

Free guarded sheds at railway stations In the Netherlands

New developments and opportunities for local authorities

"In the next few years everybody will be interested in Zutphen. There is an improvement in the railway station bicycle sheds going on and I believe and hope that it will evolve into a new trend."

These are the words of Ben van Westing, manager of the NS Fiets, the department of the national railways of the Netherlands responsible for the welfare of cyclists. In October, near the railway station of Zutphen, a brand new free indoor bicycle shed will be built, giving lodge to 3,000 bicycles. It will be the first NS bike shed equipped with free surveillance and security. This trend of 'free guarded sheds' which has become immensely popular in the last year, is probably also carrying on to the NS-sheds.

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'Free guarding at the NS railway stations'. It has been under discussion since the mid 90s. More frequently new plans came on the table discussing that bigger stations can no longer build the bicycle sheds outdoor and on the ground level so that there is space in front of the entrance for an unguarded bicycle shed. The plans were not received very well as many people thought that such a chaotic bicycle mass did not look very elegant. In many cases there was a lack of space for storing all the bicycles. So if it is not possible to build the bicycle shed in front of the building, then there is no other solution than building them indoors, preferably subterranean. After all, a bicycle shed should be on a walking distance from the railway station. Social

security, however, agrees that there should be supervisors when the bikes are stalled indoors. Now, doesn't a bike shed with supervisors look like a guarded bike shed? The idea was that when 'unguarded with supervising' remains costless then the guarded shed would experience great concurrence resulting in a shortage of bicycle spots, which was feared by many.

Difficult conversations

In several projects this fear was a motive for villages to go and talk to NS about a better tuning between, or even combination of, the guarded and the (future indoor) sheds. For many years these conversations have been difficult. Local lower rates were rejected by NS because NS-sheds were supposed to remain a rural formula. Offering the guarded part for free as well was negotiable but in a hardly realistic way. To a great extent the decrease in turnover that has to be paid off was too expensive for the counties. In the railway station of Leiden Central, for example, the distinction between guarded and unguarded was clearly separated.

In Apeldoorn a new subterranean bicycle shed is under construction for which the county is paying as well (ca. £ 2,7 million of the £ 6 million construction expenses). It is in fact in Apeldoorn, the town that lobbies for 'free guarding', where the idea of making that subterranean bicycle shed for free originated. Wim Mulder, official of the county of Apeldoorn declares that 'very soon it became obvious that the annual turnover that we were to compensate, was too high for us. These sums were not in proportion to the sum that the exploitation of all free guarded sheds will be costing us.'

Keeping the distinction

The maintenance of a certain difference in quality between guarded and unguarded

has been a central point of issue in all the projects. At Leiden Central this difference has been put into practise as the new unguarded and partially subterranean sheds on the forecourt have more risks for the bikes (like vandalism and theft) instead of the guarded sheds. This is also due to the fact that in practise there is no regular surveillance.

It might be harder to keep enough distinction in Groningen. The bicycle shed under the new Stadsbalkon (Citybalcony) of which the biggest part has been opened in July 2006, will only have room for 4,000 bicycles in a room under the ground level. The forecourt will only be for the pedestrians. The county officials do not want to speak of a 'bike basement' or 'bike building' as "every cyclist who passes through the railway area from east to west or the opposite direction, will come trough the bicycle shed. The new central cycle track that passes the railway area is part of the bicycle shed." However, there is some kind of 'daily surveillance' with supervisors in a central area, which looks a bit like guarding after all.

What might get tough is for instance the rear side of the Leiden Central when the county officials will go ahead with building a large unguarded shed, with surveillance to a large extent. There it is highly probable that the unguarded shed will no longer render as, in contradiction to the 'basin' on the forecourt in Leiden or in the Stadsbalkon in Groningen, we now speak of an indoor shed with one entrance for all the cyclists. If the unguarded shed does lose its customers, a big problem arises. The room in de unguarded or free shed does no longer suffice and the exploitation of the guarded shed will be harmed.

Zutphen combines

Maintaining the difference in quality between 'free indoor unguarded' (with the necessary surveillance) and 'paid indoor guarded' will always be a tough call. Zutphen is the only example of another solution: when it is too hard to keep the

difference, why not joining the two options? The positive part of the Zutphen solution is that the guarded and unguarded parts are joined together in one room but a clear safety distinction remains. The customers will not appreciate a complete equation of options. After all, the level of surveillance of the present NS-sheds is in order to the system of 'buying tickets' so that it can be checked whether that person gets access to the shed and if bike and cyclist belong to each other. A lower degree of security will result when the entrance is supervised but the control of bike and its owner is not so that not every bike owner will be pleased. On the other hand, customers will be bothered when they have to buy tickets, even when it is all for free. All that is too much extra work and it will scare off customers.

In the bike shed of Zutphen about half of the spots will be of 'free entrance' and a little less than a half will be of 'computerized entrance' but both options are for free (these new indications of distinction are necessary as the words 'guarded' and 'unguarded' no longer fit in this context). The shed will have only one entrance and there are always two supervisors at present. In the length of the room a fence is built that separates both parts. From the 'free entrance' part the cyclists can go to the 'computerized' part by means of three tourniquets. They need a check card with their names on it, which they will get for free after they paid a warranty. The 'computerized entrance' part has a higher level of security, a double security, actually (first the supervisors and second the 'computerized entrance'). The initiators are not afraid of the fact that only one of the parts will attract all of the customers. John Immink of the Zutphen county says: "Some people will want this extra security, especially those who already stall their bikes in guarded sheds. Others will think it is too much of a fuss, mainly because of the extra walking distance. If the relation between the two groups is different from what we are expecting, we can simply remove the fence a bit more to the right or to the left."

The construction of the bicycle shed cost £ 3,7 million of which the Dutch

government paid £ 2,4 million and the county of Zutphen £ 1,3 million but the annual cost of £ 135,000 has to be added as well. The shed has late opening hours, probably 19 to 20 hours a day. The county want the supervisors non-stop at work but in combination with the staff of the bike store that is open during the day.

Made-to-measure on a local basis

Of course, it does not have to end so positively like in Zutphen. NS and the council of Houten have been discussing a free guarded shed for years, still with no result.

Under the new railway station of Houten a large room for bikes will be built, with a capacity of at least 2,200 bikes and possibly even 2,900 bikes. A kind of 'biketranferium', you might say. The county has made this possible by paying for the extra costs caused by the construction of a new railroad (with four rails) one meter higher up. Herbert Tiemens of the Houten county says: "Currently, there is a guarded shed at the station but it has nothing to do with NS. During the discussions with NS Fiets we felt that there was little approach to made-to-measure on a local basis and quality so we had to search for another solution. Even without the cooperation with NS Fiets, if that is necessary". The county, however, does not know yet how the arrangements of the level of security and the biketranferium will be exactly.

The realisation of the innovation at Zutphen has not been easy, however. A negotiation were often long and tiring but councillor Kees Luesink, in function for quiet some time, has never given up realising his invention. It does not only yield profit to the pedestrians, who now get their area on the ground level, but also because the cyclists who now have their perfect shed. And it seems that other counties seem to follow Zutphen's example. Even NS Fiets seems to be exited over this solution and is willing to adapt it to many other places.

Even the railway station of Delft will get a similar type of bike shed as soon as the

railroad has been brought to the underground, thanks to another councillor, Rik Grashoff, who also acknowledged the importance of the Zutphen solution. Grashoff, who will be councillor until April 2006, declares: "From 2012 we will have a 'railway bike parking', opened 24 hours a day and with a capacity of 5,000 bikes. 3,400 of them will be in the free area." At the central station of Utrecht a new large bike building with a few floors will be built where, according to the latest plans, 9,000 bikes can be stored. The free places will be built at existing sheds in the surroundings of the railway station of which the council will replace the old bike stands.

Guarded bike sheds will remain on different locations but in the new super shed intensive surveillance is needed as well. At the central station of Rotterdam one large room for all the bikes will be built. At Haarlem station the idea is still under discussion.

NS Fiets positive

NS Fiets thinks very positive about the idea although it is a fact that the organisation is bound to the transport concession. They have to offer sufficient guarded spots from the beginning until the end of the train service while the sum of all sheds can be exploited without any costs. That is the reason why the NS would like to see that counties with railway stations with smaller sheds realise this type of plans.

Obviously, when the sheds know a loss of profit or no profit at all, the conversation is much easier than when a healthy and yielding shed should become of free entrance.

Ben van Westing of NS Fiets: 'If surveillance is offered from 7 am to 7 pm in smaller sheds and the computerized entrance is used after hours, it would not cost a county more than £ 61,000 a year. Of course there will be the cost of future investments as customers who now park the bike in unguarded areas will want their spot in the guarded sheds as well. But for smaller stations it does not necessarily have to be an

expensive subterranean area.

Computerizing the NS bike sheds

Computerized access to a large part of the free bike shed is of great importance in the Zutphen project. In 2000 the NS published their radical brand plans to computerize a large amount of bike sheds. The smallest 31 sheds will become completely computerized, 26 smaller sheds will be computerized after rush hours and another 30 larger sheds, with room for 600 to 1,000 bikes, at night. In 2000 the plans were brought into practise for the first time and on this very moment, the plans have become less radical. About 15 of the sheds are already computerized and that amount should increase up to 50 NS sheds in order to equalise the exploitation of all bike sheds.

In Deventer, near Zutphen, a new bike cellar was opened with room for 1,200 bikes. In 2004 this shed was completely computerized and thus more or less comparable to the Zutphen shed but there is no free entrance.