

European cities look to phase out cars in 'transportation revolution'

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BARCELONA, Spain — Last week, California's Air Resources Board announced that the state would [ban the sale of new gasoline-powered cars in 2035](#) in order to fight climate change by encouraging the transition to vehicles that don't rely on fossil fuels. Months earlier, the European Union made a similar announcement, effectively ending sales of new internal-combustion-engine vehicles across the entire 27-country bloc that's home to 448 million Europeans, starting that same year.

But in Europe that move is only one step in an ongoing transportation revolution that aims to simultaneously reduce greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution and noise pollution, while increasing livability in urban areas, including the implementation of designs for "15-minute cities," where daily necessities are located mere steps away from homes.

"We want to see a massive shift. We want fewer cars," Gareth Macnaughton, director of innovation at the European Institute of Innovation and Technology Urban Mobility Initiative, which works with governments to accelerate the transportation transition, told Yahoo News. Just getting drivers to switch to electric vehicles isn't enough, he said, pointing out that cities devote huge amounts of space to the car, from streets and garages to parking spots. "If everybody moves from a car to an electric car today, it still takes up all the same amount of space."

Across the continent, urban centers are restricting cars from entering certain parts of cities as well as imposing new fees. In Paris, which holds car-free Sundays, only [newer, less-polluting diesel and gasoline-powered cars](#) can travel into "low-emission zones" across the city; by 2030, [only electric or hydrogen will be able to enter](#) the French capital at all. In Norway, [where 78% of new vehicles are electric](#), Oslo eliminated most on-street parking spots in the city's core. The medieval Belgian city of Ghent limits vehicles in the city center by offering free shuttles from low-priced car parks on its periphery. Drivers heading into London during business hours must pay congestion fees of \$17 a day and further entry fees of \$15 simply to enter "ultra-low-emission zones"; in some parts of the city, cars will soon be forbidden altogether.

“Cities are easier to decarbonize when it comes to transport, because they are very densely populated, distances tend to be smaller and public transportation networks tend to be more developed,” Barbara Stoll, director of the Clean Cities Campaign, a London-based coalition of grassroots groups, NGOs and environmental organizations, told Yahoo News. “It’s easier to find alternatives to polluting modes, such as the car, to get around. That’s why cities are a very, very good place to start this transport revolution.” The Clean Cities Campaign, which works closely with EU governments, is pushing to see zero-emission transportation dominate cities by 2030, and issues [reports that rate cities on how well they’re doing](#).

Increasingly, Europe’s urban planners are modifying neighborhoods to restrict car entry — while encouraging “active mobility,” said Macnaughton, such as walking and biking, and mass transit use. The [carrot-and-stick approach works best](#), he said, adding that sticks include “reducing access to city centers, taking away parking spaces and imposing fees and penalties.” Carrots include providing cheap or free transit passes to workers and students, as well as attractive walkways and urban parks. “Building up alternatives for car use, such as bike networks, public transport and easy access to shared cars,” is also crucial, added urban planner Bart Claassen, a senior project leader at the Amsterdam-based sustainable-planning firm Bura Urbanism. Claassen said most Dutch planners are now rethinking city design to largely deemphasize cars.

[One neighborhood of Amsterdam has gone car-free](#), and in the Dutch city of Utrecht, a former industrial zone, Merwede, is being revamped to house 12,000 people in a car-free district, one of the biggest in Europe, stretching over 60 acres. Plans for the zone include a market hall, bicycle lanes, shops, restaurants, an abundance of greenery and hubs for car sharing. The goal is to “create a district in which most daily necessities are nearby and can be reached by either walking or cycling” within 10 minutes or less, said Claassen, whose firm is involved in the design.

One of Europe’s most ambitious projects is unfolding in Barcelona, Spain. Across the city, lush green corridors are going in to help muffle sound, to clean the air and to cool urban heat pockets. So-called superblocks — 3-square-block areas of housing, markets, restaurants and shops — limit access to most vehicles and are filled with playgrounds, gardens and places to sit. Six superblocks have already been constructed, and a mobility plan passed in 2015 calls for 500 more. If completed, the plan would transform “practically 75% of the streets into pedestrian streets,” said Salvador Rueda, a former Barcelona city councilman and director of the Urban Ecology Agency of Barcelona, who invented the superblock concept. If the project stays on track, it would translate, he said, into “2,000 streets released from the car” by 2030 while requiring only a 15% reduction in overall traffic.

The World Health Organization studied the air quality around one such superblock that surrounds Barcelona's Sant Antoni Market, and found a [25% reduction in levels of harmful nitrogen dioxide and a 17% drop in particulate matter](#).

"We want to change the current uses of the public space with the Superblock Project," Rueda said. "We want the city for the citizens, not for the cars."

"There are plans for superblocks in Valencia as well," said Justin Hyatt, strategies and campaigns coordinator of the Carfree Cities Alliance. He moved to that Spanish city for its greenway — a 6-mile coast-hugging strip for pedestrians and bikes that was constructed after locals objected to a highway project once slated there. He added that the Carfree Cities Alliance, an international nonprofit working with citizens, planners and governments worldwide, is lending strategic advice and training to those planning other projects across Europe, from initiatives proposed in Berlin that would limit up to 80% of traffic into the German capital's core to similar models in countries from the Czech Republic to Bosnia-Herzegovina. "Private motor vehicles are very inefficient in terms of transporting people, especially in cities, so we need a better solution," he said. And beyond the emissions that cars spew, there are the car accidents that lead to an average of 3,000 deaths a day worldwide, according to the WHO, he added.

Even though urban Europeans are not as dependent on cars as Americans are, Stoll would like to see their attitudes about purchasing vehicles evolve faster. "Personal car ownership is something we would like to see go down in Europe," she said, adding that car sharing is an increasingly viable option. "There's no point in everybody owning their own cars, because 95% of the time, cars are parked and not used. So they just take up a huge amount of public space. If we could cut down on private car ownership, and have all of those cars be electric zero-emission, and have those cars be shared, then automatically the space can get reallocated — and space reallocation is the best way to get people out of their cars."

The move to ditch cars in European cities is refreshing to Joel Crawford, a former California social worker [who wrote the book "Carfree Cities"](#) 22 years ago. "It's now a broad movement [in Europe], supported by many levels of government, though it's moving fairly slowly," he said from his home in the Netherlands, where he walks and bikes everywhere. Across Western Europe, he pointed out, many cities are now keeping cars out of their historic districts, leading to a street-level vibrance rarely seen in the United States.

"The average American will say, 'If you take my car away from me, I will die.' And for a lot of people, that's actually not too far from the truth," he noted. In European cities, however, "everybody knows you get along just fine without a car."

He believes that given the status cars continue to enjoy in America, the U.S. will be the last place in the world to restrict automobiles in cities.

Yet as the world wakes up to the reality of climate change and high gas prices, that may be starting to change, Crawford said, and pointed to the transformation of New York's Times Square, where cars have been banned for over 10 years, as a sign of what is possible.

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