchanged views on the effects of the pandemic on public transport, but also on the opportunities it could present for considering new concepts of financing.

Considering gender equality in the discourse on sustainable public transport!

An important topic that ran through the event was opened by Dr. Alexandra Millionig (spatial planner and scientist at the Austrian Institute for Technology). She gave a passionate keynote speech on the topic of gender equity in public transport and public space and how barriers in infrastructure together with societal barriers lead to privileged and underprivileged groups in society when it comes to transport and the use of public space.

Millonig's keynote was followed by political scientist, feminist, and climate justice activist Janna Aljets' presentation on "Inclusive Transportation Transition." Aljets made clear that local transport must pick up all social groups and where there is a need to catch up. In the evening, Dr. Alexandra Millionig and Sara Ortiz Escalante from the University of British Columbia discussed the question of when "mobility for all" is

actually achieved, the role of women, and accessibility and privileges in local transport and public space. The two compared situations and innovations from different regions: In addition to Vienna and Vancouver, ideas from Mexico City were also mentioned. Ultimately, the transport revolution is not only indispensable for climate protection, but also the only comprehensive means of creating "mobility for all".

The local perspective

In addition to the international orientation, an important perspective of the conference was the view on the micro level and thus on the venue of the conference, the Hanseatic City of Bremen. In the panel discussion "How to proceed with local transport & the transport transformation in Bremen?", representatives of several Bremen political parties (Michael Jonitz for the CDU, Ralph Saxe for the Greens as well as Anja Schiemann for the SPD) together with Janin Schaffer (Alfred Wegener Institute) and Wolfgang Geißler (Einfach Einsteigen) discussed what the future of transport in Bremen looks like, what needs to be done to advance the expansion of public transport and which interests should be weighted and how much.

Falk Wagner, together with Anja Schiemann (both SPD), presented a concept of the SPD Bremen on how Bremen's local transport could be financed through property tax revenues, and Mira Ball used the cooperation of Fridays for Future and ver.di to present in a workshop how the struggle for labor rights in local transport and climate protection can be thought together.

What else?

In addition to panels and keynotes, ÖffiCON* was composed of workshops, roundtables, and presentations on the various thematic strands. Here are a few examples:

Cornelia Vogt gave a talk on Saturday morning about the home phone and spoke about sexism in public spaces.

At the same time Frank Gerhardt and Holger Bruch showed in their workshop "Selfmade Stadtnavi in 30 Minutes", how a smart open source mobility app looks like, which also offers an alternative to Google Maps.

Afterwards, Niklas Hoffmann and Martin Stiefelbusch talked about public transport after Covid-19 at a round table.

In the evening, Wolfgang Geißler, Anja Schiemann, Janin Schaffer, Michael Jonitz and Ralph Saxe discussed the Bremen traffic transformation in a panel discussion.

At the end

The ÖffiCON* finished with a closing panel on Sunday morning. The moderator Roland Kanwicher praised the panel for giving him, as a "traffic layman", a more reflective view of traffic. Wolfgang Geißler from Einfach Einsteigen joined the closing panel and described the atmosphere within the ÖffiCON* team as "hard-working and concentrated, but very cordial". Mark Wege, founder and speaker of Einfach Einsteigen is already thinking about a possible next conference in 2021 and was very pleased to have Los Angeles Metro CEO Phil Washington as a guest. In addition, David Schmid (Innovation Manager of Stuttgarter Tram) took the floor and praised the fact that ÖffiCON* presents perspectives away from the private sector, which is unusual at public transport conferences. Annika Fuchs, head of the ÖffiCON* team, gave insight into the organization and was pleased that the conference succeeded well with a very young team.

The participants ended with the conclusion that the diversity of the speakers could be further increased in a possible new edition of ÖffiCON*. However, they all agree that ÖffiCON* has lived up to the expectations of offering new, fresh and more diverse perspectives on the future of local public transport and has thus provided an alternative to the usual conferences of the public transport sector.

The ÖffiCON* team would like to thank its supporters: The Federal Environmental Agency, the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, GLS Treuhand, GLS Bank and Elektrizitätswerke Schönau.