

AMBITION PAYS OFF



INTERVIEW WITH
BERTRAND AYRAL

ELABORATED BY
ISOBEL DUXFIELD

Cycling La Rochelle
Bertrand Ayral

La Rochelle's Deputy Mayor Bertrand Ayral reveals how **La Rochelle** has continually pushed the boundaries of mobility planning, paving the way for other cities.

La Rochelle may be one of France's smallest cities, but what the municipality lacks in size it more than makes up for in its action on sustainable urban mobility. For over 50 years, the city has been re-orienting transit around active travel and today, its pioneering cycling infrastructure, MaaS innovations and clean fuel pilots are laying the tracks for cities... of all sizes!

This June La Rochelle hosted POLIS' Small & Medium-sized City Platform gathering, where cities, regions and academic experts convened for exploratory workshops on active travel planning, cutting-edge technologies, and international cooperation- as well as taking in the city's historic and stunning sights and sounds.

We talked to Deputy Mayor for Mobility, Bertrand Ayral, about how La Rochelle has become such a pioneer, juggling tourist demands and local needs, and how ambition can go a long way!



Bertrand Ayrat

Deputy Mayor
La Rochelle

POLIS: Can you please tell us a bit about yourself, your work and your journey to the current role you hold in La Rochelle?

Bertrand Ayrat: I am 37 years old and worked as a mathematics teacher from 2007 to 2020, when I became the mayor of the commune of Sainte Soulle, near La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast. That sums it up!

POLIS: La Rochelle has been ahead of the game in urban planning for sustainable mobility, reorienting the city away from car travel. In 1970, it was the first city in France to designate its city centre as a zone for pedestrians. Why do you think La Rochelle has been so pioneering here? (local leadership, citizen participation etc.)

Bertrand: In the 1970s, the individual car was experiencing an unprecedented boom, and La Rochelle's demographics were also booming. On the other hand, the construction and historical development of the city of La Rochelle, which, unlike other cities on the Atlantic coast, had not suffered any significant damage during the Second World War, constrained the road construction.

Quite logically, the city of La Rochelle was experiencing traffic problems and traffic jams on the main roads. The response of the elected officials of the time was to encourage cycling and walking, given the size of the city and the terrain, which favoured the use of bicycles and walking in the central city. These modes of transport are all the more attractive as the oil crises of this decade are restricting French travel.

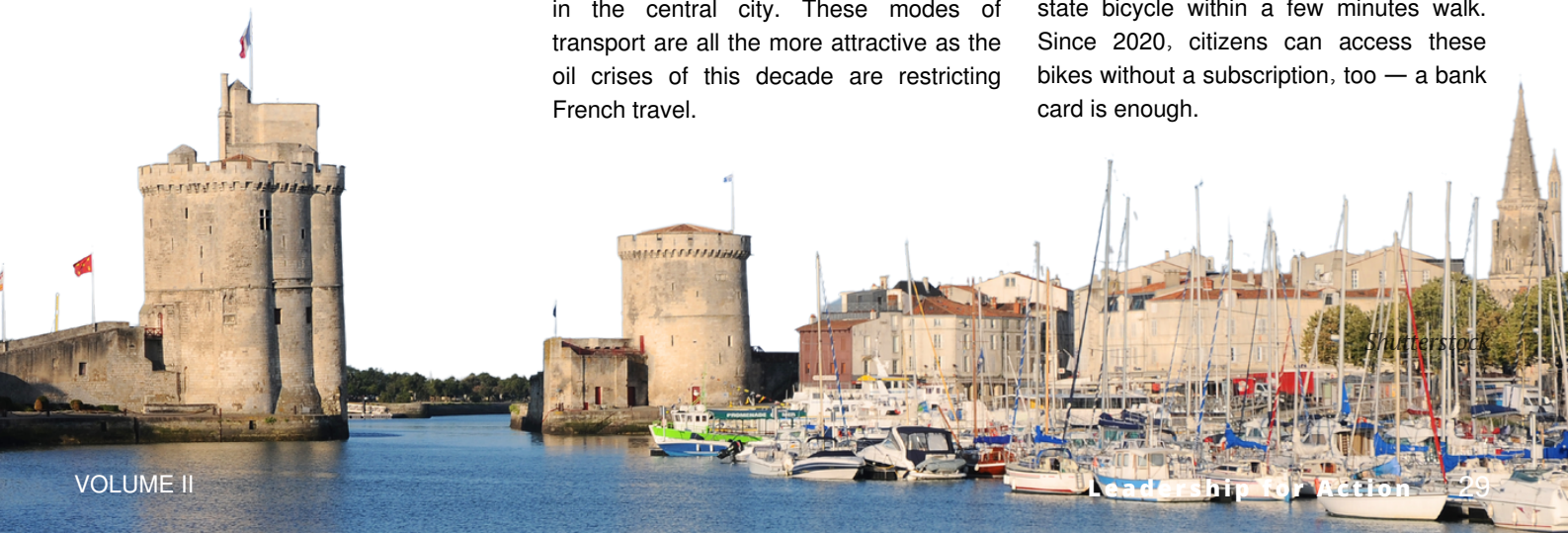
POLIS: This has also applied to cycling. 1974 it became the first French city to offer a free municipal bike share program. Why is cycling so important to the city's mobility mix? And how do you see the relevance of a public bike share program to the uptake of cycling?

Bertrand: Following the provision of self-service bicycles, which was launched by Michel Crépeau (mayor from 1971 to 1999), the challenge was to integrate the outskirts' communes of La Rochelle into its cycling strategy.

Today, the population of La Rochelle represents only 40% of the total population of the area, and the 27 other communes extend over twenty-five kilometres from the north to the south of the conurbation, along the coastline and some fifteen kilometres from east to west. The topography of the entire area also favours the use of bicycles and is crisscrossed by safe, structured cycle routes.

On everyday journeys (commutes of around 5 km) and on many of these routes, cycling competes with car driving. This is because many of the elected officials who succeeded Michel Crépeau have supported La Rochelle's environmentally friendly mobility — for once, by deploying a more structured self-service bicycle service, which has gradually extended beyond the city centre.

Today, there is a self-service bicycle station every 500 metres in the city centre. For citizens, this guarantees having access to an easy-to-use and in-good-state bicycle within a few minutes walk. Since 2020, citizens can access these bikes without a subscription, too — a bank card is enough.



POLIS: What have been the keys to success in maintaining and improving these early decisions focusing on active modes? And what about the challenges and barriers?

Bertrand: One of the challenges of our cycling policy is to invest in the cycling infrastructure that is needed to encourage use and ensure the safety of users. The operating cost of our self-service bicycle system (Yélo) is not negligible, but it remains much lower than the operating cost of an urban and suburban bus network.

POLIS: The city is a popular tourist destination. How do you balance the needs of tourists and citizens? What have been some of the challenges?

Bertrand: The number of tourists during the summer is a challenge for an area like ours, as it raises the question of how to share space between residents and tourists. As mentioned earlier, the city of La Rochelle is structured around a historic centre, and the streets leading to it are often winding and narrow. At certain times of the year, there is not enough space for all users. This is the case for bicycles on certain roads, which have difficulty cohabiting with pedestrians strolling in summer. It is therefore not easy to promote the use of bicycles to the public who are exposed to conflicts of use for several months of the year. It is difficult to find concrete answers on these subjects. Another challenge during the summer period is the size of the self-service bicycle stations, which are widely used by tourists.

POLIS: La Rochelle has been an active member of the SMC platform. Why do you feel this platform is important?

Bertrand: La Rochelles' key interest in being in the SMC platform is to question our choices and comparing our vision with that of similar partners.

We are collectively aware that self-sufficiency will gradually give way to more multimodality. However, there is still the question of how to get there...

The path is not self-evident and implies being inspired by the good ideas of others and also designing and building solutions together.

POLIS: What advice would you have for other smaller cities looking to successfully scale up sustainable mobility options?

Bertrand: You have to be ambitious in your objectives, the path is undermined by constraints and problems of all kinds, and you also have to convince citizens who have well-established habits. It is not easy to change one's behaviour in terms of mobility. However, as decision-makers, we must stay the course. We must not be afraid to be a little ahead of our time. We must also accept that we are not unanimous on mobility issues, especially when it comes to the car. When you put other modes forward (walking, cycling, etc.), you reduce the space dedicated to the car, as the road network is not expandable... However, we must be careful and not ban the car but provide the means to change its use.

Making room for other modes of transport also helps to revitalise towns and city centres, which are in great need of it.

POLIS: What is next for La Rochelle?

Bertrand: The next step for the La Rochelle agglomeration is to extend its cycling infrastructure to the 2nd and 3rd ring roads to create a network of safe and fast cycle paths for users, including peripheral routes between the communes and central routes towards La Rochelle.

For its part, the city of La Rochelle is once again questioning the place of the car in its centre, the ambition being to limit the transit of cars in it.

Bertrand Ayral at Conference
Bertrand Ayral

