



## 2023 TOP 100

### GOOD PRACTICE STORY

**Title:** Transformation of the port railway - from a ring route to the green corridor

**Destination, Country:** Tartu, Estonia

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**In the category:** ☐ Destination Management ☐ Environment & Climate ☒ Thriving Communities  
☐ Nature & Scenery ☐ Culture & Tradition ☐ Business & Marketing

**The Story in a picture:**

Cyclists enjoying their ride in the green corridor



**Summary:**

Tartu is home to almost 100 000 inhabitants. Recently, more and more residents have commuted by car. Initiatives to promote green transport have sprung up rapidly (Tartu smart bike, Car-free avenue). However, an idea that would adopt the solution to locals as their own was missing. The transformation of the port railway into a green corridor originated as a proposal in a participative budgeting program. It identified a place where cycling infrastructure is lacking and can engage up to 20 % of Tartu's population in sustainable mobility. Moreover, it involves more vulnerable road traffic groups. Children, dog owners, elder people, and tourist visitors can experience the beauty of Tartu from a different angle, without having to watch out for cars and inhale exhaust fumes. The project has resonated not only with the citizens but also with local politicians, who abandoned the plan to build a road here.



## Good Practice Story:

### Destination description

*Brief background of the destination.*

Tartu is the second largest city in Estonia, with a population of almost 100 000 inhabitants. Located in south Estonia, it has been formed for centuries by the Emajõgi (translated as the “mother river”). The river was highly used for transporting goods during ancient times and Tartu became an important trading center. In 1632, Swedish King Gustav II Adolf established the university in Tartu and planted the seed of a future smart city. For almost 400 years now, Tartu is an oasis of intellectual activity, rich culture, and history. Besides the representatives of old times – Tartu Cathedral, St. John’s church, Estonian National Museum, or the University of Tartu Museum, numerous up-to-date attractions invite you to visit. A cultural “factory” Aparaaditehas unites art and creative businesses bringing a place for workshops, exhibitions or cultural events. Supilinn and Karlova’s neighborhoods are known for unique Baltic wooden houses and eye-catching architecture. Whether you visit “the old” or “the new”, all the monuments are filled with green spaces encouraging you to walk. From Tartu, you don’t have to escape from the hustle and bustle of the city to the countryside to take a breath. Nature is an inherent part of the city. To fully soak up the atmosphere of Tartu is to discover the city in a carbon-free way on foot or bike.

### Issues faced

*Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.*

Tartu actively brings sustainable mobility options to its citizens since 2019. With the introduction of a Tartu smart bike share system (see the Good Practice Story of Tartu in 2020), a car-free avenue (see the Good Practice Story of Tartu in 2021), or the reconstruction of the railway bike road in 2020-2021, residents can get to work more easily by bike or take up more hobby cycling.

However, the cycling census shows a downward trend in the number of cyclists - a 5% decline from 2018 to 2021 (see the Tartu Action Plan for Bicycle Traffic 2020 – 2040). At the same time, car use in everyday mobility is increasing. These outcomes are worrying - increased car use causes higher emissions, reduces air quality, and harmfully influences the health of both residents & visitors.

To reverse this unfavorable situation, a citizens’ initiative: “The transformation of the port railway into a green corridor for cyclists and pedestrians” holds up a mirror to all its inhabitants. Pedestrians, cyclists, members of the City Government, commuters, and many more have a chance to declare their attitude to carry out daily activities more sustainably. The following story not only leads to new transport and leisure options for Tartu citizens but provides a unique tourism product waiting to be discovered by visitors.

The port railway was formerly constructed as a branch line to serve the heating plant to distribute the heating oil during the Soviet times. The railway route also formed the city’s boundary, so placing industrial areas on the outskirts made sense. The scrap metal processing company and a road construction company operated here. The companies’ logistics have begun to decline over time. Since the 2000s, the liquidation of a sparsely used railway branch and the construction of a street in its place have been considered on numerous occasions. On 29<sup>th</sup> July 2018, the last train passed through the port railway and its infrastructure soon began to act as a barrier.

According to the General plan of the city of Tartu (valid until 2012), the Tartu City government already has a clear conception - to create the ring road for the growing city. The trend of using cars for commuting was increasing and the ring road should divert car traffic away from the city center.

However, Tartu citizens did not agree with the idea of a traffic ring road. Therefore, a proposal came from a cycling enthusiast in 2018 as part of the city's participative budgeting program. The creation of a new pedestrian and cycle path along the green corridor of the port railway opens up new opportunities for safe transport, sport, and urban recreation. Unfortunately, the idea wasn't supported by the expert jury. There were still tracks laid in the corridor. The unclear deadline for their removal did not allow the project to be implemented within one year. The idea was also dismissed because of the same reason in 2019.

Despite rejection, the formed community of cyclists didn't give up and kept proposing the idea the next year, after removing the tracks by Estonian Railways. The idea received 1179 votes and came third, just below the first two supported projects. The author strengthened the idea's promotion and started cooperating with landscape architects. They created engaging visualizations so that citizens could imagine the future perspective of the port railway. In 2021, on the fourth attempt, the proposal finally got the support. A year after that, the idea was implemented and everyone can now enjoy the pleasant area for recreation surrounded by nature.

### Methods, steps, and tools applied

*Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.*

Based on the terms of the participative budget program, the implementation of the project must be completed within one year after the success in the public voting. The following steps were taken:

#### 1) Participative budgeting program

After the victory in public voting, the idea of transforming the port railway was discussed. The author introduced the idea to the public and expert audience, everyone could ask questions as the event was open and free of charge. The discussion hosted around 30 people.

#### 2) Construction works

The proper discussion kicked off the implementation phase. Thanks to the efficient cross-sectoral cooperation of the departments of the City of Tartu, the tender was launched in a short time. The process was coordinated by experienced specialists from the Department of Communal Services, the Road Maintenance Service. They started by removing all vegetation and topsoil from the old port railway. Followed by grading and compacting the old railway substructure (crushed limestone), creating a solid, compacted structure. Subsequently, laying and smoothening the final surface came after. It means, all the material was reused and recycled into a new one, suitable for cycling. The citizens started to use the corridor from day one. Activities such as commuting, leisure cycling, strolling, or walking the dogs enabled them to provide tips for improvements.

3) Based on the locals' feedback, a filling of the road edges with soil and grass has been done. To create a safe and continuous path without cracks and dangerous holes for users.

4) Traffic signs, barriers, and setting the speed limit for cars on Võru, Tähe, and Turu Street (on intersections with the light traffic corridor).

5) The area was enhanced by the installation of benches and trash bins.

The first official public opening passed off during the car-free avenue event (30 June 2022). A total of 100 cyclists made it through a new light traffic corridor.

Future plans: Safe traffic light crossings. The Department of Communal Services is now collaborating with a design studio to create safe intersections with traffic lights. The estimated time of completion is the end of 2024.

From a broader perspective, Tartu City Government will continue to emphasize nature conservation & wilderness. During heavy rainfall, there is a problem with the overloading of the sewerage network in several sections. The idea is to create a rainwater harvesting system (ponds, soaking areas, flooded meadows) to conduct water to the place where it will be utilized. In addition, new ecosystems support biodiversity and attract more species of fauna and flora. Moreover, it opens up as a tourist attraction for discovering new places of urban wilderness in Tartu.

### Key success factors

*Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.*

- The willingness of citizens. The author of the idea didn't get discouraged after the first & second and even third attempts. As he said: "On my part, the submissions were aimed at changing public opinion (and political opinion) about transport planning in the city. Therefore, I would have continued submitting this proposal indefinitely."
- A mindful shift of local politicians. They heard the community's voice and changed the General plan of the city of Tartu. A calm green corridor for pedestrians and cyclists was created instead of the ring road.
- The urge to combat climate change. The SDGs are not indifferent to Tartuvians. Collaborative stakeholders representing different ideas and opinions unite to put sustainable mobility and nature protection in the first place.
- Experiences and know-how of the city specialists. The construction of cycling routes from scratch isn't "something new" for the experts in the City office. They were able to maximize the output for a limited amount of money.

### Lessons learned

*Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.*

Orography: Difficult terrain, especially near intersections with busy main roads. Steep slopes affect the visibility and safety of the light traffic corridor. Various representatives of Tartu city departments were looking for the safest solution - traffic lights on crossings. However, this exceeded the amount of 100 000 € given for all participative budget projects. The affordable and safe solution was to install traffic signs, limit the speed of cars at intersections and add roadblocks for cars.

Interest from the locals - the journey from the cycle path idea to implementation took 5 years. The author of the idea has made considerable efforts to promote cycling in the former railway area. He considers success not only the support of the residents but the change in perception from the local politicians, which allowed the change of the Tartu Master plan and prohibit the construction of the ring road.

Budget – The cycle path was not implemented to its full extent (traffic light crossings, asphalt surface, or public lighting) due to budget constraints. It wouldn't be possible to carry out in one year at this scale (condition of the participative budget). However, the applied solution is a reasonable use of resources, encouraging recycling. Moreover, it minimally interferes with the natural environment, which is part of the NATURA 2000 protection area.

### Achievements and Results

*Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.*

- 1) Tartu Deed of the Year – every year, the City government and local newspapers Tartu Postimees nominate the most remarkable events which happened during the year. The citizens decide on the most important one, called the Tartu Deed of The Year. Although the

port railway didn't win this recognition, it is considered to be in the TOP 10 Deeds of importance in 2022.

- 2) The greatest satisfaction for the author is that "more and more people are discovering it as a route to work, school, to the shops and just as a leisure route for cycling and walking your dog."
- 3) Accessibility: The citizens of residential areas Karlova, Tammelinn, and Ropka can now reach the city center more easily. The green corridor serves to sustainable mobility for 21 424 inhabitants (more than one-fifth of the population of Tartu).
- 4) Counters for cyclists and pedestrians haven't been installed yet. To provide actual data, we can share the results of the manual counting. During a workday, 30 pedestrians, 17 cyclists and 2 scooter riders use the port railway in one hour. It means around 600 users of the green corridor on average in one day (night-time excluded).
- 5) According to the noise map, the area is one of the calmest places in Tartu close to residential neighborhoods.

### Tips for other destinations

*Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions*

- Use the possibility to actively hear your community via the Participative budgeting program. It's the best way to identify the needs of residents. In addition, you direct the attention of political authorities to activities that are truly demanded.
- Breathe life into old infrastructure and find a new function for it. You save financial resources and show residents that sustainability is not just an empty word, but you actively apply it to the development of the city.

### Recognitions and Additional references

*Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.*

Port railway planned as a green area:

<https://www.tartu.ee/en/news/majority-of-port-railway-corridor-planned-as-green-area>

Tartu Strategic Action Plan for Bicycle Traffic 2020 – 2040 (in Estonian):

[https://www.tartu.ee/sites/default/files/uploads/Linnavarad/SECAP/Tartu\\_jalgrattastateegia.pdf](https://www.tartu.ee/sites/default/files/uploads/Linnavarad/SECAP/Tartu_jalgrattastateegia.pdf)

Car-free avenue opening:

<https://tartu.ee/en/news/car-free-avenue-open-friday-bike-tour-and-concert>

The population by neighborhoods (in Estonian):

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizDczNDJjNzQtMmVhYy00ZDZiLTlmYmEtMGZjNTlyMjMzOTM0IiwidCI6ImMjEzMWUwLTNmNjgtNDgxMy04NGVmlTJiZTQzNDdlZDM4ZSIsImMiOiJh9>

Tartu Participative budgeting proposal winner (in Estonian, but the summary in English):

<https://www.volis.ee/gvolis/osale/view/666?filter=&arhiiv=62807&ettepanek=55973&kid=14833>

The noise map:

[https://tartu.ee/sites/default/files/research\\_import/2022-06/1.1.1.\\_Tartu\\_strat\\_myrakaart\\_autoliiklus\\_Lden\\_170522.jpg](https://tartu.ee/sites/default/files/research_import/2022-06/1.1.1._Tartu_strat_myrakaart_autoliiklus_Lden_170522.jpg)