

# PubliCar : Lynn Sloman outlines the start of a Swiss transport initiative

Autor(en): **Sloman, Lynn**

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Gelterkinden its own mainline station, so the SGB was closed in 1916. It was one of Switzerland's first real electric railways, so it should not be forgotten, although practically nothing remains today. Erich Buser, whose book (out of print) is legendary did not forget it and cherished some relics; and the old station is now a café. Subsequently, this summer a short stretch of rails were re-laid in the village centre as a historic marker. This being Switzerland it was 'opened' with speeches and a glass of white wine, and handshakes all round. I was invited, and told them that the SRS would be properly informed - so here you are. So now ride the S9, Sissach to Olten, and look for the many signs of Brassey's original work.



Today's S9 Sissach-Olten, Class 560, in the bay platform at Sissach, 10/2009.

*Author's note. This article draws on my own research for various purposes in the Cantonal Archive of Basel-Land, the University Library in Basel-Stadt, the SBB-Historic archive in Bern, and the Basel Mission (now Mission 21) in Basel.*

Imagine if you will, it is 1995 and you live in a village in Vaud, a substantially rural region of Switzerland. During the day, in school term time, there are reasonable bus services to your dentist, supermarket or office, albeit with a long walk to your nearest bus stop. But off-peak, services are not so good and there are threats of cutbacks as national legislation dictates that buses need a minimum number of passengers on each run to justify the need for that service.

Cue the introduction of **PubliCar**, an on-demand taxi-bus service for rural areas offering door-to-door shared transport with no pre-defined routes or timetables, typically running from 06.30 until 20.00 (later on Friday and Saturday nights). Funded by the Canton, bookings are made via a free-phone number. Initial resistance from local taxi firms is overcome by clear differences in services offered. **PubliCar** operates on a zone-by-zone basis with specific hours of operation. Passengers are not guaranteed a direct route, because vehicles divert to pick up other passengers, and they might travel at a slightly later or earlier time than they wish, to fit in with others; sharing taxi-buses result in fewer vehicles on the road, lower emissions and less congestion. In fact many local taxi operators have benefited from the success of the bookable on-demand services as families give up second

## **PUBLICAR**

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One of the PubliCar Vaud fleet waiting at Cossonay Gare in September 2008 to collect pre-booked passengers.

PHOTO: Malcolm Bulpitt.

cars, sometimes choosing a regular taxi instead of using a **PubliCar**.

Jump forward ten years and the pilot scheme has expanded (\*) to 260 towns and villages with a total population of 350,000 – a little smaller than an English county like Cumbria. Technical difficulties with automated booking (matching journeys to ensure those all travelling in the same direction at the same time are taken in the same vehicle) have been

overcome with a bespoke system, and passenger numbers have started to increase. Now in an average year, **PubliCar Vaud** provides about 110,000 passenger trips. In some places **PubliCar** has replaced poorly-used conventional bus services while elsewhere PubliCar has demonstrated sufficient demand for buses to be reintroduced. Residents now view the service as part of the public transport network for their area, providing links with traditional transport services as well as schools hospitals and shops.

*\* Editor's Note. These figures refer to the 15 PubliCar schemes now operating across Switzerland.*

Lynn Sloman is the vice-chair of the UK Commission for Integrated Transport and a partner at consultancy Transport for Quality of Life. This article has been abstracted from her *Viewpoint* column in *Local Transport Today* with the permission of the author and editor.