

How green is my valley

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Is compressed natural gas, or CNG, the renewable energy solution it's cracked up to be? Perhaps not, according to Carl Bieker, project leader for the Valleilijn, which is one of the Netherlands' flagship CNG bus projects.

The Dutch *Valleilijn* (Valley line) is a combined bus and train connection. Buses connect the city centre of Wageningen with the railway station of Ede, from there trains run via Barneveld to Amersfoort. At Barneveld, the trains halt at an interchange, which connects car drivers to trains to Amersfoort and further to the Randstad.

The most sustainable section of the route is the first leg from Wageningen to Ede railway station, which is covered by MAN compressed natural gas (CNG) buses, operated by Veolia. The remainder of the route is serviced by state-of-the-art trains, run by Connexion. The trains and buses have a uniform Valleilijn branding.

Popularity

Because of the relatively high frequency of trains and buses, the popularity of the Valleilijn has increased dramatically. Since 2004, when the line started, the number of passengers on the buses has risen by fifteen per cent and by an incredible sixty per cent on the trains.

[F041 image 1](#)

"I think it's partly because of the tight integration of the trains and buses on the line and partly because of the good connections that the Valleilijn offers to trains to the Randstad," explains project leader Carl Bieker. During off-peak hours, though, the connection between bus and train could be better.

Unreliable

Carl says that after the promising start, the initial enthusiasm for the CNG option has waned because technical problems have reduced the availability of the CNG buses. Earlier, we already [reported](#) about some minor hiccups because of the different composition of Dutch as opposed to German natural gas. Carl also says that when temperatures are low, the reliability of the buses is not up to scratch.

Does their unreliability outweigh the environmental benefits, though? We asked the question but the answer is still unclear because there is no firm system in place to measure the environmental benefits or the negative impact of the unreliable buses. In any case, despite the operational concerns the Province will still prefer the CNG route for the next concession period, starting in 2010.

Conflicting objectives

The Valleilijn project had also been hampered by poor communication between the different departments of the Gelderland provincial authority. But there is positive news in this matter. In January 2009 the departments were restructured: the Department of Transport and the Department of the Environment and Sustainability were combined, ensuring better communication and closer working practices.

[F041 image 2](#)

Carl says that the departments still have to balance their sometimes conflicting objectives, such as the number versus the type of buses. But he is optimistic that “there will be benefits to be seen later from the new integrated department.”

Still looking

With the precedent already set for running gas-fuelled buses on the line, one way of propelling the environmental benefits into a different league would be to move from CNG to biogas. Nice idea at least, but Mireille Wösten of the Province’s Environmental Department, cautions that although “there is a plan to introduce biogas in the future, no concrete decisions have been taken as of yet.”

There was another hiccup. During the 2007 European Mobility Week, the Ede municipality announced that the CNG filling station used to fill up buses and municipal vehicles would also be opened to the broader public. Sounds good, but it never happened because the owner is concerned that the filling station may become too crowded. (A business worried that it might have too many customers – nice problem to have!) An alternative site has still not been identified, although Carl says they are still looking (very slowly it seems). So private CNG drivers still face a struggle to fill up their vehicles in Ede.

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