

## **Bicycle parking: the latest challenge in Groningen's bicycle policy**

### **Favourable political climate**

In the city of Groningen, the advantages of cycling have been major considerations for its traffic and town planning for many years. This is because, for decades, this city has had city councils with predominantly leftist tendencies. Obviously, such councils tend to believe that the development of alternative means of transport to the car – of which the bike is an example *par excellence* – merits particular attention. By and large, this policy is supported by the opposition. Consequently the efforts to make the most of the strong points of the bicycle have enjoyed a broad support base in the city council as a whole for many years, so measures in favour of the bike generally meet with approval in local politics. This consensus finds expression in the strict regulation that every proposal of the council involving traffic and transport should include a section providing insight into the consequences for the bicycle. But obviously political good will is shown most effectively by the financial set-up. In both of their four year periods of office, for example, the last two benches of Mayor and Aldermen have made € 6 million available with the specific aim to boost the implementation of bicycle-oriented measures. In its turn, this dedicated financing enables the acquisition of subsidies. This way, the city of Groningen has invested approximately € 18 million in its bicycle policy in the past eight years.

### **Consistent bicycle policy**

Groningen's bicycle policy is based on two major pillars:

1. creating adequate conditions for the bike in terms of urban planning;
2. improving and expanding bicycle facilities.

#### 1. Creating conditions in terms of urban planning

In 1977 the old inner city was entirely and permanently closed to all through (car) traffic. Basically, this measure was aimed at the preservation of an attractive environment in the inner city, which was threatened by the explosive increase in car use. Cyclists, on the other hand, were not banned from the inner city. As anticipated, the side effect was that they had an advantage in terms of travel time. But the most important choice in favour of the bike in terms of town planning was the ambition to keep the city compact, so that work and amenities would remain close to residential areas – in other words: within cycling distance. The most striking example dates from the mid-seventies, when it was decided to keep the University hospital (with 10,000 jobs) within the inner city, unlike many other cities that opted for a location on the outskirts. The result of this urban planning policy is that in Groningen, with its 185,000 inhabitants and 135,000 jobs, practically all transport relations are at a maximum distance of about five kilometres. As a matter of fact, approximately 80 per cent of the inhabitants live less than three kilometres from the city centre.

#### 2. Improving and expanding bicycle facilities

The city of Groningen has constantly invested in improving its bicycle network. Barriers in the form of canals, railways and motorways have been overcome by building bridges and tunnels. Alongside main roads, separate cycle paths, or at least cycle lanes have been laid. In addition a separate system of bicycle signposting has been installed. Due to these measures, the cyclist has an intricate network of 200 kilometres of cycle routes at his disposal nowadays – routes that are socially safe and avoid contact with motorized traffic wherever possible with a view to with traffic

flow and safety. When developing new districts, bicycle facilities are always a point of special interest right from the outset. Roughly 90 per cent of the desired bicycle network has now been realized, but there is still scope for improvement. At any rate, three more bicycle bridges will be completed in 2009 and 2010, and another five kilometres of new cycle path are high on the agenda. In addition the comfort of existing cycle paths with paving stones is being improved by asphaltting them. Besides we are going to readjust traffic lights to give cyclists more green time or green light simultaneously etc. Finally, in conjunction with the Province we are working on plans to improve the bicycle paths from the surrounding villages into the city, the so-called Bicycle Routes Plus.

### **Successful bicycle policy**

The outcome of this policy, obviously in combination with our flat landscape and the bicycle culture of Dutch people in general and those in the North in particular, together with the presence of 47,000 students, has ensured that Groningen has developed into a true cycling city. In 2002 we were voted the best cycling city of the Netherlands and in the new competition of 2008 we were second. All this puts us in the world top class – but what we consider even more important, of course, is that bicycle use in Groningen is unprecedentedly high. The bicycle accounts for nearly 60 per cent of all travelling in the city. Children use their bike to go to school, students to go to the University and many people use it to go to work or do their shopping. Some cycle paths are used by as many as 15,000 people every day. In fact, cycling has become second nature to the residents of this city. And as it takes some effort to get used to Dutch cycling culture, we even organize cycling training for immigrants.

Just imagine what would happen if a part of the cyclists would switch to the car... Car traffic would definitely be in serious trouble much more often and for a much longer duration than it is today. Which only goes to show that cycling is essential for a properly functioning traffic system in our city.

### **A shift of focus towards bicycle parking**

One consequence of the huge numbers of bikes is that, in some respects, the bicycle has fallen victim to its own success. All those cyclists come from somewhere and go somewhere. And all those bikes have to be parked there. As a matter of fact it is common practice nowadays to park bicycles quite randomly. Obviously the enormous numbers of parked bikes cause obstructions at various locations in the city. However, an overload of bikes is created in public spaces and consequently it is hard to find sufficient and safe places to park a bike.

In the seventies, there was an explosive increase in car use. As a result, cars threatened to dominate public space at the expense of other functions, which made it necessary for the authorities to take action. Restrictive parking measures were imposed to reduce parking in the streets and multi-storey car parks were built as an alternative. Analogous to the situation with the car in the seventies, we are now faced with a discussion as to whether strict measures ought to be taken with regard to bicycle parking. Problematic locations are:

1. The inner city;
2. The railway station;
3. The pre-war districts.

## 1. The inner city

Groningen is making an all-out effort to ensure that its unique inner city can thrive in all respects. It should not become run down because functions are moving to the outskirts. As a result, the inner city now offers an extensive range of shops and is an attractive entertainment centre. These aspects make the inner city, with its 55,000 jobs and 30 million visitors a year, the major attraction of the city. A large number of these visitors use their bike to get there and wish to park it as close to their destination as possible. In consequence free passages for pedestrians but also for emergency services etc. are blocked at some locations and at certain moments. And, as has been mentioned above, it makes it more difficult for the cyclists themselves to find an adequate parking facility. In addition, it also puts a bit of a blot on the allure and appearance of the city.

When addressing this problem, we are faced with a dilemma that we have found very hard to solve so far. The success of the bike, certainly compared to cars and public transport, is based on the fact that it takes you to the front door. Regulating and organizing bicycle-parking, for example by creating dedicated parking areas, may undermine this success factor. All of a sudden the cyclist is faced with the necessity of subsequent transport, namely on foot. This may well prove counter-productive in terms of bike use, which in its turn might influence the numbers of visitors to the inner city. And it must be borne in mind that the two spearheads of Groningen's policy are: the highest possible share of cyclists and a flourishing inner city. Nevertheless there are an increasing number of people who maintain that the attractiveness of the bike would not be essentially harmed if bicycle parking was regulated to some degree. It is obvious that in terms of bicycle policy for the inner city this is Groningen's greatest challenge.

The first steps to address the problem of bicycle parking in the inner city were taken in 2005, under the project name 'Citybikes'. The first measure involved placing 1,500 extra bicycle racks where there was still space. The four existing supervised facilities were made free of charge (1,085 spaces altogether) and at locations where shops were especially bothered by parked bikes, red carpet strips were laid. True, these have no legal status as an official ban on parking bikes, but the psychological effect is that people only park their bikes alongside the carpets, thus ensuring free access to the shops. Finally, peak racks were placed at various locations: extra parking capacity at busy times of the week only, so that at quiet moments the appearance of the beautiful historic inner city is not marred by many rows of empty bicycle racks. The evaluation of 'Citybikes' showed that the growing demand for bicycle parking spaces in particular has now been met. But the problematic nature of the inner city as a whole has not yet been solved definitively with this project.

We are now working on a large-scale plan, the main issue of which is ample funding to help create a structural solution for the inner city. This plan is known for certain to include an underground bicycle parking facility with 1,700 spaces underneath the Groningen Forum (an extensive cultural centre in the middle of the inner city), which will be completed in 2015. The inner city is generally regarded as Groningen's 'living room', so – apart from inner city entrepreneurs and residents – there are numerous groups who volunteer an opinion in discussions concerning the inner city. In the year to come we will be working on solutions for the bicycle problem in conjunction with the main interested parties.

## 2. The railway station

In the Netherlands, the bicycle is the main preliminary means of transport for the train. And this share in preliminary transport is still growing. This is also shown by the number of bikes parked around the Central Station in Groningen. For this reason a large underground parking facility was created in front of the station in 2007, with a plaza directly above: the City Balcony. It was possible to build this facility after the bus station had been made more compact by combining city buses and regional buses. In this way, room was created for the city balcony and also for the thousands of bikes that used to be parked randomly on the old station plaza. The final result was that the public space in front of the station regained a certain quality.

The city balcony offers space to 4,650 bikes. The facility is guarded 24/7 and a cycle route runs right through, so that you ride straight into the facility. Initially it was designed to offer space to 3,000 bikes, but halfway the process this number was increased to 4,000 on account of the recorded growth in the number of parked bikes. But now even this expansion has turned out to be insufficient. Meanwhile the capacity has been increased to more than 4,600 racks that occupy all corners of the city balcony. As a consequence, the perception of a spacious and high-quality facility has to some degree been dashed. The (weekend) peak in the demand for spaces has now exceeded 6,000. And so, unfortunately, what one sees now on the city balcony and in the immediate surroundings of the station is once again a tremendous chaos of parked bikes.

A number of measures will be taken in the short term. Arrangements have been made with the people supervising the underground parking facility of Dutch Railways to offer spaces free of charge during weekends, so that this facility is used to its full capacity. Near the rear entrance of the station extra racks will be placed and a temporary facility that was to be removed after completion of the city balcony, will be done up and continue to be used for the time being. Finally, a tough line will be taken with regard to old wrecks of bikes (a common problem in this country) and bikes that have been in the facility for far too long. Together with bikes parked in places where they cause dangerous situations or block passages, they will be removed and can later be collected by the owner at a charge.

In the long run (2020) the station will be renovated and rebuilt on account of the advent of the tram and of extra trains. At the same time the surroundings of the station will undergo a metamorphosis. In our plans we have set our sights on a parking capacity of 15,000 to 20,000 spaces.

## 3. The pre-war districts

The pre-war districts have a high housing density, a fact that is a cause of high pressure on public space, which is quite scarce as it is. After all, many more people own a car than had been factored in when these districts were built. The same goes for bike ownership. These districts are extremely popular with students as they are situated close to the entertainment centre. Consequently they have a high percentage of houses with multiple households (students' homes).

The pavements are frequently blocked by walls of bikes parked outside the racks. This is also caused by the fact that more often than not there are no adequate alleys

to back gardens and sheds. And then there are upstairs flats that have no place of their own to park a bike at all. As a consequence pedestrians and people with prams or wheelchairs etc. run into difficulties, not to mention the annoyance it causes to the neighbours.

One of the reasons that the problem deteriorated was the fact that in 2005 the letting out of lodgings was liberalized, which caused the number of lodging houses in these districts to rise drastically. In order to keep the bicycle problem under control, funds were made available to place extra bicycle racks near students' homes. In the past four years 2,400 extra racks have been installed and another 700 have been planned for 2009. In the meantime, racks have been installed in all places where there was still room. It was not uncommon that in such cases (car) parking spaces were sacrificed. However, we have now reached a point where it is becoming more and more difficult to find suitable spaces while still avoiding heated discussions in the neighbourhood. The fact is, of course, that in these districts in particular car parking space is scarce anyway.

There has been a recent change in policy with regard to the housing of students. The maximum percentage of lodging houses in a street has been reduced to 15 per cent, so that the pressure in some streets in terms of parked bicycles is kept under control. In addition, we will take energetic action to remove wrecks of bikes in these districts. It is quite common among students to own broken down bikes without any economic value. Still, these unused bikes occupy a lot of space on the pavements or in the bicycle racks.

### **Conclusion**

We are aware that the percentages of bicycle use and ownership in Groningen, the Netherlands, are the envy of many countries. However, it now appears that in the city of Groningen we have been surprised, to some extent, by the increase in bicycle use and the attendant pressure on public space to park all these bikes. It only goes to show that a good network of bicycle routes is just one aspect of an effective bicycle policy – for it is not complete until comprehensive solutions have been found to the problematic nature of bicycle parking for all target groups. In point of fact, this is why bicycle parking poses a threat to the ardent wish on the part of the political parties to witness a further rise in bicycle use in the city of Groningen.

*Eric van Huissteden*

*Senior Policy Adviser for Traffic and Transport  
Department of Urban Planning and Economic Affairs  
Municipality of Groningen, the Netherlands*

*Email: [e.van.huissteden@roez.groningen.nl](mailto:e.van.huissteden@roez.groningen.nl)*