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Exploring mobility innovations

The Passenger Bench (Mitfahrerbank - Speicher)

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The idea of the passenger bench emerged in Speicher, a village in the North-West of Germany. A survey had pointed elderly's need for street benches and the mobility problem of carless people.

Since 2014, benches have been installed in the streets connecting Speicher to the neighbouring villages and at the railway station which is three kilometres away. Next to each bench, there is a pole on which passengers show their destination to passing drivers. Then they rest on the bench until a driver stops.

Users are in an order of magnitude of one hundred. They tend to be elder or younger carless people. Since the typical waiting time is about 5 minutes, people are increasingly confident in the system and do not hesitate using the benches, even in dark winter evenings. However, rainy or cold weather remains an obstacle.

In addition to making some travels possible, the system provides carless people with a wider feeling of freedom. Drivers are proud to be a good deed resource. Drivers and passengers get to know each other.

The passenger benches of Speicher are now copied at large scale throughout Germany. There are also replications in Austria and Scandinavia.

Sources

Phone discussions with Ursula Berrens and Karin Plein in May and July 2017.

<http://mitfahrerbank.com/>

Presenting the system

This note presents the Mitfahrerbank system as it is running in Speicher in 2017, three years after having been launched. The system is quite simple: passengers select a sign showing their destination and wait on a bench until a driver stops.

The term ‘passenger bank’ is not a fully satisfactory translation. A ‘Mitfahrer’ is a passenger and also a person benefiting from a lift or a carpool member. Moreover ‘Mitfahren’ means ‘to accompany’ and this was what the initiators of the system wanted to stress. A better translation might have been ‘take-me bench’.

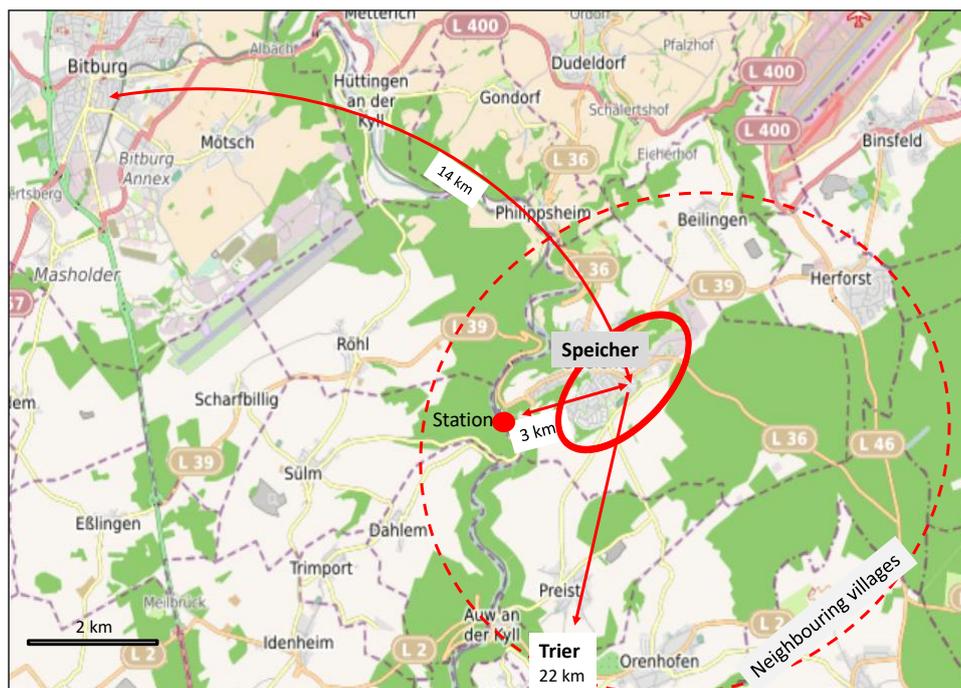
Location

Speicher is a German community of municipalities of 9 000 inhabitants, of which 3 500 are living in the main village and 5 500 in smaller neighbouring villages at 3 to 6 km. Density is relatively high (220 inhabitants/km²). The closest cities are Bitburg (14000 inhabitants, 14 km) and Trier (110 000 inhabitants, 22 km). Luxemburg is 50 km South.

Most people in that rural area rely on private cars. Regular public transport lines are mainly serving scholar purposes. There are only five buses per weekday to Bitburg and a lack of service in evenings, week-ends, and school vacations.

Rail connections to Bitburg and Trier are convenient (one train per hour) but reaching the railway is a 3 km walk along a steep street with no sidewalk. The station is an unfriendly automated one with no toilets where mobile phones do not work. Again bus connections to the station are scarce (five buses per weekday). Buses may not always await delayed trains.

Figure 1 – Map of the served area



History

Ursula Berrens works at [Caritas-Trier](#). In 2012, her organisation got an exceptional grant from a national foundation, something which enabled her to initiate a number of micro-projects. As she was living and working (partly) in Speicher, she considered designing a project locally. Then, she started to explore people's needs in terms of their quality of life. For instance, she held a stall at Speicher market where she invited passers-by to speak about their needs and problems. The elderly often complained of the lack of benches in the streets. Mobility was also said to be a difficulty. The idea of the passenger bench popped up by the end of 2013 while Mrs Berrens was wandering through the village in order to locate future benches.

Together with two volunteering women she started designing the passenger bench project. She discussed that idea with the mayor and several interested citizens. The concept was refined and some sponsors were found. A first bench was bought at low cost and an eighty year old retired blacksmith created the first pole. Then the municipal council discussed the project and was asked to choose the colour of the bench. The first bench was installed on March 2014 in front of the city hall as a pilot test.

In order to develop the system, the Mobility Network of the Speicher Community (hereafter the Network) was created with a fund raising purpose. It held its first meeting in November 2014. By these times, the online version of a famous German newspaper (Spiegel online, Kulturspiegel) launched a call for innovative ideas aimed at improving urban life. The Network joined that challenge with the passenger bench idea which was well rated by the Internet voters (68% !) and won a € 2 500 prize. With the money and the reputation gained, the Network became strong enough to install several other benches. The project was on its track.

Figure 2 – Bench and pole



How does it work?

Communication

The Kulturspiegel prize gave the passenger bench a high visibility. The system has often been mentioned in the weekly municipal newspaper.

There are also QR codes on the poles leading to the website of the Network.

Practicalities

Currently, there are four benches in the centre of Speicher on the streets leading to the neighbouring villages, plus one at the railway station. Eight other benches are installed in the neighbouring villages. The Network plans to install a bench in Bitburg, in a street leading to Speicher.

Next to each bench, there is a pole on which people may select their destination or a white sign for those who just need to rest on the bench (see Figure 2). Passengers wait on the bench until a driver stops. Drivers are free to stop, or not to stop if they are going to another destination, not ready to carshare at that moment, or not willing to carshare with the awaiting passenger. Conversely, passengers are free to embark or not to embark in stopping cars, for instance if the driver is unknown.

Benches, poles, and signs cost € 300, €110, and €60 respectively. Sponsors have always covered these costs.

Benches are located in agreement with the municipality and installed by either municipal staff or volunteers.

Safety

Drivers and passengers use the system under their own responsibility. Passengers under 16 are advised not to travel alone. No specific insurance is needed as the compulsory car insurance covers the main risks.

Management

Mobility Network of the Speicher Community

This organisation is responsible for attracting sponsors, installing the benches and managing the website. It has about 15 members and holds about six meetings a year. Its budget is very small.

Municipality

The Speicher Community takes part in locating and installing the benches. It has never been asked to provide financial support.

Actual practice

Users are in an order of magnitude of one hundred. They tend to be elder or younger carless people (see Box 1). Even foreigners, possibly migrants, have been seen using the benches. People are increasingly confident in the system and do not hesitate using the benches in dark winter evenings. However, rainy or cold weather remains an obstacle.

The typical waiting time is 5 minutes. Young women tend to wait less as well as people with dense social connections. Users tell that they get 'fast on their way' (*flott fott* as said in Speicher dialect). However, passengers may wait longer in some circumstances, for instance 30 minutes on a small road in a case where just one car was passing every five minutes.

Users have not yet reported on any problem related to their travels and the Network did not face any problem with the benches.

Box 1 – Two typical users

A teenager is often using the train to reach his school in Trier or to visit some friends in Bitburg. Most often, he would reach the railway station through as a bench-passenger. He is not afraid of missing the train or travelling by night.

A young single mother, who cannot afford to own and maintain a car, also uses the benches to reach the railway station, most often with her baby in a buggy.

Motivation

In addition to making some travels possible, the system provides carless people with a wider feeling of freedom.

Drivers and passengers get to know each other.

Drivers are proud to be a good deed resource. They also appreciate the freedom to travel without constraint and to stop if they want to do so, contrary to a carpooling system which would oblige them to make their travels visible publicly and to set formal appointments.

Perspectives

The passenger benches of Speicher are now copied at large scale throughout Germany (about twenty different places), mostly in rural areas but also in some in some outlying suburbs (Hamburg). There are also replications in Austria and Scandinavia.

Contact

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