



Interview ▶ Current affairs and future of public transport in Andorra

The Government will conduct a survey on the use of buses

The number of users has doubled in a year with the introduction of free pass, with more than 340,000 trips in August

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The Government is finalizing the survey it wants to launch, in October, among users of national public transport. The aim of this study is to find out the type of user and the frequency of use, and especially to observe if there has been a change in the travel habits of people who used private vehicles. «With the free pass we have had a significant increase in users, but we want to know if there has been a transfer of people who were moving in a private vehicle to do so in public transport», explained the Director of Business, Commerce, Industrial Development and Transport of the Government, Josep Pujol, who assured that they are finishing defining the questions in collaboration with the Department of Mobility.

In this sense, Pujol emphasized that the result of the survey will be used to polish the policy regarding public transport tariffs in the country, once it has been determined that it will be free. «Perhaps there are people who used to make a specific journey on foot and now

take the bus because it's free, but above all, we want to know what the impact has been on the use of private vehicles», he reiterated.

In this way, in order to obtain a sufficiently reliable picture, the Government wants the questionnaire to be answered by around 1,500 or 1,600 people from different parishes in order to «have visions of different realities». Likewise, the information will also serve to draw conclusions about the convenience and options for improving the service, routes and frequencies, and

even connections with municipal buses «for those people who live in towns far from urban centers» in order to attract even more travelers.

In any case, what is undeniable is that, with free pass, public transport users have increased. «The latest figure for monthly subscriptions is that we have already issued 23,000, of which 90% are physical and 10% digital», specified Pujol, who detailed that «the average number of user validations is 14 per month, which is a good figure». But the most significant figure in this regard is the one related to the total number of trips: «We closed the month of August with 342,000 validations, while in the same month of 2021 168,000 trips were made», as reported by the director. In other words, the free service has led to a growth of around 105%.

Likewise, Pujol explained that with the launch of the 30-euro pass, there was a small increase in users, but that the formula resulted «rather, in a relief for the workers' pockets», and acknowledging that «perhaps we didn't see the growth we expected or the leap to public transport».

Be that as it may, the Government still do not want to assess whether this number of travelers is sufficient for the purpose of decongesting the road network and reducing the emissions of the cars that occupy it or whether more people need to use private vehicles alongside, waiting precisely to have the result of the survey of habits. «In January, when we will have seen the operation of the pilot test and we will have the study, we will assess the results it has given us and its real cost», said the director of Transport. =

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«We have to promote public transport and we have to get used to it»

JOSEP PUJOL

Director of Business, Trade, Industrial Development and Transport

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Josep Pujol has been working for the Government for 28 years, and since 2019 he has held the position of Director of Business, Commerce, Industrial Development and Transport. From this area, the national public transport service is monitored and, once its free service has been implemented, they study the necessary improvements to continue promoting it and make it mo-

re attractive, especially for private vehicle users.

–What are the strategic axes that define the country's public transport policy?

–First of all is to promote their use in order to reduce that of private vehicles, and contribute accordingly to reduce the pollution they generate, in addition to improving the saturation that we currently find on public roads. To get here we have two parts that we have to work

on. The first is to assess the behavioral habits of all bus users, and for this we will develop the survey among passengers. And on the other hand, the second aspect we have to work on is routes and frequencies. We need to know if they are suitable, if they should be modified or if they should be added. Ultimately, we want to check if there are elements that need to be rethought in order to attract more users.

–The litmus test of the free service

was now, in September. Do you think it's over?

-I think so, although we cannot say that it has been an absolute success because we have been making adjustments. It must be taken into account that we did not know what the growth would be for this 100% return to business and school activity in September. We had data on what we were transporting in August and that there were around 2,500 youth bus passes, but we didn't know how many users it would all represent. We tried to oversize it, but I think that with the contributions that have been made to us, we have been quite successful. We hope that, by the end of the month, everything will be defined with the appropriate format and we will be responding to the real needs of users.

-Can it be said, then, that the management of public transport is alive?

-Completely, it's non-stop. You have to be very on top of it, because now we have returned from the summer holidays and in a matter of a month the temporary workers will start to arrive and this will lead to a new growth of users, and later on they will also tourists...It's a very lively activity, and until you've completed a full year of service you don't have data on which to base your planning. And of course, we had covid, which didn't bring us real numbers, and then came the free bus, which created a significant growth in demand. Little by little we have to adapt and I think the time will come when we will be left with an annual percentage growth linked to the same increase in the population. On the other hand, we are talking about an element in which citizens are very demanding, and at the very least there is a mistake, they let us know immediately.

-In fact, in the last year and a half there have been many tariff changes in the service. How have you experienced this situation?

-I think the most complicated thing is the fact that it involves changes in the conditions of a public tender, and all this must be specified with the concessionaires. But the evolution must be this if we want to be able to move easily around the country by bus and if we want to put a stop to climate change. We must promote public transport and we must get used to it. Most people recognize that, when they travel out-

side the country, they leave the car and use public transport, and instead, in Andorra we take the car to go 100 metres. It is these changes that we must integrate. And maybe it has been a very fast evolution, because we hadn't yet closed one door and we already had the other open, but I think it's the path we had to follow. Fortunately, we can now close the negotiations with the companies and it will be much easier to move forward together, although it is true that it is difficult to go beyond making the service free.

-So, will the bus continue to be free?

-Following the line of what the head of government said during the Political Orientation Debate, it can be said that the year 2023 will continue. I suppose it will also be linked to this whole study we want to do on whether we have achieved the effect we were looking for with the initiative. In any case, in the last instance, it is a political decision, but if it can be verified that the effect it has caused is the desired one, from the department we will propose it to the political sphere.

-Regarding the offer, do you think it is sufficient or does it have room for improvement?

-We are working on it, but we have to monitor the conditions of the award contracts, which is where our hands are tied. We can redefine the routes and frequencies to improve the service, due to the fact that we know that between 07.00 and 09.30 we have a large volume of trips, and on the other hand, from 10.00 to 13.00 the demand drops. With these conditions that we have already observed, we must find a way to redistribute the service so that it is better. And we have to do all this work with the concessionaire companies.

-Perhaps one of the challenges would be to decentralize the service, and in this sense there has sometimes been talk of routes such as La Massana - Encamp. Do you see it as viable?

-This route is one that, personally, I would like to try. We have had requests from people who live in each of the parishes and would like to travel between them, because nowadays this movement means having to go to Escaldes-Engordany and make a transfer, and this is not efficient even with public transport, neither by atmospheric pollution,

nor by the user. Well, we do a pilot test, because it can also happen that it seems to us that there is a lot of demand and then it turns out that it is not so much. For example, in Cortinada we have a pilot test in place because there was a need because the municipal bus did not cover this last hour, and it seems to be working. We are doing these little tests to check if there is a real need, and if there is, how should we apply it, because when we talk about buses, it is neither profitable, nor ecological, nor productive if there is not a certain number of travelers.

-One of the shortcomings that users usually point out is the end time of the service. Have you considered being able to extend the hours?

-We are studying to review the last journeys of the day to ensure that the last journey takes place at 10.00 pm. We already received a request to extend it, and a few months ago we established that the last journey leaves at 21.30 instead of 21.00. It seems that the feedback we've had about it is that it's not enough, so that's why we're working to expand it.

-Andorra has shown itself firm in its sustainability objectives and for the reduction of emissions. How can public transport be adapted to this mandate?

-In the basic document of the national service there was a period during which we allowed the introduction of older vehicles before adapting the fleet to the European standard in terms of emissions, but we ourselves pushed for a moratorium on this clause because we wanted to carry out tests, which have already been carried out, with electric vehicles. We operated both small and larger vehicles for a few days, and the conclusions we drew from them are that, nowadays, this type of electric vehicle is more ready to perform the municipal service, but the electric bus that covers the need for the national line is still far away.

-Then, the companies will have to adjust the fleet to these emission conditions, finally?

-Correct. We have already notified them and they already have vehicles entrusted to them. We asked them to try to find buses with the maximum capacity possible, as long as they can circulate properly on our roads, thinking precisely about an increase in users with the free service.



«We are studying to review the last journeys of the day to ensure that the last journey takes place at 10.00 pm»

«The electric bus is ready for the municipal service, but the one that covers the need of the national line is still far away»

-We refer to buses, but it is true that they have promoted studies on other possibilities. What does the Government have on the table in this matter?

-From the ministry and the department we worked on a cable transport study in the country. The company to which it was awarded, in accordance with the topography and needs, put forward a proposal between the aerial metro and a tramway between Sant Julià de Lòria and Escaldes-Engordany. The proposal was understood as the most viable option, not only because of the number of stops, because in a cablecar-type transport, each stop requires a station and that was unfeasible, but also because of the necessary height and the distance with the houses. Everything recommended an aerial metro-type tram between Sant Julià de Lòria and Escaldes. And from Escaldes central, and towards the northern and eastern valleys, we proposed cable transport, because it would have a single point of departure and arrival: Escaldes, and La Massana and Encamp. This study is done and we have it on the table.

-Would the cost of implementing it be very high?

-This is what will have to be worked on next. We have to see if any of these phases can be launched, and if so, check its feasibility with a specific project.

-And would it be viable to activate it soon, in case the Executive gives it the green light?

-I think that with the study we have done, if it were to be launched it would be in the short term, as long as we develop a serious project in this regard. In the case of the section between Sant Julià de Lòria and Escaldes-Engordany, we should see carefully where we can make it pass, what it would entail and what it would cost. And it would vary greatly depending on whether we decided to make it pass over the river, making tunnels or giving way to vehicle lanes. And as for the cable transport to the eastern and northern valleys, since this technology is evolving so much, we don't know what will happen the day we want to go ahead with it definitively, but I think that the evolution should allow us to do the same route with fewer bollards, and this will make it simpler to implement. ≡

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