Bellinzona

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About Bellinzona

Bellinzona, the capital of the Swiss Canton Ticino, counts 47K residents and lays in a tight Alpine valley. In the past years, the city has expanded along its core, aggregating in 2017 with other 12 adjacent municipalities, thus creating a polycentric urban setting. Despite the favourable conditions for cycling, most trips in the city are still made by car, and the active mobility share is only equal to 3.2% of all trips. To limit car dependency, the city has recently adopted an ambitious Bicycle Mobility Plan aimed at doubling the cycling modal split by 2040. Investments in dedicated cycling infrastructure, such as bike lanes and parking facilities, as well as regional cycling routes, are expected to encourage residents to cycle, aligning with the city's sustainability goals.

Cycling in Bellinzona

Over the past decade, significant strides in promoting cycling as a sustainable mode of transport for daily needs have been made in Bellinzona. Efforts have focused on the one hand on enhancing infrastructure, such as expanding bike paths, offering secure parking facilities, especially at interchanges with public transport, and creating low-speed zones throughout the city. Doing so, cycling became safer and more time convenient. On the other hand, several educational programs, awareness campaigns, and financial incentives have encouraged residents of all ages to adopt cycling, fostering a culture of active mobility and shared road use. While the first interventions have been supported by the city, multiple actors have worked on the second type of actions, from local NGOs to groups of volunteers, frequently engaged in mixed public and private partnerships.

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Examples of cycling promoting initiatives

Sustainable mobility apps

Bellidea (2017 to 2018)

A smart app promoting all forms of sustainable mobility in the city. It was co-designed by the city with experts and voluntary citizens. Through automatic mobility tracking, app users were assigned points based on the travel time they spent using sustainable means of transport. Small prizes were then offered in exchange for accumulated points.

Bikecoin (from 2022)

An app-based initiative challenging workers in a "corporate mobility programme". The app assigns points to participants by tracking the number of trips and kilometres they cycle, creating a competitive environment for employees and company departments. Each firm allocates different prizes and cash awards, that employees can earn through collecting points by cycling.

Courses

Bike mechanics course (from 2014, twice a year)

The "Bike's mechanics" is a daylong technical course open to kids and adults. Divided between levels of technical expertise (beginners and more advanced), it offers a practical introduction to bicycle maintenance from a road safety perspective. Organized and run by a local NGO, it is also integrated into the Canton's continuing education courses for adults.

BikeSchool (from 2017)

Carried out during school hours, BikeSchool aims to train last year elementary school kids in a playful way, so that, the year after, they feel confident in reaching their middle school safely and independently. The lessons are taught by certified professionals. Today, the course is freely offered to all elementary schools of Bellinzona, and its cost is covered by the City itself.

School commuting

Bicibus (Cycling school bus, from 2024)

An initiative to raise awareness among kids and adults regarding the existing appropriate routes for cycling in the city and to support the kids' practical competences towards cycling. Volunteer adults accompany elementary school children - from the age of 8 - to their schools by bike, along predefined safe routes, identified together with the police.

Cycling infrastructure

Velostation (from 2019)

A covered and video-monitored bicycle parking area located at the city's public transport inter-change hub. This was the first Velostation in Canton Ticino and was designed and funded by the municipality, to integrate the supply of the city's sustainable mobility hub. It provides a safe place to park bicycles, tools to perform small mechanic fixes and cleaning, and lockers to easily store personal things.

Factors enabling cycling in Bellinzona

Building trust one bike ride at a time

Volunteer initiatives unite people with shared values, fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion within neighbourhoods. Trust built through joint activities strengthens relationships among adults and kids, whether cycling to school or learning new mechanic skills. Furthermore, the involvement of kids from a young age has proved to be helpful in building confidence and keeping cycling as a daily habit.

Designing adaptable solutions for all

Successful infrastructures in Bellinzona have some specific traits in common: they can adapt to accommodate mixed uses (e.g. a parking space provided with changing and locker rooms, where mechanical support can also be offered) and can be shared by different partners. Such spaces could be easily redesigned and reconfigured at varying needs, that citizens and participants have the chance to indicate to city administrators.

You cycle, you win! Or is your colleague better than you...?

Initiatives based on the gamification of cycling have collected data on the reasons why their participants committed to commuting by bike: even if receiving an award – sometimes monetary – was an important trigger, participants were mainly driven by a sense of competition. The latter played a role, however, as those initiatives were experienced in "closed" environments, where people personally knew the other participants.

Factors hindering cycling in Bellinzona

Can people really be expected to cycle while zigzagging between pedestrians and cars?

Dedicated, safe, and convenient infrastructures are a primary and necessary element to foster cycling. If bike lanes are discontinuous and shared with other road users, no significant or lasting results can be expected when involving people in cycling initiatives. This is even more relevant when kids are pushed to cycle, as the presence of other street users creates an additional layer of difficulty and unsafety.

All burdens fall on the same people

Most cycling initiatives in Bellinzona are based on volunteers' action and engagement. The lack of an involved critical mass implies strong dependency on few individuals that feel high levels of pressure related to the responsibility of keeping the initiatives alive. This creates small, fragmented realities that prevent reaching significant results in modal change and poses great implementation risks.

We've always done it this way!

Cultural mindsets and rooted habits are probably the highest hurdles to overcome in fostering sustainable mobility changes. These may differ according to personal background and characteristics, as well as external social influences, such as the perception of unsafety in cycling. For instance, in some companies, this perception still results in continued support for car-based commuting and in a lack of incentives for cycling commuting.

What are we doing wrong?

The lack of a monitoring system is a critical aspect for the majority of initiatives', even those that, before the start, have set their evaluation and learning agendas. This leads to inertia in the organization of initiatives: errors may be repeated, as organisers fail to understand mistakes or how to improve. Without proper monitoring, there's no feedback loop to guide adjustments. This results in persistent inefficiencies and, eventually, in missed opportunities for tangible impact.

Lessons for governance and planning

To maximise their impact, cycling initiatives should support both experienced riders and beginners in fostering the perception of safe cycling experiences. Understanding non-cyclists' motivations and dealing with the daily needs that steer their mobility practices is key to co-developing solutions able to tangibly increase cycling. Local partnerships are vital for developing new cycling services, but often they face human and financial resource constraints. To be effective, these partnerships also need autonomy and flexibility, as a strong top-down approach would hinder feelings of empowerment by their initiators and partners. Institutions could support these partnerships by enabling shared monitoring systems for initiative evaluation and by ensuring they can evolve if changed needs are detected.

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