

# THINKING BIG, ACTING BOLD

INTERVIEW WITH  
LARS STRÖMGREN

ELABORATED BY  
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In June, Stockholm hosted POLIS' Leadership Summit. The event convened high-level decision-makers from across the transport sector for a frank, honest and — most of all — collaborative exchange on the road toward sustainable urban mobility.

POLIS speaks with **Lars Strömgren**, **Stockholm's** Vice Mayor for Transport and Urban Environment, about the capital city's achievements, the challenges they have faced, and what the city will look like by 2030.

**POLIS:** The City of Stockholm was the first European Green Capital (2010); what have been some of the keys to getting this “early start” on the transition to a more sustainable future for the city?

**Lars Strömgren:** Stockholm is a place where nature is never far away. Our archipelago, quaysides, and accessibility to nature continue to attract both visitors and new residents. Over the years, Stockholm has gradually adopted sharper goals accompanied by far-reaching measures. As early as 1996, we introduced an environmental zone for heavy vehicles in large parts of the city, reducing emissions from buses and trucks.

When Stockholm was named the first green capital in 2010, the city's goal was to be fossil-fuel-free by 2050. Last year we decided that this goal was not ambitious enough, and committed to making Stockholm fossil fuel free by 2040 and climate positive by 2030.

*Stockholm City Hall*  
*Henrik Trygg*

**POLIS:** What does the role of the Vice Mayor for Transport and Urban Environment entail, and how has this role changed as sustainable urban mobility has risen to the agenda in Stockholm?

**Lars:** The Vice Mayor for Transport and Urban Environment is responsible for traffic planning and the city's public spaces, including streets, parks, squares and waterfront.

As climate change has forced a reassessment of priorities, so has the demand for a more sustainable Stockholm. The debate about green mobility has increasingly raised the question of what kind of urban life we should be striving for. At its core, this is a battle about space. Cars have been allowed to seize an unreasonably large amount of the public space that belongs to all the inhabitants of a city.

**POLIS:** Stockholm is recognised as a pioneer in using urban vehicle access regulations (UVARs) to reduce congestion, improve air quality and promote alternative transport modes within the city centre. What have been some of the main challenges in implementing and scaling these up? What advice would you have for others seeking to follow suit?

**Lars:** A challenge with new traffic policies is that people tend to be accustomed to current situations and have a harder time imagining alternative solutions. When we reveal a plan to convert a road into a pedestrian street, it is easy to count the parking spaces that will be lost. It is more difficult to imagine the popular and bustling street environment that will soon take their place.

In the early 2000s, Stockholm had a loud public opinion against urban vehicle access regulations.

To increase the support for a congestion tax, we conducted a six-month full-scale test, after which we held a local referendum on the issue. The positive effects were evident, the citizens of Stockholm voted yes, and today the tax is fairly uncontroversial.

A challenge in Sweden is that the congestion tax is national legislation. Any change must be approved by the national parliament, which makes the system slightly unwieldy. It also makes it harder for cities to be more progressive than their national governments.

**POLIS:** Your approach to access regulations has been to empower citizens in the decision-making process. How do you feel this engagement has supported their implementation?

**Lars:** New major traffic proposals tend to create confusion which fuels conspiracies. By involving citizens in the process, we reduce the risk of unnecessary misunderstandings. We also get a chance to ensure that we have understood all the implications of our proposal. This both improves policy and eases implementation.

At the moment, the city is preparing the introduction of the world's most ambitious environmental zone. Starting in 2024, a part of Stockholm City will be restricted to electric cars and low-emission gas cars (Euro 6) only. An intensive dialogue is currently underway with residents, businesses and property owners.

So far, the response has been surprisingly positive, especially among business owners. Many local companies see a big competitive advantage in being early in the green transition.



**Lars Strömgren**

Vice Mayor for Transport and Urban Environment  
City of Stockholm

**Stockholm in the summer**

*Fond & Fond*







**POLIS:** Stockholm is doing a lot of work on introducing infrastructure for electric vehicles and alternative transport fuels such as biomethane and bioethanol and encouraging the adoption of vehicles by public and private end-users. How has this strategy developed over the last few years, and how are you combining the move towards cleaner fuels with the overall reduction in traffic volumes?

**Lars:** The most important thing we can do to build a more inviting city with lower climate emissions is to reduce the number of cars. An electric car occupies just as much of our common space as a diesel or petrol car. Although electric cars are by many metrics better than fossil-fuel cars, they still pollute the air through wear and tear from roads and tires. More space for cyclists, pedestrians and public transport is not just an accompaniment to electrification, it is without a doubt our main tool for reducing emissions. The current plan is to reduce car traffic in Stockholm by 30% by 2030, which promises a city characterized by lively streets, rather than stationary cars.

**POLIS:** How does Stockholm collaborate with its surrounding municipalities and other cities in Sweden on sustainability and transport? What do/ can you learn from one another?

**Lars:** Stockholm's infrastructure continues seamlessly into several neighbouring municipalities. This means that we need to cooperate closely in the transformation of the traffic system. When we build new bicycle infrastructure, for example, we want it to be just as good when it crosses the municipal border, because many residents commute between municipalities.

***Humlegården at Östermalm***

*Tove Freij*



## **cities in motion**

When cities in Sweden have common challenges, we try to share insights with each other. Stockholm, however, being the largest city by a good margin often has more in common with other cities in Europe. This means that we tend to look beyond the country's borders for inspiration.

**POLIS:** You have been actively involved in POLIS' political group, which brings together local decision makers responsible for urban mobility. Why is this coordination and collaboration with your peers important for you?

**Lars:** I am passionate about creating a more enjoyable and climate-friendly city, as quickly as possible. At the moment, I feel that many other transport politicians in Europe share that ambition. There is fertile ground for a fruitful collaboration.

I am constantly looking for new ways to accelerate Stockholm's path towards a more sustainable future. But no city and certainly no politician can come up with the best solutions alone.

**POLIS:** Stockholm has been selected as one of the EU's Climate Neutral and Smart Cities. So, it's 2030, what does Stockholm's urban mobility landscape look like?

**Lars:** In 2030, Stockholm has achieved an emissions-free transport system. The city is filled with generous pedestrian and bicycle streets and the roads for motor vehicles are largely dedicated to buses. The air is clean and not a single fossil-fuel engine is roaring. Many residents still own an electric car, but an increasing number of Stockholmers choose to rely on other forms of mobility. People who need a car every now and then can easily use a carpool or a rental.



### ***Parking space turned outdoor classroom***

*City of Stockholm*

***The Traffic Administration Office inspects the cycle lanes with electric cargo bikes – minor obstructions are fixed immediately with tools in the box***

*Ola Eriksson Bjärle*