

Jacques Barrot

Vice-President of the European Commission, Commissioner for Transport

Promoting bicycle use across Europe

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Velo-city Conference

Dublin, 3 June 2005

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

I am grateful for the invitation to take part in this closing session of this Velo-city conference for three reasons.

First, as Commissioner for Transport I am responsible for all modes of transport. Despite the application of the subsidiarity principle I feel that the European Commission has a role to play in promoting bicycle use across Europe.

Second, in my view cycling can play a bigger role in the Transport White Paper's objective to re-balance the modes. This objective will obviously require rationalising the use of the private car – especially in cities. The high quality and the diversity of the participants in this conference are a testimony of your interest in this objective and in your willingness to share experience and responsibility with each other.

Third, it is a pleasure for me to be here in Dublin and to see the impressive investments that are taking place in the transport facilities here, including those for cycling - and the good use of European funding. This city offers examples that could certainly be followed by other cities, especially in the new Member States.

In my intervention I will present to you briefly the European transport policy framework and then give you an overview of how the European Commission helps to promote cycling in Europe.

1. Transport policy framework

Transport plays an essential role in the development of the European Union. It is a key factor for sustainable development, our competitiveness, our well-being and for European cohesion. This Commission has defined economic growth and strengthening European competitiveness as its priorities. While everybody agrees that these objectives should be supported for social and employment reasons, we have to recognise that economic growth will undoubtedly lead to an increase in the demand for transport.

In 2001, the Commission adopted a White paper on the European transport policy. This reference document presented the situation of the European transport sector and proposed measures in order to tackle the problems it encounters. The main objective of the White paper was to rebalance the modal split from congested and polluting modes, mainly the road transport sector to less congested and more environmental-friendly modes. We have started the mid-term review of the White Paper. In the framework of this review, consultations with external actors will be organised later this year and I warmly invite you to share your views with us.

Nobody here will need to be told that cycling is an efficient way of using road space, that it is a cheap, clean and energy efficient transport mode, and that it is a route to a healthy and enjoyable city life. Without well-connected cycling and walking facilities public transport cannot successfully operate.

But, as indicated in the 2001 Transport White Paper, we need to make sure that cycling is safe and attractive in terms of infrastructure and services in order to fully exploit this potential – especially in cities.

When we look towards the future, our statistics show that, in most urban areas, there is a growing trend in car use. The level of bicycle use is generally stable, which means that cycling is losing market share, as are walking and public transport use. A few countries stand out with very high modal shares for cycling. In the Netherlands more than 1 in 4 trips are made by bicycle, in Denmark more than 1 in 6. We have clear evidence that properly developed and sustained policies result in improved usage of the bike, and at the same time can produce a better and safer environment for cyclists.

Now, I will focus the rest of my intervention on explaining how the European Commission helps to promote cycling in Europe. We do this by helping to spread best practice, by increasing road safety and by informing and working with others.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a huge potential for cycling when we remember that almost half of all car trips are over distances shorter than 5 kilometres.

2. Commission initiatives to promote cycling

2.1 Funding programmes

The CIVITAS Initiative, that has so far allocated 100 Million Euro from the EU's framework programme for research and development, helps cities to introduce and test packages of innovative measures to improve their local transport system. For example, as part of its integrated approach, the city of Nantes has set up a bicycle renting scheme for university students with the name Velocampus. In Cork, here in Ireland, we have helped the municipality to launch a local Cycleways project. To participate in CIVITAS, cities have to set ambitious targets and so far we have selected 36 CIVITAS cities, of which 11 are in the new Member States. The experiences of the CIVITAS cities are well documented and form a reference point for other cities. It is my intention to continue with the CIVITAS Initiative over the years to come.

Besides support through the research and development programme, the new financial perspectives for the period 2007 – 2013 will offer funding opportunities for urban transport projects through the structural and cohesion funds. These funding opportunities will not only be available for traditional infrastructure investments, for instance in tram or metro systems, but also for integrated packages of measures for clean urban transport. The size of the finances that will become available will depend on progress in the current debate on the EU's financial perspectives. The type of projects that will be funded will depend on the proposals made by the relevant national or regional authorities.

Let me also mention that the Commission will continue to use its other funding mechanisms as a means to help implement its policies. For example, as part of the new Programme for Competitiveness and Innovation the Commission intends to continue the Intelligent Energy - Europe Programme. The STEER part of this programme offers support for pilot projects, studies and promotional activities that addresses the efficient use of energy in transport. It is obvious that this includes cycling. The Commission is at this moment selecting a first set of cycling-related projects that will be co-funded. These will help in implementing bike-sharing schemes, promotional campaigns for cycling, knowledge sharing and benchmarking, and company travel plans that promote cycling, in about 50 cities in Europe.

I want to end by highlighting that the success and impacts of many of the actions that can be co-financed with EU money depend on local, regional and national politicians, on policies that facilitate change, and on courage to take the necessary decisions – that perhaps are not always easy and popular.

2.2 Improving road safety

Ladies and gentlemen, two-thirds of all road accidents takes place in urban areas and one third of all traffic deaths fall in urban areas. This poor level of safety is unacceptable. Safe bicycle use, especially in the urban environment, is integrated in our road safety policy. As you know, we want to reduce the number of people killed in road accidents by half by the year 2010. In order to improve the safety of cyclists we focus on three fields of action.

First, it is important to improve the visibility of cyclists. Here, cyclists themselves have a responsibility to make sure that they behave in line with the highway code, that their bicycle has reflectors and that they wear well-visible clothes. To address the problem of the 'dead angle' for turning heavy vehicles there is now a Directive that obliges new trucks to be equipped with special mirrors. Member States have until the end of this year to transpose the Directive into national legislation. At the moment we are assessing whether it would make sense to extend the coverage of the Directive to old trucks.

Second, it is important that cyclists are protected in case of accidents. Ideally, when space permits, cyclists should have their own dedicated and well identified infrastructure. But this is not always possible. Since November 2003 there is a Directive in force that aims to make the fronts of certain vehicles less aggressive in case of accidents with vulnerable road users. The industry could also reflect on the need to equip bicycles with a reflective safety arm, attached to the back of the bicycle. Such a device can help to make sure that car drivers keep sufficient distance when they overtake a cyclist.

Cyclists themselves have to make sure that they wear a safety helmet. All cyclists should take an example from the big professional cycle competitions such as the Tour de France.

Our third field of action is the education of young cyclists. Many Member States are already implementing special educational programmes on road safety for children. These initiatives deserve our full appreciation and support. The Commission co-finances several actions in this field. One of them, called "Rose 25", has the ambition to raise the awareness of road safety education and to spread best practices across Europe.

2.3 Informing decision makers and working with others

The Commission is also actively raising the awareness of decision makers of cycling as a real transport mode. For example, in the framework of the European Mobility Week we each year emphasise the benefits of cycling. We also continue to give out largely our brochure "Cycling: the way ahead for towns and cities". As part of the urban transport benchmarking initiative a working group of city authorities that is co-financed by the Commission is assessing and comparing their local cycle policies.

Best practices on cycling are made available in the internet through the European Local Transport Information Service (ELTIS). Since its establishment in 1998 ELTIS has been consulted more than 5 million times. Projects co-financed by the European Commission have also helped to identify these best practices and to develop knowledge of cycling and cyclists. One example is the BYPAD project that has created a tool for auditing local cycle policies that is now used by more than 40 cities in 15 countries.

The Commission also works with other organisations and we look for synergies between our activities. For instance, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE) undertake a number of activities to mainstream cycling in their initiatives. Indeed, we live in an era where more and more people exercise too little, eat unhealthy food and experts start to consider obesity as an epidemic. This epidemic imposes high costs on the individual and society and provides a strong justification for public policy in favour of cycling.

I would like to conclude this last part of my speech by underlining that the Commission is applying these good practices internally. A specific plan exists in order to promote within the institution the use of bicycles. For instance, specific parking spaces are dedicated to bikes, and bikes are put at the disposal of the civil servants for their short professional trips.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, I come to the conclusion of my intervention.

I have explained to you the European transport policy framework and the activities that the European Commission undertakes to promote cycling. At the moment we are in an important period for our transport policy as we have started the mid-term review of the White Paper. The time has come to critically look at the measures taken so far, and their effectiveness in achieving the objectives of the White Paper. We need to reflect on the role of urban transport in the EU. Are pollution and congestion reaching such a level that the EU should take a more proactive role to promote good urban transport policy in order to meet the expectations of citizens?

There is a need for new thinking. We all must reflect on the place of the private car in our cities and develop a new integrated vision for urban transport. This should include better and more efficient public transport, safe infrastructure – especially for cyclists and pedestrians, a more rational style of car use, and regulated entry to city centres to protect them against excessive noise and pollution from traffic. This should also include initiatives to promote cleaner and more energy-efficient vehicles.

Thank you for your attention.