

Forms of Public Transport in Small Towns and their Development

Jakub Hora^{1*}, Pavel Drdla¹ and Josef Bulíček¹

¹*University of Pardubice, Faculty of Transport Engineering, Studentská 95, 532 10 Pardubice, Czech Republic; Email: st51965@upce.cz, pavel.drdla@upce.cz, josef.bulicek@upce.cz*

***Corresponding Author:** Jakub Hora

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Abstract: The article deals with urban public transport systems in small towns with no more than 25,000 residents. The aim is to recommend the criteria which are required to be followed by planning, organizing and controlling such small urban public transport systems. The perspectives of 3 stakeholders – passengers, carriers and municipalities are aggregated by combining of conjunctive and disjunctive decision-making methods. The enumeration of the importance of the criterions (weights) is done by the Saaty method. The research is based on surveys with representatives of all stakeholders in all monitored small towns. The specifics of such small urban transport systems are mentioned. The coordination with long-distance transport and the periodic timetable are identified as important features to be followed by local authorities responsible for urban public transport.

Keywords: Criterion, carrier, decision making, municipality, urban public transport

1. Introduction

The paper focuses on conditions in urban public transport (UPT) of small towns, small UPT in short. We define a small town as a municipality of up to 25,000 inhabitants for this purpose. It is common that UPT in small towns are operated under limited conditions. There are often small numbers of vehicles and lines. The systems based on one bus are not an exception. The routes of individual UPT services are often different because they are adapted to local events. Start of working shift or operation of a swimming pool are examples. Small UPT often has a simple fare and non-transferable tickets.

Small UTP systems are often a part of regional demand transport services [1-4]. However, we will focus on the traditional small UPT systems. Regional or urban demand transport systems are an important complement to the traditional transport systems [5,6].

All UPT systems in the Czech Republic are in the competence of individual municipalities. The operation of urban public transport is managed in accordance with European Union regulations

(1370/2007 and 2336/2018). The issue is that the management of UPT systems under these conditions is more complex.

There are rising demands on the management of such UPT systems in small towns. They must be organized under the conditions very similar to the complex UPT systems in larger cities. The second issue is the fact that the current trends in UPT organization are not often followed in small towns.

The purpose of this paper is to support the management of UPT systems in small towns by defining general criteria together with their quantifying importance. This task is complicated because the integration of 3 perspectives needs to be considered. Passengers, carriers and municipalities have different attitudes to the topic because the roles of these stakeholders are quite different.

The research, as well as the resulting recommendations, are based on the combination of the on-site survey and the multicriterial decision making theory. The core part of novelty is the finding of a way to integrate 3 aforementioned different points of view. These weights can be part of a suggested methodological recommendation on how to manage the UPT systems in small towns as a help for people who are not specialized in transport, which often works in local municipal authorities.

We refer to the situation in the Czech Republic using the sample of the municipalities located in the northwest part of Bohemia. The municipalities from 3 regions of Ústí and Labem, Karlovy Vary and Plzeň are selected because each region has its own integrated public transport system (IDS). As a different context occurs there, this is helpful for the generalization of the conclusions and proposals.

In terms of scientific contribution, it is important to emphasize the deepening research in the investigated area that is currently being addressed in various countries in Europe and around the world. The aim is to deepen the research into the transport services in sparsely populated areas. Some research has been done in the areas that have received less attention. Furthermore, the conditions for the follow-up research by other authors have been created.

2. Literature Review

The agenda of UPT in small towns has received less attention in research, but some authors mention useful findings worthy of consideration (to be considered). Antonio Nigro [7] focuses on the relation between public transport use and the extent of the public transport network in small cities.

Maria Börjesson [8] draws attention to the fact that the frequency of services on lines is crucial for decisions made by passengers. An important fact is that the issue of public transport financing is also an essential aspect in small cities located in Sweden.

These findings also correspond to the state/situation in the Czech Republic. It declares that the issue of UPT systems in small towns has an international aspect as well.

The author Sinyiana Rasca [9] also focuses on the region of Northern Europe and mentions the impact of the walking distance to the stops. She also deals with other factors such as car ownership, transport distance, sufficient parking spaces, fare prices, etc. It indicates that it is necessary to consider the UPT with regard to a complex of various aspects.

Nadia Giuffrida [10] focuses on the possibility of using flexible systems in urban transport based on the example of a small city in Italy. It can lead to a change in the UPT by supplementing it with this new kind of service.

A different view of the issue is presented by Aud Tennøy [11], who studied the effects of reducing the number of lines, straightening lines, speeding up connections and shortening the intervals between connections for a small UPT. He states that this causes an increase in the walking distance to the stop and an extension of the intervals between connections on non-core lines. He used examples from the cities in Norway to demonstrate the increase in the number of passengers after the application of such measures.

The issue is also comprehensively addressed in the book by Müller-Hellmann [12] with a wide group of co-authors. Many suggestions are still inspiring, although the book was published in the year 2000. The effort to provide comprehensive information on public transport in German-speaking countries, including public transport in small towns, is also an advantage.

The conclusion of the analysis is that the UPT systems in small towns must also be well organized. There are some relations between the organizational aspects and the attractiveness of the UPT system. The limited extent of the UPT must be compensated by an adequate design of operation. The quality of regular public passenger transport is also a key factor [13].

2.1 Ways of UPT Ensuring

The first aspect of the topic is the way in which UPT is ensured. There are 5 possible ways applied in small towns in the Czech Republic (Fig. 1). It is also related to the European Union regulations (1370/2007 and 2336/2018) alongside the local law [14].



Fig. 1 Ways of UPT organization. Source: authors

Also, small towns can ensure the UPT operation by their own companies. Such companies do not usually specialize in transport. Municipal companies usually provide complex municipal services like waste collection, cleaning of streets, operating of sport facilities, etc. in combination with the UPT. This way is applied in Jáchymov, Kadaň or Duchcov.

Open tendering means that the UPT is operated by an external subject (carrier), but full responsibility for the tender, as well as for the UPT provision, is taken on by the municipality itself. This is the case of the UPTs in Ostrov, Klatovy, Tachov, Klášterec nad Ohří, Roudnice nad Labem, Litoměřice, Lovosice, Louny and Bílina.

The third option – open tendering with an effort to utilize synergy effects with other transport activities of a carrier is efficient for small UPTs, but almost impossible from the legal point of view. In general, public tenders must be open to all applicants. So, requirement for, e.g. backup buses shared with other transport systems operated by the same carrier, is irrelevant, despite this synergy can be beneficial for the small UPT systems from the technological and operational points of view. That is why we also consider this possibility, even though producing this effect is random only (it is impossible to be required). Next is a collective tender with regional transport in the surroundings, usually organized by the regional authorities. This way is applied in Varnsdorf, Domažlice, Sušice, Rokycany, Stříbro, Nepomuk. A specific situation occurs in Přeštice when UPT line has been converted into a regional one.

The most advanced way is joining an IDS [15]. The advantages are synergy effects, professional background (IDS are usually organized by a team of transport professionals) and a unified system. However, financial cooperation with the municipality is still necessary. Another issue can also be the necessity to cooperate. A team organizing the UPT from outside can have a different attitude to local specifics and problems. External teams can be efficient due to skills, however, they can be a potential source of problems due to the misunderstandings of local conditions. Clear communication and cooperation are basic presumptions for an effective solution. Similar effects can also occur from the perspective of passengers. Passengers usually appreciate unification with other public transport subsystems (fare, tickets, transport conditions). On the other hand, there can also be negative effects. For example, when the ticket price is higher within the IDS in comparison with the previous UPT fare. The conclusion is that the municipality must be active in negotiations in any way with a UPT organization.

2.2 Examples of the Studies on the Researched Issue

The study on sustainable mobility planning in smaller towns [16] shows that these settlements face specific problems, such as heavy dependence on cars, weaker public transport, and limited planning capacities, while SUMPs help them to effectively coordinate development, improve the health of their

inhabitants, and make use of available resources thanks to cheaper, quickly deployable measures and an emphasis on regional cooperation.

The review of case studies of rural transport in Scotland and Europe [17] shows that rural areas most often face inadequate transport connections, limited modal options, and information barriers, with community-led transport services, shared mobility, and a user-oriented approach to planning proving effective in reducing transport poverty and increasing service accessibility.

The Eurocities Monitor [18] reports that European cities' biggest concerns in public transport are the lack of funds for fleet expansion and renewal, rising operating costs, accessibility and labor issues, and aging infrastructure. At the same time, however, cities are emphasizing improving coverage, frequency, and affordability, as public transport is key to meeting climate and mobility goals.

The study "Mobility management – insights and examples to successful implementation" [19] presents the mobility management approach as an effective "soft" tool that helps cities reduce traffic congestion and emissions without the need for extensive infrastructure investments. It explains that mobility management influences transport demand through information, organizational, educational, and coordination measures that motivate residents to change their transport behavior. The study also provides specific examples of the successful implementation of these measures in European cities, such as shared mobility systems, mobility centers, employer support for public transport, and combined packages of "soft" measures that improve the overall quality of the urban environment.

3. Methods

In the case of any way of UPT organization (mentioned in the chapter “Ways of UPT ensuring”), it is necessary to consider the UPT in a small town in a complex way. Maximal efficiency is necessary due to the limited extent of UPT (including the limited amount of money). This follows from international comparison (chapter “State-of-the-art”) as well as from the own survey in 14 small towns located in the north-west part of the Czech Republic (chapter “On-site analysis”). The main goal of our research is to define the criteria needed to be met by the control of small UPT systems. This clear recommendation is needed because people responsible for planning, controlling and the operation of such a UPT in small towns have usually shared responsibilities for more fields. The basic facts about the research design, the research workflow and the applied methods, as well as the results of each research step, are in Table 1.

Table 1 Research design. Source: authors

Step	Way	Purpose
1. On-site analysis	14 small towns	Data obtaining Systemic analysis
2. Rating	Passengers (A)	Survey of representatives of all relevant stakeholders
	Carriers (B)	
	Municipalities (C) and transport professionals	
3. Preselection of criteria	Conjunctive method	The most important ones
	Disjunctive method	Welcomed in average
	Lexicographic method	Aggregation
4. Criteria weights enumeration at selected criteria	Saaty method	Weights of importance

3.1 On-site Analysis

An important part of our research is an on-site analysis performed in 14 small towns located in northwestern Bohemia – namely in the regions of Plzeň, Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem. Table 2 shows a list of the towns and the UPTs surveyed. It is also mentioned if the UPT operates every day (indicated by w) or if the operation is limited to business days (bd) or school days (sd) only. The type of fare can be own (o) for the UPT system or integrated (i), i.e., valid also in other parts of the regional IDS. There are also 2 types of timetables – adopted on local events (a) and periodic (p), when services run mainly in a given interval. A carrier can be own or private. The private operators are divided into regional and external for the case of this analysis. The regional carrier also operates transport services close to the solved system, so more or less synergic effects could occur. The external operator is a private carrier working specifically for a given small UPT.

Table 2 Considered small UPTs (stand April 2025). Source: [20]

Municipality	Residents (thousand)	Number of lines	Operation time	Fare	Timetable	Carrier
Aš	13	3	4-17 bd	o+i	a	regional
Bílina	14	3	4-23 w	i	a	regional
Duchcov	8	1	4-19 w	o	a+p	own
Jáchymov	2.5	1	7-15 sd	o	a	own
Kadaň	18	3	4-19 w	o	a	own
Klatovy	23	4	3-23 w	o	a	private
Kláštevec n. O.	14	2	4-23 w	i	a	regional
Litoměřice	23	4	4-23 w	for free	a+p	regional
Louny	18	3	4-23 w	o	a	regional
Lovosice	8	1	5-19 w	for free	a	regional
Ostrov	15	5	5-23 w	o+i	a	regional
Roudnice n. L.	12	1	4-18 bd	i	a	regional
Tachov	14	1	5-23 bd	o	a	regional
Žatec	19	2	4-23 w	i	a	regional

(legend of abbreviations: first paragraph of chapter 3.1)

Table 2 reveals an important finding. There is almost no relation between the size of the municipality and the character of the UPT. An own carrier is in the smallest municipality (Jáchymov) as well as in Kadaň (4th largest). A similar situation is also in the extent of operation. An everyday operation is in Duchcov and Lovosice (8 thousand residents), and an operation reduced to business (working) days is in Aš, Roudnice n. L. and Tachov with 12 – 14 thousand of residents. The line structure in Žatec is considered chaotic despite the size of the city (3rd largest in the sample), but there is a daily operation till 11 PM and an integration of the fares. The connection to long-distance transport (especially railway) is also often referred to as a very important feature. For example, almost one third of UPT passengers travel for or from an interchange to/from a train in the case of Duchcov. This is also important in Klášterec n. O., Klatovy and Roudnice n. L. Free travel is offered in Litoměřice and Lovosice. A regular, clear and periodic timetable is seen as positive in Litoměřice and Duchcov. Serving the defined local events (like starting shifts at industrial plants, school education, etc.) is core for the systems in Bílina and Jáchymov. Bílina is also known for the effort to improve the UPT by applying electric buses, even though electric buses that were set to operate in 2018 were not found too reliable from a technical point of view.

The conclusion of this analysis is that small UPT systems are important, but the features of those systems differ significantly. This leads to the fact that most of the systems analyzed indicate a potential for improvement. On the other hand, the operating conditions of these systems are limited. Many local specifics need to be often followed in the case of a limited budget and in the case of a limited system capacity (small number of buses, etc.). So, it is necessary to define which features are important in small UPT systems to help municipalities discover how to improve their UPTs. It can also be beneficial for managers whose agenda is not focused solely on public transport. Finally, any measure prepared to improve a small UPT must be verified due to the often very specific local conditions. There is a limited number of places to travel to work or school in comparison with larger cities (more than 25 thousand residents). The connection to regional and long-distance transport can be more complicated than in the case of major terminals in metropolises (with more public transport services), etc.

3.2 Rating

Surveys were conducted with passengers (A), carriers (B) and municipalities (C). These 3 groups are identified as important stakeholders (relevant subjects) for UPT in small towns. Relative satisfaction of all is a presumption for efficient operation of the small UPT. The final users are passengers (A), and meeting their requirements is needed. The perspective of carriers (B) is recommended for operation efficiency. Municipalities (C) are responsible for funding as well as for defining a strategy for how the UPT will look.

The result of the survey is that there are 14 criteria (factors) that have a potential impact on UPT in small towns. Passengers (A) as well as experts representing stakeholders B and C were asked to rate the individual elements according to their importance. The scale ranges from 0 (lowest importance) to 20 points (highest importance). The results are in Table 3 in the chapter “Preselection of criteria and viewpoint integration”.

3.3 Preselection of Criteria and Viewpoint Integration

It is necessary to integrate the different perspectives of stakeholders – passengers (A), carriers (B) and transport customers (C), as well as to reduce the number of assessed criteria to one half. The conjunctive and disjunctive methods were applied for both purposes [21]. Conjunctive methods look up the elements important for all stakeholders (A), (B), (C) together. The disjunctive method follows the perspective of each stakeholder individually. Following only one perspective can cause that the solution can objectively fail at different stakeholders [22].

In the case of the conjunctive method (selected 7 criteria), the aspiration level was 5 points for (A), 4 for (B) and 7 for (C). In the case of the disjunctive method (selected 2 criteria), the aspiration level was 17 points for (A), 14 for (B) and 16 for (C).

Some aspects of how to utilize multicriteria-decision making, including the conjunctive and disjunctive methods for preselection, are mentioned in the paper [23]. The principles of conjunctive and disjunctive screening in the case of supplier pre-selection are mentioned by [21].

Table 3 Conjunctive and disjunctive methods. Source: authors

Criteria	Conjunctive method				Disjunctive method			
	(A)	(B)	(C)	Selected	(A)	(B)	(C)	Selected
1. Connections to long-distance transport	17	13	16	Yes	17	13	16	Yes
2. Periodic timetables	16	14	15	Yes	16	14	15	Yes
3. Inclusion in the IDS tariff	5	10	15	Yes	5	10	15	No
4. Optimization of line management and interconnection with IDS lines	5	12	14	Yes	5	12	14	No
5. Guarantee of continuity between lines	10	11	10	Yes	10	11	10	No
6. Connections between lines	10	10	8	Yes	10	10	8	No
7. Elements of flexible transportation systems	7	5	7	Yes	7	5	7	No
8. Modern public transport vehicles	8	3	8	No	8	3	8	No
9. Service of local public transport links	3	3	4	No	3	3	4	No
10. Modern public transport stops	5	4	4	No	5	4	4	No
11. Benches at public transport stops	7	3	5	No	7	3	5	No
12. Operation even on weekends	5	3	2	No	5	3	2	No
13. Zero fare price level	4	1	1	No	4	1	1	No
14. Information about public transport on the internet	3	1	2	No	3	1	2	No

Note: (A) passengers, (B) carriers, (C) municipalities.

Table 3 shows the results of selection using the conjunctive and disjunctive methods. Criteria below the aspirational level are marked in red. They have been rejected by the conjunctive method. The rest of the criterias being above or equal to the aspirational level for all the perspectives (A) – (C) are selected as the criteria followed by all stakeholders. The disjunctive method selects the most important criteria for individual stakeholders without regard to the meaning for other ones. The parallel running of both methods is a part of the designed way to consider small UPTs in multiple perspectives.

The way to combine these methods is based on the lexicographic method. The first step is to accept each criterion with the highest individual importance for each stakeholder (A) – (C) identified by the disjunctive method. The second step is to fill the remaining positions with the elements resulting from the conjunctive method, starting from the best (most important).

The respondents were selected from a broader pool of potential respondents. This procedure was like that used for the cities, where respondents were also gradually selected from a broader pool. The respondents were interviewed both in person and by correspondence. For the purposes of the research, questions were carefully selected to obtain valid feedback from the respondents and to ensure that their answers were not influenced by the wording of the questions.

3.4 Criteria Weights Enumeration

The Saaty method [24] is applied for the second stage with an effort to enumerate the weights of the 7 finally applied criteria. The Saaty method allows a very specific approach allowing an inclusion of both objective and subjective inputs, which are then reflected in the ranking of individual criteria. The criteria in Table 4 are indicated by the serial numbers (noted in Table 3) due to the length of the text. The preference values were also set by the experts.

Table 4 Application of the Saaty matrix. Source: authors based on the survey

Criterion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	1	1/3	5	5	7	3	5
2	3	1	3	3	5	3	3
3	1/5	1/3	1	1/3	3	1/5	1/5
4	1/5	1/3	3	1	3	1/5	1/5
5	1/7	1/5	1/3	1/3	1	1/5	1/5
6	1/3	1/3	5	5	5	1	3
7	1/5	1/3	5	5	5	1/3	1

Table 5 is compiled according to the Saaty method, the weights of individual criteria are calculated in the way of geometric means.

Table 5 Assigned criteria preference values. Source: authors based on the survey

Criterion	Weight [-] (·100%)
2 Connections to long-distance transport	0.289
1 Periodic timetable	0.276
6 Inclusion in the IDS tariff	0.179
7 Optimization of line management and interconnection with IDS lines	0.121
4 Guarantee of continuity between lines	0.061
3 Connections between lines	0.045
5 Elements of flexible transportation systems	0.029

The results show that the main important factors are connection to long-distance transport (to reduce traffic isolation) and periodic timetables (to increase comfort and clarity of traffic). The following criteria are related to the integration into IDS.

4. Discussion

Two maximal absolute differences in the rated score (Table 3) between stakeholders (A) – (C) are related to the inclusion of small UPT in IDS. Passengers (A) evaluated this criterion by 5 points from 20; carriers (B) by 10 and municipalities (C) by 15 points in the case of fare. This is supported by the fact that the fare schemes of small UPTs are usually very clear and simple (often it is a direct payment to a driver). So, passengers can accept their own fare with no need for integration.

The minimal score expressed by the passengers (A) is registered at the internet information as well as the service of local public transport lines. The limited need for information is also a specific feature of small UPTs. It is caused by the fact that small UPTs are clear and simple and that the share of local passengers is usually high. However, missing information can be a complication for people using the UPT irregularly. Some of the small UPTs are hidden from these passengers because passengers do not anticipate the presence of the UPT in small towns like in large cities. A low rating of service of the same carrier at other local public transport lines indicates that passengers are not identified with a specific carrier. The relatively low rating of this by carriers (B) with the score of 4 points declares that carriers also accepted the decomposition of public transport according to an economic point of view. This can be a message for municipalities and transport authorities (C) because they must be able to find potential synergies leading to the most efficient transport operation (e.g., in the frame of IDS).

Connections to long-distance transport are the criterion with the highest weight (see Table 5). This corresponds to the fact that, historically, a lot of UPTs have been started by a connection between the city center and the railway station. The purpose of this traffic is still relevant.

The criterion with the second highest weight is the periodic timetable. This is in contrast with the requirement for a weekend operation, which is a lower priority for all stakeholders (A) – (C).

5. Conclusions

The paper identifies the core criteria (factors or elements) which need to be followed in the case of the UPT system in small towns (Table 5). This recommendation has been made especially for responsible authorities, who are often not specialized in UPT. The discussion about the specifics of small UPT systems together with the rating of all criteria define the context in which a UPT of a small town could be considered. The novelty is also related to the integration of different perspectives of three individual stakeholders – passengers (A), carriers (B) and municipalities (C). The methodological contribution is seen in the combination of the disjunctive and the conjunctive methods together with the whole process, as mentioned in Table 1. This process can be repeated when modified conditions occur. It is strictly recommended to conduct your own surveys to reflect local specifics if applied outside the Czech Republic or in case local conditions are principally different.

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