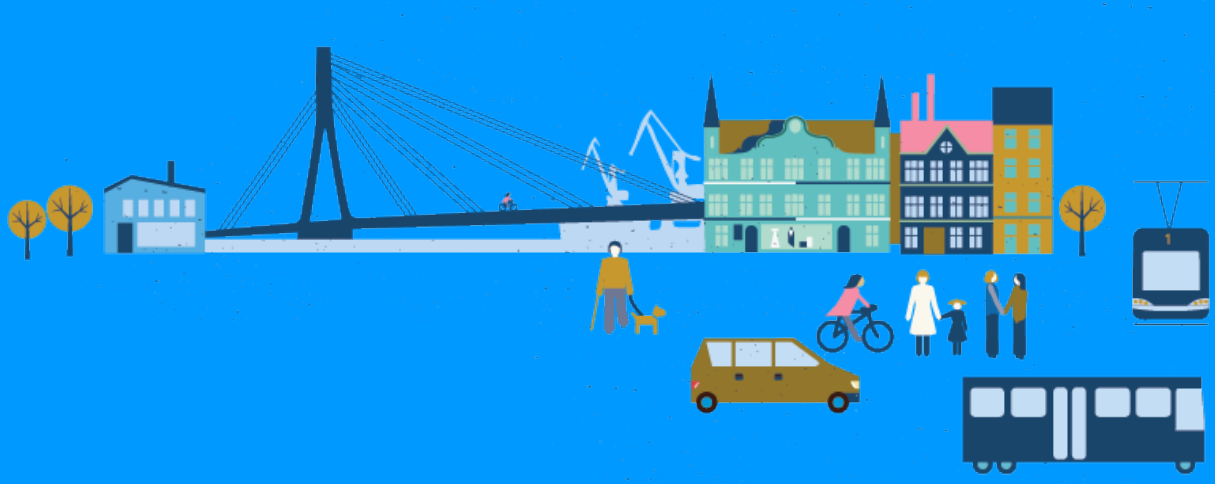
Riga short-term mobility action plan - A review



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Introduction

Since August 2018 Gehl along with partners MOE Tetraplan and SWECO have worked together with Rigas Satiksme and the City of Riga, focusing on 3 tasks related to the future development of mobility in Riga:

- Providing a draft vision for mobility in Riga looking towards 2050
- Collecting background information on best practice mobility systems
- Discussion and ad hoc advice related to the Mobility Action Plan prepared by the City of Riga and local partners

As part of the last task Gehl has been asked to do this review, a review of the Short-Term Mobility Action Plan from February 2019. The full English title of the report being "Sustainable Mobility Programme for Riga – Short-term Action Plan 2019-2025" or in short "STAP".

The structure of the review is as follows:

- General comments
- Comments related to specific modes/subthemes
- Concluding remarks

The purpose of the review is to discuss the overall focus and balance of the plan. This means that the review only contains comments at specific project level regarding a few major projects.

General comments - 3x3

The plan addresses a topic that is crucial for the future of Riga. Car traffic in and around Riga has been increasing steadily for a couple of decades, to the point where mobility for both people and goods, as well as the more general quality of life, are increasingly challenged by the amount of and congestion for motor vehicles.

It is positive that the plan:

1. ...clearly states its priorities when it comes to improvements: First walking, then cycling and public transport followed by (individual) car traffic and lastly cargo traffic.

2. ... is realistic in acknowledging that regarding the reduction of car traffic, the measures must be a combination of "stick and carrot" to have an effect.

3. ...is looking somewhat outside the borders of Riga and also towards the national level, acknowledging that to improve mobility is a regional challenge where both neighboring municipalities and the national level play an important role, for example through heavy rail.

For mobility to be improved - and as part of this to create a situation where alternatives to the car are attractive when it comes to travel time and convenience - our recommendation is that the following topics receive further attention:

A. Land use planning, focusing on compact developments and development in areas that already are or will be served by good quality public transport.
B. Addressing the overall drivers that currently make people move out of Riga and instead live in the vicinity of the city and commute in an out, very often by car. This means drivers related to topics such as housing policies, tax policies and quality of public spaces within Riga and compared to surroundings.
C. How citizens and other stakeholders will be involved. Citizens are a resource, the same is the case with stakeholders such as NGO´s and large workplaces. The plan would benefit from the addition of a section on how these partners will be included, both in the overall debate and selection of specific initiatives and in the design phase of specific measures.

Whether A and B are addressed in detail in the mobility action plan or in other planning documents is less important. The crucial thing is that they are addressed integrally with the planning and considerations linked to mobility.

3 key themes

Inherent in the plan are 3 key themes. Themes that have potential to both contribute very positively to the development of Riga and to enforce/ add-to problems.

Firstly, City of Riga has the courage to explicitly acknowledge that in the historical center of Riga "there are no opportunities for considerable transport infrastructure improvements to absorb the constantly increasing transport flows". AND to take the consequence of this through proposing congestion charging as part of the overall effort to keep Riga accessible by car and at the same time to shift transport from private cars to less space-consuming transport modes such as public transport, cycling and walking. Congestion charging has been implemented in several other cities such as London, Stockholm, Goteborg and Singapore and can, if correctly applied, be a very effective tool as part of an effort to improve overall mobility. Furthermore, congestion charging of some sort can be expected to be a tool that will only become more common in advanced cities as a means of securing an urban environment free of driverless cars with no passengers flooding the streets to avoid paying for parking or to pick up forgotten lunch boxes. Experiences from cities that have implemented congestion pricing show that clear communication around the purpose of the scheme ("why"), parallel improvements of alternatives to the car planned in cooperation with surrounding municipalities, as well as transparency regarding the use of the revenue from the scheme, are among the key parameters for success. In the event of proceeding with the implementation of congestion charging, Riga is strongly recommended to learn from these experiences and convert them to actions that fit with their context.

Secondly, Rail Baltica is a huge project "arriving" soon to Riga with the purpose of linking the city to other European capitals. This will have large and potentially negative consequences for local mobility. The goal for the City of Riga should be to ensure that the more detailed construction of Rail Baltica

through Riga is done in a manner that supports the overall city vision for local mobility. One example is how to address the potential barrier effect of the Rail Baltica (the aim is to have no 'at-level' crossings of the Rail Baltica line which will affect a lot of existing railway crossings). The work on new or redesigned crossings of the railway – where, for which modes and with which urban quality etc. – should be seen in a strategic perspective where the sum of this work should make walking, cycling and public transport more attractive and the use of the car for local trips less attractive. Inspiration for this approach might come from the many Dutch cities where cars have to go out from the center before they can get across/around the city, whereas people cycling and walking can take a much more direct route. Another example of using Rail Baltica as an opportunity is the current focus on ensuring that the Rail Baltica crossing of the Daugava will be supplemented with a walking and cycling connection. The final point to raise here is the importance of avoiding both that Rail Baltica and connected projects are not *either* taking all planning resources of the city administration *or* due to a lack of planning resources at city level, being "left alone" to a degree where the project will do more bad to the Riga traffic system than good.

Thirdly "walk the talk": The world is full of city plans and visions committing to sustainability and to limiting car traffic, but what happens in real life is still often "more of the same". If Riga runs into this trap it is certainly not the first city to do so. Nevertheless, with the stated commitment to promote and prioritize alternatives to the private car for the good of the overall mobility and for the quality of life in Riga, this would be a shame. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider performing a 'reality-check' on the plan; can everything be done as part of a SHORT-TERM mobility plan, are the necessary financial and staff resources available to implement this many initiatives? And if not, what will be highest priority/absolute minimum and what is 'nice-to' when it comes to delivering on the priorities that are stated in the introduction? The current list of initiatives is impressive, but the volume of initiatives also has the consequence that it becomes a bit difficult to see what is priority. One way to address this issue could be to state plainly in the introduction the first 6-8 concrete changes the plan will result in, or what can be expected to have changed in 2 year's time, for example.

A tool for prioritization: The "4-step model"

It is recommended that Riga adopts the so called "4-step model" when selecting mobility related actions. This will help to secure that large investments in infrastructure are optimized before new infrastructure is added. The latter steps should only be taken when needed and when the earlier steps cannot achieve the desired outcome. The 4 steps are:

1. Affecting the demand for mobility and the choice of mobility by non-physical interventions (reschedule trips to work to reduce congestion in the rush-hour, a public ticketing system working across modes and administrative borders, workplaces providing support for cycling and public transport similar to the value of free carparking ("cash-out") etc.
2. Optimizing of existing infrastructure (i.e. dynamic information on travel time for buses; introducing more dynamic traffic lights, upgrading local public spaces etc.)
3. Improvements to existing infrastructure (for example, redesign of crossings, traffic-calming or introducing bus lanes or bicycle tracks on an existing street).
4. Building new infrastructure such as bridges, roads or new stations.

Thematic comments

This section contains comments related to the specific themes or traffic modes addressed in the short-term mobility action plan.

Road network for motorized traffic:

Although very large and costly projects, the upgrade on the eastern and southern ring road do have an important role in relieving more central areas of traffic and providing car and lorry drivers with an alternative route through more central areas where further restrictions on car traffic are planned.

During the construction of these projects there is expected to be substantial disruption to the street network for cars. Improvements to the car-alternatives should, where possible, be timed with this.

Furthermore, the larger road expansions might add new multilevel crossings or in other ways also affect the quality of the cycling and pedestrian network. It is important to have this in mind, and as part of these large street projects remember to increase the quality of crossings for cycling and walking, not the opposite. Part of this is to ensure that potential underground crossings for pedestrians and people cycling are programmed and designed to prevent becoming socially unsafe (this point is also relevant for a lot of the Rail Baltica related projects).

Public transport

Riga has a substantial public transport system. It is positive that the plan is focusing on how to keep developing the rail-based modes as the backbone of the system. The ambition level should be to ensure that public transport will gradually be competitive with the car for more and more trips, just as has happened in best-practice cities such as Zurich, Munich and Vienna.

Timing-wise it is important that the more long-term improvements to the tram network are combined with improvements that can be in place when restrictions on car traffic is implemented.

It is hard to model exactly where needs for extra capacity will arise, therefore important that part of the added capacity is flexible.

On a more detailed level:

- Existing tram lanes are a scarce resource, namely space reserved for public transport in central areas in Riga. Consider if the effect of this resource can be optimized further by allowing buses on these lanes through smaller infrastructural interventions widening the lanes, or other measures. This could also relate to potential improvements on sections where there is currently nearly but only nearly space for an extra car lane, which results in car traffic at times blocking trams with just a few cm.
- The Riga trolleybus-system only has limited mention in the plan. Consider, as part of the plan, to explore the potential in this mode in greater detail. In a less and less fossil-fuel dominated mobility system, the trolley bus system could potentially be one of the most promising existing infrastructure assets for Riga to further develop. One scenario could be a Trolleybus-system 2.0 where trolley-battery hybrid buses are able to disconnect and reconnect with the trolley

network and thereby serve more regional destinations, still using mainly electricity as power source.

Carparking

Carparking is an exceptionally important tool when it comes to affecting choice of traffic mode in urban areas. The plan addresses parking and acknowledges the need to reduce parking in the city center and instead distribute space to walking and cycling. Though in the list of actions the most specific actions are related to constructing new parking. It is recommended to develop a more coherent parking strategy – including short-term actions. Such a strategy should specifically address issues such as updated data on parking (amount, level of use, pricing, ownership etc.), the reduction of on-street parking, spillover effects from areas with parking pricing to areas with free parking, fair pricing of parking including actions such as unbundling parking from the price of apartments and cash-out instead of free parking at workplaces.

An important topic for such a strategy is also to address the purpose and future of courtyards in the denser areas of Riga. Courtyards have huge potential as a semi-public space with greenery and play opportunities that make living in the city also attractive for families. If on the other hand, courtyards are mainly used for carparking this limits the quality of life associated with living in the city and at the same time makes commuting by car more attractive.

Park & Ride,

The plan includes initiatives for Car Park & Ride. The Car Park & Ride spots shown on figure 3 are well located in a short-term perspective. In a mid and long-term perspective, they are probably located too close to the city center. Therefore, consider building these 6-7 parking facilities in a flexible way that makes it easier to later repurpose them as shops or offices after 10-15 years (when Car Park & Ride facilities should potentially be moved further away from the city center).

It is important that the focus on Park & Ride also include better access to public transport by bicycle and walking. A plan for this is included in the initiatives which is positive. To get this plan done and implemented should have high priority and the focus should include access to public transport stops in general, not just to the "designated" Park & Ride spots.

Micro mobility devices

In the timeline of the short-term plan, emerging transport technologies such as "Mobility as a Service" (MaaS) and autonomous vehicle technology will probably not have large scale impact. Though one area where the development is fast and might impact in the short-term is what is often referred to as "micro mobility devices": e-scooters, e-bikeshare, segways etc. Hubs to facilitate access to such devices should be part of the Car Park & Ride spots as a micro mobility device also can be an attractive mode for the last part of the trip. Furthermore, the plan should address the broader issue of how to regulate these modes / systems, preferably both creating an attractive environment for providers of these systems to test in but also ensuring that pedestrians and other users of the public space will not experience a disadvantage.

Walking:

Walking is mentioned in the plan, even acknowledged as the highest priority. And both the importance of a "red carpet" principle and improved crossings are among the actions mentioned. Furthermore, the appendix with a complete list of actions includes the need for design guidelines regarding

walkability (and public spaces) (i.e. 2B, 4B and 4C). Specific infrastructure measures aimed at improved walking is still somewhat vague and relatively limited in dedicated funds and often scheduled for completion at the end of the short-term time span (2025).

It is recommended as high priority to develop and implement the design guidelines as part of a more thorough pedestrian programme for how and where more specifically to improve walking conditions, and how this will be financed. It is recommended that such a programme also include a focus on the many rather basic pedestrian enhancements that can be done at relatively low costs, and on local neighborhood centers as a supplement to the city center.

Closely related to the focus on walking is the more general focus on public space and local destinations, see remarks on this topic below.

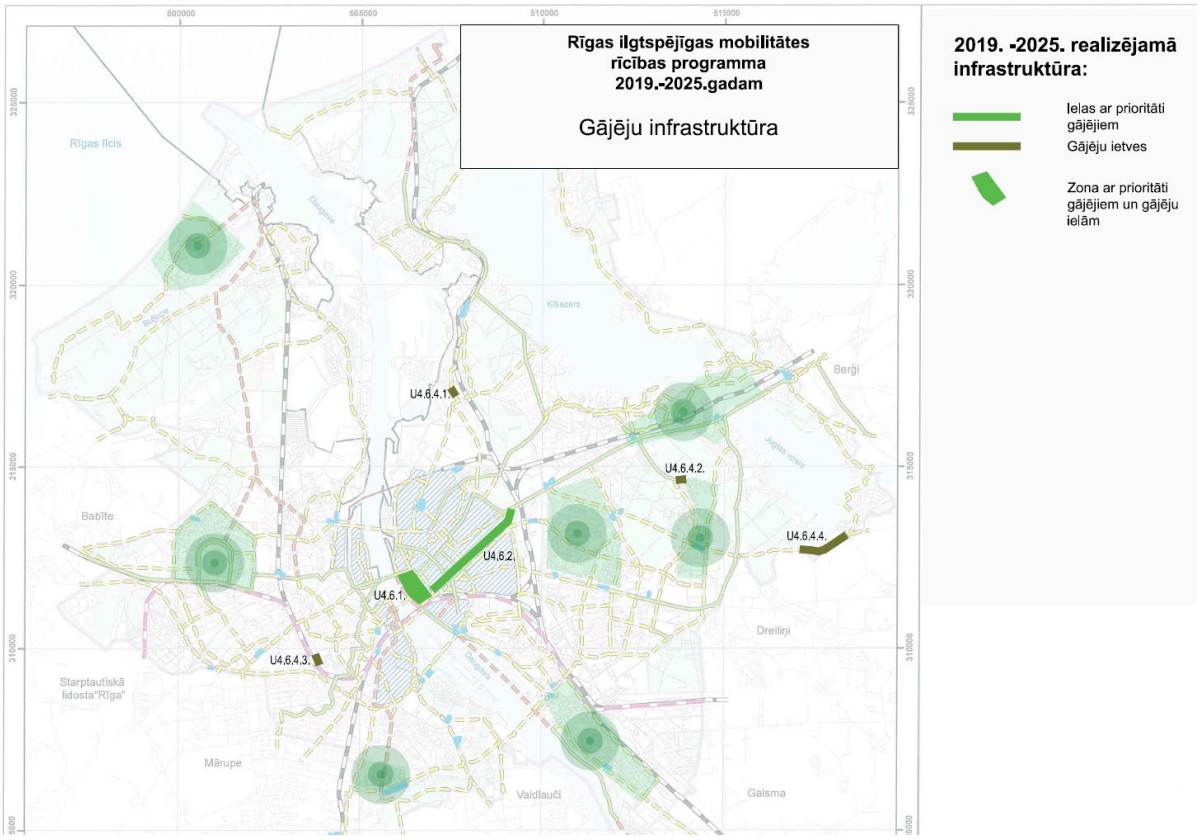

Figure 1: The focus on improved conditions for walking and good public spaces should also include local neighborhood centers such as those indicated on this map

Cycling network

The plan includes a number of new bicycle connections which is positive. However, to judge from figure 4 in the plan, it still leaves a substantial amount of gaps in the overall network by 2025, and some gaps will still be there by 2030. The city is recommended to investigate how most if not all of these gaps can be eliminated with the goal of having a citywide network of high quality cycling facilities in place by 2025.

Traffic calmed streets are currently addressed in the plan in the section on traffic safety. Such streets play an important role in creating a coherent bicycle network – and in creating streets that are attractive public spaces and not just corridors for traffic. This wider role of traffic-calmed streets should be explicitly addressed in the plan, including how the work with traffic calming - not just in the central areas but also in more residential areas - is foreseen. Furthermore, it is recommended to highlight where traffic-calmed streets rather than dedicated cycling facilities are the prioritized way of eliminating some of the aforementioned gaps.

Cycling in Riga has the potential to reach beyond the municipal border. To illustrate this, it should be considered to add circles with a 5 km and a 10 km radius around the city center on figure 4 in the plan, these circles equaling travel time by bike of approximate 20 and 40 minutes.

The issue of bike-parking in public space and at public transport hubs is addressed, although the issue of bike-parking at home should be addressed as well. The City already has standards for bike-parking in new developments which is positive, one recommended action is to evaluate these standards and if relevant adjust them. Bike-parking in existing residential areas is another important theme that should be explored, this could be addressed through, for example, guidelines for how to integrate bike-parking into existing courtyards and buildings. The latter could potentially be combined with a municipal grant system of some sort co-financing bike-parking facility at such locations.

Local destinations/public space

A high-quality public space encourages more people to walk and cycle, and many people walking and cycling make the public spaces of the city more lively and vibrant and attract yet more people and investment to a city, rather than to dispersed suburbs which are hard to access with any other means of transport than a car. On the other hand, living in a dense city-environment with close proximity to public spaces of high quality makes public transport competitive and encourages people to walk or cycle to destinations close by, rather than taking their car to a destination further away.

This close relation between mobility and public spaces has been discussed in detail as part of the 2050 Draft Mobility Vision provided by the Gehl team, but there is only limited mention of it in the plan. Though the appendix with a complete list of actions includes the need for public space programme with strategy, design guidelines and specific projects to be implemented.

We at Gehl Architects have experienced again and again that attractive, vibrant and inclusive public spaces not only are what make a city truly livable for its inhabitants but also plays a deciding factor in how the mobility pattern unfolds. We therefore recommend that the City of Riga gives the implementation of the public space programme high priority, and that this includes the working with a mix of small, quick physical interventions and larger ones to ensure that improvements of public space happen gradually, from 2020 onwards. This recommendation is further strengthened because through

its assets such as its beautiful green areas and fantastic setting at the Daugava, Riga has great potential for becoming a city renowned for the quality of its public space.

Figure 2: The Daugava Promenade

Figure 3: One of several newer playgrounds (© City of Riga)

A topic currently missing in the plan is land-use planning including the location of future developments. As the issue of land-use planning has big and long-lasting impact on mobility we recommend that this issue is addressed. Our recommendation is 1) to focus new development and re-developments on plots in or next to the central areas of the city, areas which should be well connected to other parts of the city by public transport, walking and cycling, as well as 2) ensuring high quality public spaces and facilities in the new neighborhoods from the early phases. This encourages future residents to a car-free lifestyle and will have an immense impact on the mobility patterns in Riga in the future.

As mentioned in the overall comments, whether the issue of a public space programme and land-use planning are addressed in detail in the mobility action plan or in other planning documents is less important, the crucial thing is that they are addressed integrally with the planning and considerations linked to mobility.

Operations:

The daily operations of the city, whether related to administrative procedures or to maintenance, play a large role when it comes to creating and maintaining a well-functioning mobility system. Below are highlighted a few themes related to operations relevant for the plan:

- Winter: Riga has harsh winters. This 1) affects the attractiveness and therefore potential for cycling, walking and use of public transport (door-to-door public transport trips involve waiting outside and most often walking or cycling to/from the public transport) and 2) have implications for operations such as snow removal. This issue should somewhat be addressed in the plan.
- Street upgrades/street maintenance: The existing focus of the city on not just doing this at 1:1 but also seeing it as an opportunity to "walk the talk", to gradually reconfigure more and more streets towards better condition for walking, cycling, public transport and local public spaces, should be continued and potentially, through standards and guidelines, be intensified.
- Partnering with the EU: The EU is an important partner for the development of the mobility system in and around Riga. It is recommended to address the consequences of this in the plan including actions aimed at increased alignment between the projects receiving EU support,

and Riga´s goals regarding mobility. Currently the EU in Riga is supporting primarily large-scale road projects focusing on car and lorry traffic supplemented with support for a couple of large-scale tram and rail projects. It is recommended to investigate the possibility of securing larger scale EU funding (also) for projects with a different profile; i.e. a large project consisting of many smaller sub-projects related to issues such as cycling, walking and public spaces. A dialogue with the EU on this issue will have to be done in close cooperation with the national level.

- Cost-benefit analysis: Chapter 4 of the plan contains an overview of expected socio-economic costs and benefits which is positive. The cost-benefit calculations done for the large road projects (table 10) are based on standard methods, where time savings for car users is the main benefit. It should be noted that how these standard methods to calculate the cost and benefits works somewhat collides with the fact described in the beginning of the plan; how expanding road capacity only shifts the congestion problems to the future, not solving them more substantially. Furthermore, these methods, only in a quite limited way, handle softer and more long-term effects related to factors such as health, perception of safety, equality of mobility and effect on demographic trends. Therefore, if such methods are too isolated in guiding decisions, there is a risk they will work against the more overall vision of a livable Riga - not sprawling and being too car-dominated. This is a more general dilemma regarding cost-benefit methods not unique to Riga, though it is still recommended to include a refining of the methods among the actions in the plan.
- Traffic monitoring and counts: It is important for the quality of the planning and for the focus to include numbers on walking, cycling and the use of public space in this work. As Jan Gehl says: "You count what you care about"

Concluding remarks

The short-term mobility action plan is, in a coherent and straightforward way, addressing a topic which is crucial for the future of Riga. Car traffic in and around Riga has been increasing steadily for a couple of decades to the point where mobility for both people and goods and the more general quality of life are increasingly challenged by the amount of and congestion for motor vehicles.

The plan consists not only of recommended actions but also contains an overview of expected socioeconomic benefits and costs plus a thorough status on current mobility issues. Altogether this forms a comprehensive basis for political decisions on short-term mobility actions.

We hope our review will be a useful supplement and will help in securing a plan that will not just on paper but in real life, be instrumental in the realization of the stated political ambition to create a mobility system that supports a city that is attractive to live, work and invest in instead of the opposite.