



ENABLING CYCLING CITIES INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

**INTERVIEW WITH DENIS LEROY**

Vice-President of La Rochelle Urban Community, France





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City of La Rochelle

## LA ROCHELLE

Interview by **Oliver Hatch**, [Urbrans.org](http://Urbrans.org)

Denis Leroy, Vice-President of La Rochelle Urban Community, France has been an elected representative of the city of La Rochelle since 2001 and has taken an active part in a variety of European projects on mobility. In March 2008, he was appointed vice-president of La Rochelle Urban Community with responsibility for mobility and transportation. He played a key role in the creation of the first "Day Without My Car". He was involved in the creation of the CIVINET francophone network, allowing him to promote the CIVITAS Initiative among a wide range of French cities and organisations. He also gained experience in facilitating political-level exchanges between CIVITAS and non-CIVITAS cities. He has recently joined the Board of GART (the French network of transport authorities). He believes that a new culture of mobility can be created by encouraging public involvement, fostering profound changes in mobility behaviour, demonstrating innovative technical solutions, and adapting infrastructure and spatial planning.

La Rochelle Urban Community has long considered bike as a mobility mode in itself and as a way to improve the liveability of the city for its inhabitants. La Rochelle innovated in 1976 by implementing a public bike rental system known as 'vélos jaunes'. At the light of La Rochelle's own experience and considering other best practices from European cities, the local authority aimed at defining how bike services have to develop in order to meet new needs of its inhabitants or visitors, making bike easier to use.

The objective is to make "bike" the first mobility solution for 1 to 3 km travels, alone or combined with other modes of transport. The bike-sharing service implemented from 2005 - mainly adapted for short duration usage - has become fully part of the global cycle strategy of La Rochelle which aims at reducing car trips notably in the city centre and pollutant emissions. Several additional cycle services are available on the territory of the Urban Community: long duration rental, summer touristic rental and "bike shelters" for private bikes. All these bike services in La Rochelle have been developed so as to be: Complementary between them and with the other transport modes in order to multiply the inter modal possibilities. Different to cover all the needs and User-friendly and clear to make their use and comprehension easier. More generally, the "bike" strategy is meant to be fully integrated into the global mobility policy and complementary with other policies, notably parking, public transport, walking, car and public spaces management. An objective set in the new SUMP is to increase the share of bike users from 8% to 12% by 2020.

**In your view, how important is political support and commitment for pro-cycling policies?**

It is crucial. Cycle is a crucial element in the overall urban mobility policies. In La Rochelle, from decades, investments related to transport have integrated cycle - and this thanks to the commitment of representatives and to their deep belief of this mode of transport for the future of the City.

**Have you a particular success story you can describe in respect of this?**

The first one - which is very symbolic. La Rochelle launched as soon as in 1976 a public-rental scheme (called 'vélos jaunes') at a time when every cities, inspired by the USA, thought about infrastructures for facilitating the trips by car in the city. The will of the former mayor, Michel Crépeau, was then a crucial element. He was on this point visionary, although most of his counterparts in other cities thought he was at least an idealist - or even a fool ! This trend has been perpetuated by La Rochelle's current mayor, Maxime Bono. The bike-sharing service - where a user can take a bike in a bike-sharing station, use it, and pick it up in another one - was launched in La Rochelle in 2005, some years before Paris Vélib'! This is also a success.

**Is a well-planned and steady flow of finance for cycling measures necessary?**

Yes, as mentioned above, La Rochelle has always taken into account the investments related to bike infrastructures (as well as softer measures like awareness raising and promotion actions) in its mobility planification. Last year, La Rochelle Urban Community has adopted its "schéma directeur des liaisons cyclables" (master plan for cycle lanes and paths) setting responsibilities of the urban community and of each of the municipalites, setting a financial plan where costs are shared ...

**What is the position of cycle planning within your wider land-use and transport policies?**

Cycle planning has been fully part of the plan settled, especially the sustainable urban mobility plans. It is the transport mode that is privileged for the trips between 1 and 3 kms (at least).

**Does your city have a cycling department or team and if so, how vital are they in promoting cycling?**

Some years ago, there were one "Mr bike" working for the City of La Rochelle and another "Mr Bike" working for La Rochelle Urban Community. Today this topic is transversal and several departments work together on it.

**Do you consult with your cycle user groups and neighbourhood groups on cycling and how useful are their views and their role?**

Yes. As regards facilities, uses, needs, expectations, the user groups and neighbourhood groups are consulted. They help the local authority to be more accurate in its actions, to be more relevant in the answers it provides.

**How necessary for cycling is it that different city departments cooperate and work together?**

According to me, a good cycling policy cannot be achieved without a reconciliation of all of those who are in charge of roads, public transport policies and parking (intermodality with bus, boats, P+R, trains...), business travel plans, school, youth...

**Has your city been able to learn and adapt ideas from other cities for cycling - if so, how?**

We have learnt from cities located in northern countries like Denmark and Sweden (Copenhagen, Malmö, Aalborg...) or Germany (Freiburg) on topics like how to cycle in a cycle lane against the flow of traffic, awareness-raising from an early age. We learned on how to insert the bikes in the vehicle traffic. On a better cohabitation between cars and bike. The multimodal exchanges providing importance and space to cycles (eg Amsterdam Central Station) have been of great interest for us. The system implemented in self service bicycles in Burgos - both simple and robust - has inspired us to make our own bike-sharing service evolve technically. On the other hand, I want to stress that many cities in Europe have shown interest in the actions towards cycling developed in La Rochelle and have developed their actions by adapting to their local context some of the measures developed in La Rochelle.

**To what extent do your city transport planners listen to the views of residents on cycling?**

Inhabitants and citizens are listened with great attention and care. The dialogue is permanent. The community is always looking to integrate in the programs answers that are adequate to citizen's expectations.

**How does your city balance the provision of 'hard' measures for cycling (infrastructure) with the provision of 'soft' measures such as maps and promotion measures?**

Our SUMP sets a number of actions within a ten-year timeframe. Some actions focus on behaviour change, aim at developing awareness-raising and promotional campaigns (two seasons per year); some others relate to investments, infrastructures.

**How necessary are the communications and marketing of cycling initiatives to all your city residents?**

Soft mode... soft marketing! The purpose should strongly differ from "trade" marketing, from "product" marketing. This marketing has to be specifically designed. The focus should be on behaviour change marketing, on "virtuous" marketing. Our approaches are much better received and effective, if they are not aggressive (e.g. in La Rochelle : "Magic vélo", "Docteurs vélo" campaigns).

**Why is cycling important to you and your city?**

Cycling is an efficient way of moving and/or strolling in the city, non-polluting, cheap, good for health; it « gives time » (time for looking around, time for meeting other people)...

**If you had one recommendation to make to another city starting to plan for bicycles, what would it be?**

My recommendation would be that one: come in La Rochelle to exchange and to see how we have implemented actions over the years to become a bike-friendly city.

The interviews were taken by Oliver Hatch,  
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