

Fietsbalans II: competitiveness bicycle greatly improved

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The second round of Fietsbalans, the Fietsersbond study into cycling climate in towns, is being finalised. Major conclusions: towns have invested a great deal in bicycle policy and cars are gradually coming to a standstill.

The competitiveness of bicycles has greatly improved over the past eight years. That is one of the most striking conclusions when comparing the first (2000-2003) and second (2006-2008) rounds of Fietsbalans. The fact that bicycles do better compared to cars is the result of policy decisions made by local authorities, but autonomous developments are as important. Particularly in major cities the amount of traffic has increased to such an extent that cars are slower than bicycles.

How much slower has not yet been calculated at Fietsersbond. Project manager Frank Borgman expects the average car speed to barely surpass 20 kilometres an hour on many connections to the centre of a town. Thanks to more direct routes cycling is often faster. Cars are increasingly becoming unattractive alternatives, due to policy considerations as well. Cars have to be parked at a greater distance to the destination. That means longer distances to walk, and more time needed.

At the same time local authorities have taken extra steps to make cycling more attractive. Some towns have taken a giant leap forward, like Nijmegen, where progress has been made in all respects. Bicycle policies have 'matured' of late, as Borgman states. 'Cycling has become more of an integral part of traffic and transport policies. It is unquestioned. The handbooks are being used ever so much better. Policies on paper are for the most part all right. But when translating this to actual practice, sometimes things go wrong. But there definitely has been a lot of effort over the past eight years.'

More asphalt

That is strikingly obvious when considering data on the criterion of comfort (road surface). Large numbers of towns have invested in better roads for cyclists. Borgman: 'In some towns tremendous distances have been asphalted'.

In other respects there has been no or barely any progress, for instance in obstruction. This measures, among other factors, whether cyclists can continue to ride side by side. Borgman: 'That has remained more or less at the same level.' This does not mean there have been no investments in bicycle paths and bicycle routes. 'Once again the increase in the amount of traffic is obvious, both in cars and bicycles', Borgman states. 'During the test measurements we often could not ride side by side, even on bicycle paths. That demonstrates that traffic has increased on bicycle paths as well.'

The results for the criterion directness prove that traffic lights are still the major causes of delay for cyclists. Borgman once again points to the increased amount of traffic. 'Probably some local authorities did make improvements, but these have been counteracted because the traffic lights have been adapted in order to increase the flow of cars.'

Study

In the Fietsbalans study various research methods are employed. A number of routes through town are cycled with a measuring bicycle equipped with video camera and meters to record vibrations and noise. The measuring car is used to demonstrate competitiveness and measure air quality.

In Fietsbalans I (2000-2003) 125 towns were studied in ten respects. Fietsbalans II (2006-2008) added a study into bicycle parking and air quality. It proved impossible to compare air quality in various towns. Atmospheric differences affect a fair comparison. Up to now 42 towns were visited by an investigative team for Fietsbalans II. Of these, 35 participated for the second time, 7 for the first time.

Less right of way

A remarkable result is that cyclists have less right of way than in 2000. Borgman suspects this is related to the introduction of priority for all traffic from the right, in 2001. At that time cyclists from the right were given priority on all equivalent intersections. Quite a lot of towns did not dare to take the risk and regulated right of way to the disadvantage of cyclists.

Duurzaam Veilig plays a role as well. In 30-kilometre zones there is no right-of-way arrangement, as a matter of principle. And that means that some through routes for bicycles have lost their right of way. Borgman: "According to the BABW implementation regulations a principal cycling route through a 30-kilometre zone may have right of way, but in actual practice we have not encountered that very often."

New in Fietsbalans II is the study into bicycle parking facilities. For certain destinations the number of available bicycle parking spaces has been counted at peak times. Bonus points could be awarded for free guarded parking, stands with the Fietsparkeur hallmark, for guarded parking, covered parking and for good 'damage-free' stands at schools.

There are no major differences between towns, Relatively much attention has been paid to parking bicycles near the train station and in the town centre, but other destinations are often forgotten. With destinations like schools and swimming pools the problem often occurs that it is not clear who exactly is responsible for bicycle parking facilities.

No town turned out to provide sufficient parking capacity at peak times. Even in towns where much has been achieved, there were not enough stands at peak times. Even leader Groningen scored zero points for capacity in the town centre and a number of locations like hospital and library. Borgman: 'Particularly in towns like Groningen, where bicycle use is very high, it is difficult to meet demands at peak times. I can imagine that local authorities then say: we will have to live with that.'

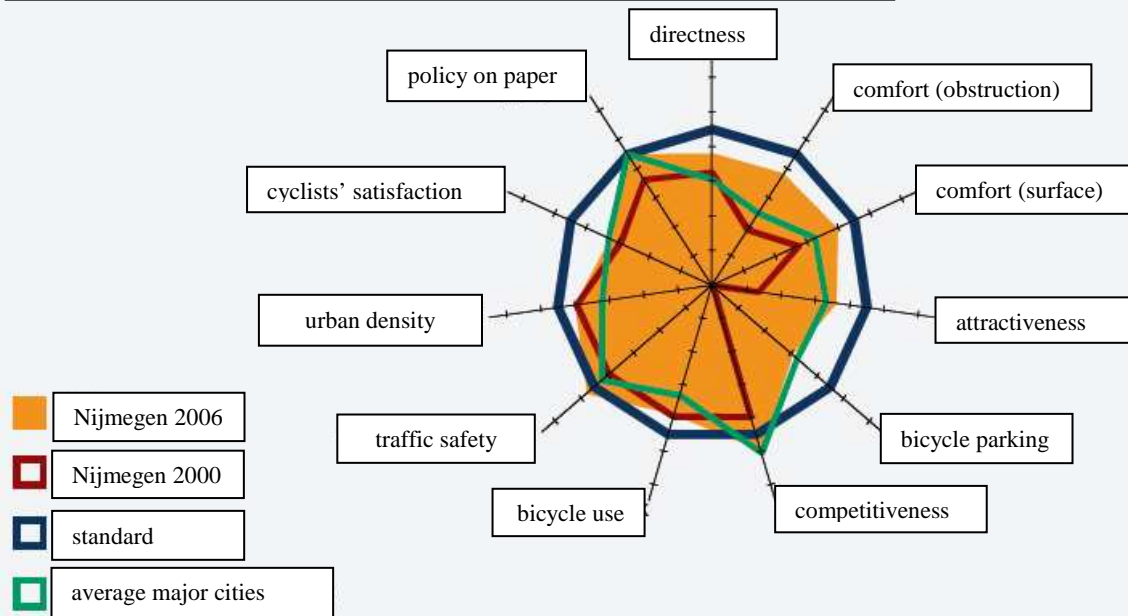
Grey roads

Over the past eight years the cycling climate has improved, is the Fietsersbond opinion.

Positive factors are increased bicycle use, improved competitiveness of bicycles over cars and local authorities' efforts in bicycle policy. Yet there are worries as well, particularly on traffic safety. Fietsersbond draws attention in particular to the so-called grey roads. These are roads falling into a residual category: no official district connector, nor neighbourhood connector.

Fifty kilometre is often still the speed limit, but there are no bicycle paths or full-fledged bicycle lanes. Often parking is allowed to the right of a bicycle lane, something that is officially not allowed on a 50-kilometre road, according to ASVV. These roads have been listed within the framework of Fietsbalans II. A report has been made on these on behalf of the towns concerned, but this have not been included in the ranking. Borgman: 'Local authorities wrestle with these roads, they are not consistent in implementing Duurzaam Veilig. And that is quite often to the detriment of cyclists. A typical example is Kanaalstraat in Utrecht, where our office is located. Parking, bicycle lanes that are too narrow, and to make matters worse, a bus route. These streets do not bother experienced cyclists in the prime of life, but elderly, young, inexperienced, or non-native cyclists are seriously affected. There should be more awareness of this problem.'

Nijmegen has made a lot of progress in cycling policy, as demonstrated by this diagram comparing the scores for 2000 and 2006



Battle for title Bicycle town 2008

At the Fietsersbond symposium jury foreman Jeltje van Nieuwenhoven will announce which town will be Bicycle Town 2008. Here a survey of the nominations.

subject: Bicycle parking
- Groningen

In the bicycle parking study Groningen was remarkable by the number of bonus points it gathered thanks to introduction of free guarded parking and the provision of bicycle stands with Fietsparkeur. Parking policies were moreover all right on paper.

Stadsbalkon is a local ace. The new large bicycle parking at the train station is officially not guarded, but there is a tremendous amount of supervision. In addition the supervisors direct cyclists towards free spaces. At peak times extra stands are provided. Fietsersbond is taken with the fact that local authorities do not employ bicycle parking bans in the town centre, but deposit red carpets for instance, at locations in the town centre where bicycles should really not be parked at all. In addition Groningen is a real bicycle town with an enormously high bicycle use. In 2002 Groningen also was bicycle town, but that is no reason not to nominate the town again. Fietsersbond project manager Frank Borgman: 'This really is an example we want to hold up to other towns.'

The Groningen alderman for traffic Karin Dekker is overjoyed and full of confidence: 'I think we stand a good chance of being Bicycle Town once more.'

subject: progress

- Nijmegen

Nijmegen ranked in the middle of the first round of Fietsbalans, but proved to have progressed enormously in Fietsbalans II. Particularly on directness, quality of surface, attractiveness and obstruction matters had improved. The major part of the improvements is due to policy efforts. The construction of the Snelbinder bicycle bridge in particular affected the scores. A wide red bicycle path was constructed from Vinex location De Waalsprong to the town centre. Cyclists no longer ride alongside speeding cars but along a relatively quiet rail line. Connections to the university centre and Wijchen have been improved as well.

Competitiveness with the car was hereby considerably increased on a number of routes, to the cyclists' advantage. Due to the amount of traffic the speed of motor vehicles fell.

Nijmegen alderman Jan van der Meer was nevertheless surprised by the nomination: 'We had secretly hoped for it, as we really wanted to be in the list of real bicycle towns. When GroenLinks entered executive government in 2002 we immediately set aside 10 million Euro for the bicycle and deliberately decided in favour of upgrading connections. There are now nice, red bicycle paths everywhere.'

Remarkable nevertheless: bicycle use has not increased since the first round of Fietsbalans. Bicycle use in Nijmegen (approximately 37 per cent of all short trips occurs by bicycle) is above the national average, but lags behind top bicycle towns like Groningen (47 per cent) and Zwolle (48 per cent). Van der Meer: We are pulling out all the stops. We have also conducted a cycling campaign, driving by car has most certainly not become more attractive. All we can do is promote and facilitate cycling. At the end of the day people have to take to their bicycles themselves.'

Subject: traffic safety and bicycle-friendliness

- Houten

For the third time Houten has been nominated as Bicycle town of the year. Borgman: 'Houten is simply very safe, and now in the Vinex location Houten-Zuid as well.'

Studies show that it is of major importance for cycling safety that there are few intersections with roads where 50 kilometre is the speed limit. Houten has an ideal structure with its ring road being crossed by cyclists everywhere at a different level. This concept was continued in the new neighbourhood Houten-Zuid as well. There are many bicycle streets where through car traffic is physically impossible. There are in Houten no so-called grey roads, which worry Fietsersbond very much (with a maximum speed of 50 kilometres and parking is allowed).

Houten knows a high bicycle use. It is remarkable that people of all ages cycle a lot.

Borgman: 'As regards traffic safety this is still the best example. Fortunately interest has increased among urban planners once again for the Houten design principles. As regards the quality of outdoor space Houten is a magnificent example as well.'

'We did not expect differently,' states Herbert Tiemens, Houten traffic official, with a smile.

'We have a spatial structure that is highly advantageous for cyclists. These principles have been maintained in the new neighbourhood Houten-Zuid as well. We simply have an extremely safe town. And in a couple of years we will have a free guarded bicycle transferium beneath the train station as well.'

Subject: irresistible cycling climate

- Goes

High bicycle use may lead to less walking in a town. The best result, however, is when high bicycle use leads to low car use. In that case short car trips have been exchanged for trips by bicycle. Which is good for air quality, health and quality of life in a town or village.

For this subject Fietsersbond investigated the quality of the bicycle network and competitiveness of bicycles and cars. The data from Mobiliteitsonderzoek Nederland (MON) on bicycle and car use were studied as well. That led to a surprising nomination. Goes couples an extremely high bicycle use (on average over the past five years 48 per cent of all short trips are made by bicycle) with a relatively low car use. That fell moreover in the time between both Fietsbalans studies from 38 per cent in 1999 to 31 per cent in 2007.

Policy decisions most certainly contributed to this. Car use has been impeded, cars were no longer allowed to park on Markt. In residential areas though traffic has been made impossible and parking was concentrated on the edge of town. At the same time the bicycle network has been improved. Fast routes were constructed to the new neighbourhoods in the south, bicycle parking facilities were expanded and on a number of locations traffic lights were removed. These were replaced by roundabouts where cyclists had the right of way. All this led to an increase in average bicycle speed.

Hans Fell, Goes traffic official: ' We really appreciate being included, but we were not greatly surprised. We have known for a long time that we are very successful. Of course last year the KIM (Kennisinstituut voor Mobiliteitsbeleid) study Vaker op de fiets was published, where we were ranked first in bicycle use.'

Subject: cyclists' satisfaction

- Veenendaal

A high bicycle use and highly satisfied cyclists. Those are the characteristics of Veenendaal. In the first Fietsbalans round the satisfaction appeared to be related mainly to the availability of free guarded parking. That makes it all the more remarkable that Veenendaal managed to keep cyclists satisfied when the free guarded parking in the town centre was discontinued.

Borgman of Fietsersbond thinks the high degree of satisfaction in Veenendaal is due to a well-maintained, exemplary bicycle network. 'Local authorities have a good eye for details. For instance a bicycle path is smoothly continued across an intersection, instead of bumping over two gutters.' In 2000 Veenendaal was bicycle town already. At that time the town was the absolute road surface champion with a great many good bicycle connections. Borgman: 'The second round demonstrates they have not let matters slide. Consistent and continuous persistence in bicycle policies, that is the Veenendaal secret.'