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2019 PASSENGERS IN 2019 - SIX WEEKS OF A SEXY DRT SYSTEM ON HILLY REMOTE AREAS

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Short Description

After decades, public transport finally appeared on the hilly areas of Zalaegerszeg, Hungary. The ZERGE on-demand minibus system implemented upon the SUMP, under frameworks of the Interreg CE SHAREPLACE project serves as living lab for DRT experiences and shows how it is feasible to organise public transport in low-density areas.

Main part

The city of Zalaegerszeg in Hungary (61.000 inhabitants) is suffering of the growing motorisation and of the decrease of the share of public transport, offering less and less attractive services. Some lower density areas of the city are situated on hilly surroundings with narrow streets where public transport has been missing for decades, and walking distances are important. Mobilissimus developed the SUMP for Zalaegerszeg in 2015, being one of the first ones in Hungary, and described the huge problem of the lack of public transport at these remote areas, causing inequality and showing several layers of mobility poverty. A new local bus network has also been planned in 2016, creating a more attractive user-friendly system, also focusing on the remote areas with huge accessibility handicaps. This new network scheme recommended also a DRT system. Though the new bus network has not been implemented yet, the DRT elements were further planned, implemented and tested due to the Interreg CE project, SHAREPLACE, where both the City of Zalaegerszeg and Mobilissimus are partners.

After 1,5 year of preparation with living labs and field trips with the inhabitants, local representatives and city leaders, a complete service scheme was born. On the 6th November 2019 the three ZERGE lines Z1, Z2 and Z3 were launched for a 7 weeks first testing period. The name "ZERGE" means chamois, referring to the abbreviated name of Zalaegerszeg, which is "Zeg", and to the hilly areas where service is operating.

The system is well connected to the local buses, giving plannable interchanges at several stops and endstations. ZERGE got a special design, visual timetables, line schemes and maps are helping the customers.

At the first testing period two buses of 15 passengers performed the three routes with 7 departures on each lines every weekday and 4 departures on weekends. The ZERGE system is operating as on-demand service. Phone-based or web-based registration and booking is needed. At the first testing period until 22nd December 2019, 2019 passengers used the service, 41% used the phone, 59% used the internet page for booking.

The first testing period will be followed by a second in spring 2020, integrated all experiences and results of the users' assessment survey. Hopefully the service will be kept after the testing periods and fully integrated to the local bus system.

ZERGE proved there are good solutions for remote areas' attractive mobility and users can easily adapt to the DRT features of the service.

What is new?

ZERGE is an icebreaker project attracting the attention of mobility experts, authorities and operators, as potential solution for remote areas' public transport. ZERGE is a unique solution, connecting the local bus network and lower density areas, upon the real needs of the passengers. The routes and stop points were planned together with future users in order to have the most adequate service. Contrary to the

former expectations, not only students and retired people used the service, but during the first testing period 34% of the users were between 20 and 60 years.

What is transferable to other cities and regions?

Authorities, operators are usually afraid of low level of adaptability to the online booking requirements. ZERGE proved a high adaptivity to the internet-based registration and booking, even at the remote areas and even for elderly groups. DRT systems can decrease mobility poverty and its negative impacts in remote areas. Those people who are new customers in the public transport system thanks to the ZERGE, will pay for the normal local bus system and appear as paying passengers. It helps the evolution of a better modal split. Stop points instead of fix stops can make the operation more flexible and cost-efficient.

What are outcomes and conclusions?

ZERGE is a success story, showing real opportunity for lower density areas' public transport service. This is a milestone in the DRT solutions in Hungary both for the planning principles (inclusive and community planning) and both for the implementation (testing periods and surveys based on the testing). ZERGE also shows that modal-split can be influenced by attracting new users living formerly isolated from the public transport services, obliged to use personal car. Residents, owners of weekend-houses as primary users were almost 100% satisfied of the service and of the whole communication and integrated planning process.

Who are the main target groups?

The main groups are transport authorities, operators, also municipalities touched by lower density or hilly areas showing mobility poverty signs. Mobility experts, transport planners are also involved in order to reach their focus of planning for remote areas. Designers and communication professionals can also learn from the ZERGE visual and communication elements, proving how easy-to-understand schemes, timetables, maps are important for helping the journeys. Vehicle manufacturers of vans and minibuses are also welcome as hilly areas, narrow roads need special vehicles, even more specific if accessibility obligations are satisfied.

And what now? - what will change? - what is the relevance for the future?

ZERGE DRT system is frozen by the pandemic, the second test originally planned for the spring 2020 will be postponed to the second part of summer, first part of the autumn. This is bad news as users and potential new passengers having weekend houses in the area or living in the area from spring to autumn cannot have any connection. Additionally, Hungarian municipalities are in a very difficult situation also from financial point of view, they cannot maintain the pre-pandemic service level due to the lack of (paying) passengers and revenues. In this case the existence of ZERGE after the test period is more uncertain than before, but hopefully the test will prove the high need for such a service and politicians will find the way how to operate it continuously. The main conclusion is the weight of the relevance to recognise the value of public transport services in the period when social distancing and communication push people to car use.

Link to the project

www.zergebusz.hu (available still only in Hungarian)
mobilissimus.hu/en/news/first-zerge-rolled-out