frontiers | Frontiers in Communication

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 12 August 2025
DOI 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1633504

"Mixing the Green and the Grey": how public officials use strategic communication to advance sustainable transport policies in Norwegian medium-sized cities

Hilmar Mjelde[1]* and Anders Tønnesen[2]

[1]Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway, [2]CICERO, Oslo, Norway

Check for updates

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
John Parrish-Sprowl,
Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis, United States

REVIEWED BY
Natasha A. Rascon,
Indiana State University, United States
Suzana Azizan,
University of Malaya, Malaysia

*CORRESPONDENCE
Hilmar Mjelde
✉ himj@hvl.no

RECEIVED 22 May 2025
ACCEPTED 08 July 2025
PUBLISHED 12 August 2025

CITATION
Mjelde H and Tønnesen A (2025) "Mixing the Green and the Grey": how public officials use strategic communication to advance sustainable transport policies in Norwegian medium-sized cities.
Front. Commun. 10:1633504.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1633504

This article fills a gap in existing transport and strategic communication literature by examining the role of public communication as a core component in the design and implementation of large-scale policy packages for urban transport-system development. Using a case-study approach focused on the three Norwegian medium-sized urban regions of Grenland, Haugesund, and Sandefjord, and a multi-method approach combining document analysis and interview data, we investigate how public officials use strategic communication to advance climate-friendly transport policies that are perceived as just and legitimate by local stakeholders. We show that the communication must (1) address tensions between different modes of transport such as car use and public transportation; (2) work to overcome geographic tensions, especially in inter-municipal contexts; and (3) address the temporal dimension of transport transitions, so that individual policy measures appear just, logical, and connected. Based on these findings, we suggest to policymakers how communication strategies can help secure policy legitimacy, reduce resistance, and build momentum for sustainable urban change.

KEYWORDS

sustainable transport policies, transport policies, strategic communication, city packages, rhetorical situation

Introduction

Transport poses major challenges to sustainability goals and continues to remain a fast-growing source of carbon emissions in the world. In Norway, one-third of greenhouse-gas emissions comes from transport, and the sector's emissions are over 25 percent higher than they were in 1990. Most emissions relate to road transport (Ministry of Transport, 2024a), highlighting the need for a sustainability shift. However, the shift to climate-friendly city regions involves major societal changes and calls for aligning diverse actors and interests. The phrase 'Mixing the Green and the Grey' in the title, taken from one of our interviews, captures a key theme of the article—the balancing act public officials face in communicating and implementing transport policy packages.

In January 2021, the Norwegian government proposed an ambitious plan to reduce Norway's climate emissions by up to 55 percent by 2030 compared with 1990 (Ministry of Climate and Environment, 2021). To achieve this, strong transport policies are required, targeting a mobility shift away from private car use and toward higher shares of walking, cycling, and public transport. The national zero-growth goal frames these ambitions in Norway, proclaiming that all growth in passenger traffic in urban areas is to be covered by public transport, walking, and cycling (Ministry of Transport, 2024a).

However, across Europe and in Norway, sustainable transport policies and restrictive measures on cars have been met with citizen protests. Such protests may be rooted in perceptions of injustice, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of these measures. In line with this, Bowen et al. (2017) highlight the need to ensure accountability for reaching targets and outcomes as one of three key governance challenges when implementing sustainable policies. This illustrates the relevance of this paper's topic: The ways in which public authorities employ communication strategies when implementing sustainability policies and projects. The paper is based on in-depth case studies conducted in three medium-sized Norwegian city regions: The Grenland, Haugesund, and Sandefjord regions. These regions share the characteristic of having policy packages for transport-system development (so-called city packages) but are in different phases of implementation. Studying strategic communication in sustainability transitions within the Norwegian context is particularly interesting due to the combination of a Nordic setting—characterized by high levels of trust between citizens and authorities—and, at the same time, notable protests and political mobilization in recent years against car-restrictive measures. As our main research question, we ask: How can public officials use strategic communication to advance transport policy? We use Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation as our analytical framework, since it is a well-established tool for exploring how strategic communication can be used to advance public policy (see, e.g., Ihlen et al., 2021).

The paper contributes to the research literature in two main ways. Firstly, it responds to a gap in the literature on how communication is used in relation to policy packages for urban transport change. While there are numerous studies on communication within the field of transport, these tend to focus on single measures and behavioral change (see, e.g., Tennøy and Hagen, 2021; Vonk Noordegraaf et al., 2014). Secondly, the paper addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on shifts toward more climate-friendly transport in areas that, in the Norwegian context, fall under the category of medium-sized cities. This gap is also evident in Norwegian authorities' policy orientation: Larger urban areas have been delegated the clearest responsibility to increase levels of walking, cycling, and public transport, while smaller cities have been held less accountable (Tønnesen, 2015). Herein lies an implementation challenge, as extensive research points to the need for contextually adapted policies, and that schemes which have been successful in one place cannot automatically be transferred as a blueprint to another. Instead, they need to be adjusted to local needs and contexts (Inderberg et al., 2023; Westskog et al., 2022). In Norway, medium-sized cities have different urban transport contexts than larger cities due to lower access to public transport and better access to car parking. Consequently, medium-sized cities have more private car use compared to larger Norwegian cities (Lunke, 2020). These differences impact the conditions for policy design and implementation.

To lay out our argument, we begin by presenting the Norwegian context and sustainable transport policy approach, followed by a literature review and presentation of our analytical framework. We then describe our data and explain the choice of method, after which we lay out the empirical analysis, which is structured according to Bitzer's three-part framework of a *rhetorical problem*, *the audience*, and *constraints* on the communicative response of the rhetor. The conclusion highlights the main findings and discusses implications for policy makers.

Norwegian goals and incentives for climate-friendly mobility

To achieve Norway's goals for sustainable transport system development, national authorities have long emphasized the need to coordinate policy measures and engage multiple stakeholders (see, e.g., Ministry of Transport, 2009, 2021). One such coordination mechanism is the use of 'city packages' which are established in several Norwegian cities to foster policy integration. These policy packages involve agreements between state, regional, and local authorities to develop the transport system, with toll-road revenues typically being a main component in the financial structure.

To drive changes toward more sustainable mobility, various state incentive schemes have been introduced, the most substantial of which is the Urban Growth Agreement. The agreements typically include road projects and infrastructure for walking and cycling, along with one major public-transport initiative. The Urban Growth Agreements are formally available to nine of Norway's large urban areas, of which seven currently have signed 10-year agreements. Sandefjord and Haugesund are outside the current scope of the agreement structure, while Grenland is eligible, but has not yet signed one. Instead Grenland has a multilevel agreement within the so-called Reward Program, open for them, but not for Sandefjord and Haugesund. Like the Urban Growth Agreement, also this program targets reduced car use within urban areas.

With substantial state funding involved, there have been calls to extend Urban Growth Agreements to additional urban regions beyond the current nine. In response, the 2021 National Transport Plan (Ministry of Transport, 2021) allocated NOK 600 million for projects promoting public transport, walking, and cycling in five medium-sized urban areas, including the Haugesund and Sandefjord areas. To access these funds, urban areas must adopt the national zero-growth goal. Furthermore, cities are required to commit to sustainable transport measures and establish a "city-package structure," involving collaboration across all three levels of government.

Literature review

Transforming the transport sector is critical to limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C. Globally, road transport accounts for 69% of greenhouse-gas emissions from the sector.[1] Decarbonizing transport will therefore require a broad set of transformative measures. According to the IPCC Core Writing Team (2023), electric vehicles powered by low-emissions electricity offer the greatest decarbonisation potential for land-based transport. However, IPCC also stress the importance of urban-development strategies that reduce transport demand and encourage shifts toward more energy-efficient modes. This highlights the need for policies promoting a transition from private car use to walking, cycling, and public transport (Haarstad, 2025). Following this, city regions stand out as key arenas for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

One central issue for policy makers concerns how transport infrastructure is planned in urban regions. Traditional demand-led

1 United Nation Fast Facts Transport: fastfacts_transport-april-23.pdf Accessed 16.06.2025.

predict and provide planning often results in excessive road capacity, inducing more traffic, expanding spatial footprints, and undermining walking, cycling, and public transport. In contrast, the decide and provide paradigm addresses transport needs through proactive policy, shaping demand rather than simply responding to it (Tennøy and Hagen, 2021). Measures under this model include the mix of strengthening facilities for climate-friendly transport modes, while simultaneously implementing traffic regulations such as toll-road payment, parking costs, and access restrictions (ITF, 2023). However, across Europe, such transformative and car-restrictive policies have often provoked strong public resistance, making them politically contentious and challenging to implement (Campbell, 2023).

Transport communication strategies have been examined from various perspectives. Regarding transport mode change, Taniguchi et al. (2013) highlight the effectiveness of audience targeting, showing that higher public transport usage is linked to providing specific and motivating information. Similarly, Franssens et al. (2021) found that labeling passengers as sustainable travelers can encourage increased public transport use. Another area of research focuses on the effectiveness of campaigns in reducing system shocks during disruptions, such as those caused by major sporting events (e.g., Frey et al., 2011) or periods of road capacity reduction (Tennøy and Hagen, 2021).

This paper takes a different approach, emphasizing the communication challenges public authorities face in establishing the legitimacy of transport intervention targets and outcomes. In particular, it examines communication strategies related to toll-road financing—one of the most central and debated aspects of city-transport packages.

The role of well-designed information campaigns in building legitimacy for public interventions has been widely recognized, both in the context of broader sustainability transitions (e.g., Banister, 2008) and in the successful implementation of toll-road schemes (e.g., Livingstone, 2004; Vonk Noordegraaf et al., 2014). Before Norway's municipal elections in 2019, some cities experienced mass protests against toll-road payment (Westskog et al., 2020). However, effective communication strategies can help mitigate such opposition and may explain regional differences in the severity of toll-road protests (Tønnesen et al., 2023). Research further shows that public acceptance of toll roads increases when the scheme is perceived as fair and effective in reducing car-traffic emissions (Jagers et al., 2017). This implies that, public support is closely tied to perceived benefits (Sørensen et al., 2014). To manage public dissatisfaction, cities have successfully implemented communication strategies that emphasize the overall purpose of city packages and clearly communicate what residents and stakeholders gain in return (Tønnesen, 2015; Tønnesen et al., 2023).

The broader literature on strategic communication offers several useful general theories and models for how communication can contribute toward accomplishing some organizational goal (e.g., public policy outcomes), with the term "organization" encompassing government agencies, corporations as well as civil-society associations.[2] We define the concept of strategic communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). According to the highly influential "excellence theory" of public relations, an organization must integrate its communication operations into the overall management, as opposed to annexing it to other main functions such as marketing. Although the exact arrangement of it within the overall strategic management can look different depending on the entity, the idea is to empower the communication function so that it is viewed as critical to achieving outcomes (Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig et al., 2002).

One consideration is the extent to which an organization, in terms of how it generally operates, has adopted a strategy that shapes its behavior, including how it communicates. There exists quite a few typologies of organizational strategies (see, e.g., Botan, 2006; Chaffee, 1985; Whittington, 2001), although a distinction could be drawn between linear strategies, on the one hand, and more dynamic or adaptive and contextual strategies, on the other (cf. Chaffee, 1985). In regard to communications, the question is to what extent the organization is guided by a specific strategy or communicates with the public in a reactive or ad-hoc fashion (the answer to which, in turn, should be determined by the priority given to communication, as discussed above). Ihlen (2016, p. 42) notes that textbooks in public relations tend to recommend a linear strategy, in which organizations seek to execute a carefully devised plan centering on a strategy wheel, whereby they analyze, plan, execute, and evaluate their course of action (c.f. Broom and Sha, 2012; Coombs and Holladay, 2009; Smith, 2020). For example, in a hypothetical case the organization needs to decide first what role a communications effort can or should play toward achieving some outcome. By contrast, a complexity-based approach to communication emphasizes its non-linear, interactive, and system-level qualities, meaning that one cannot grasp the communication process without also considering how the communication develops as an interplay between the often varied set of actors with opposing interests involved (cf. Lamb, 2021; Winkler and Etter, 2018). We place our analytical approach in the latter cateogory–more on that below. Moreover, recent literature discusses how "strategic foresight" can help organizations "strategically communicate future developments" (Kunadt, 2025, p. 2) in fast-changing circumstances, thus underscoring the need for adaptation.

Further, an organization needs to know which are the external actors that can either facilitate or hinder a successful outcome. In the context of a collaborative transport-policy project like those in the city regions we study, the external actors (depending on the sender of the communication) could be politicians, administration staff, the general public, private companies, civil society and interest groups, or private individuals (for typologies, see Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Smith, 2020), and the distinction between "stakeholders" as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46) and "publics" as active or mobilized interest groups—i.e. mobilized stakeholders—is useful (Grunig and Repper, 1992). Furthermore, the relationship could be "asymmetrical," in which the organization is attempting to make a stakeholder act in a particular, desired way, or "symmetrical," in which both are trying to co-exist in a way that serves the interests of both parties (Grunig, 2001). This can be exemplified by situations where the central government determines the allocation of funds for local transport projects. At the local level, however, the relationship between the sender and the intended receiver of the communication may be relatively symmetrical. It should be emphasized that the concpetual distinction probably speaks more to process than outcomes.

2 We do not provide an overview of this large and multidisciplinary research field or a state-of-the-art theory overview. The purpose is instead to make use of selected scholarly contributions that provide theoretical perspectives on the analysis of our empirical material. For an introduction to the field of strategic communication, see e.g. Botan (2021). We have been guided by Ihlen's (2016) overview book of the fields of public relations and strategic communication in our selection of literature.

When the sender (of the communcation) is a government agency (elected or appointed officials) seeking to lead public opinion in order to create or sustain public support for public policy, we need to go beyond the communication and public relations literature and consult theories of democracy and public opinion leadership. General theories of the public sphere conceptualize the contemporary public sphere as an arena for both deliberation and persuasion, largely constituted by the media (Habermas, 1962). One would therefore expect strategic communication through mass media—letters to the editor, politicians making media appearances, staging events, etc.—to be central to advance public policy. Even so, various strands of literature challenge the notion of *a* public sphere. To be sure, Habermas (2006), in his revised model of the public sphere, acknowledges what may be termed "soft" (e.g. a newspaper debate) and "hard" (e.g., national elective institutions) arenas of democratic contestation and decision making. Still, the concept of publics seems to reject the idea of a mass audience public sphere (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), and conflict theories emphasize conflict rather than agreement as the basis for politics (see, e.g., Heidar and Berntzen, 1995). Even if one accepts the general idea of a mass audience that is the target of some communications effort, persuasion is extremely hard. Politicians tend to fail in their attempts to lead public opnion, even those holding the most prominent offices (Edwards, 2003). We are merely pointing out these tensions, and the next sections present the concept of the 'rhetorical situation' as a useful analytical framework for accomodating them when studying strategic communication in practice, which is often quite "complex" (cf. Lamb, 2021).

Analytical framework

Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation is a classic much-used framework for exploring how rhetoric or strategic communcation can be used to solve or modify some problem while emphasizing the constraints of the situation that must be taken into account:

> Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence (p. 6).

Thus, the three constitutive elements of the rhetorical situation are the *rhetorical problem, the audience*, and *constraints*. The rhetorical problem involves the exigency or concrete problem that a rhetor—the individual or entity communicating strategically—has the ability to affect through rhetoric. It concerns how public officials cooperating with or at least having to engage with various other actors can communicate strategically to mobilize support for sustainable transport policies. A situation that cannot be addressed through rhetoric, because it demands entirely different means, is not a rhetorical situation. For example, public officials could encourage people to avoid using their car after heavy snowfall. However, a tow truck can recover a car out of a ditch.

The second element is a receptive *audience*, meaning actors capable of alleviating the problem. Here, the four logical scenarios are; (1) that the rhetor and the audience agree on the facts of the situation and the appropriate response; (2) they agree about the facts but their interests diverge; (3) they have the same interests, but do not agree on the basic facts; or (4) they agree on neither the facts of the situation or how to respond to it (Kjeldsen, 2013, pp. 84–85). The latter situation resonates with the concept of *wicked problems*, which are characterized as being challenging due to stakeholders' different opinions on both the nature of the problem and the best solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). As a result, solving them requires complex political judgment. In transportation-system development, the "wicked" aspect involves balancing priorities across generations, regions, and different groups of travelers. Wild et al. (2018) argue that changes to the existing streetscape—such as the removal of parking or the construction of bike lanes—can create new opportunities for some groups, while others may perceive these changes as a loss. This dynamic is central to the mobility-justice perspective (Sheller, 2018), which highlights the tensions, competing interests, and underlying values involved in transport-system development. Hence, a just transition toward climate-friendly transport must consider both the distribution of benefits and burdens resulting from projects and strategies, as well as whether affected groups feel recognized and perceive the process as fair (Schwanen, 2021). Managing the wicked problems and maneuvering the shift toward climate-friendly transportation requires collaboration across sectors, stakeholders, and levels of government (Head and Alford, 2015; Torfing et al., 2019).

The third element involves the various *constraints* in the situation that the rhetor must be sensitive to in order to devise an effective communication strategy. The constraints should not be understood in purely negative terms as circumstances that constrain the rhetor; they are also opportunities to be explored. Importantly, the measure of a successful rhetorical response is not necessarily that the problem is fully resolved, but that the response is helpful in moving toward a resolution.

Ihlen's (2011) study of the rhetorical situation the Norwegian state-owned energy company Statoil faced is informative to our study. The problem was how to retain legitimacy as a high-polluting oil producer at the time of rising public concern about environmental and climate issues. The rhetorical audience that mattered in different ways for the company was politicians, authorities, the media, environmental groups, and the general public. Authorities can impose regulations, and politicians are accountable to voters. Statoil thus had to maneuver within a complex set of constraints and possibilities. On the one hand, the idea that greenhouse-gas emissions cause climate change was no longer seriously contested in the political community. On the other, the International Energy Agency projections showed rising energy-needs in the decades ahead. Moreover, the concept of sustainable development is that the needs of future generations must be balanced against the needs of the present. The rhetorical strategy of Statoil was therefore, first, to argue that its activities were sustainable because it focused on cutting emissions. Second, it argued that the world's energy needs cannot be met without fossil fuels. Third, Statoil argued that other producers polluted more, so that it would actually be beneficial for the environment if the Norwegian oil industry *increased* its production. In the empirical section, we will frame the promotion of sustainable transport politicizes in Norwegian medium-sized as a rhetorical situation.

Data and method

Using an analytically focused sampling strategy (Patton, 2015), three cases were selected to deepen the analysis and understanding of communication strategies in transport-policy packages. All three cases involve medium-sized city regions in the Norwegian context. The selected city regions—Grenland, Haugesund, and Sandefjord—are similar in size and operate within the same national institutional framework, hereunder the formal division of responsibilities between the three levels of government in questions of land use and transport. A key aspect of this framework is the aspiration of cities of this size to receive state co-funding for transport system development. However, access to state funding varies across the three cases, as do the stages of their city packages, providing valuable analytical comparisons. Greenland's city package has been in operation the longest and receives the most state funding, whereas Sandefjord and Haugesund have more recently implemented city packages currently with uncertain and limited state funding.

This study employed a multi-method approach, based on a research design that incorporated various types of data and facilitated an interactive analysis between empirical findings and theoretical perspectives. Document analysis focused on municipal plans as well as national-level policy documents. The latter included both overarching governmental white papers that frame transport policy in Norway and specific multilevel agreements concerning transport-system development in the three case areas. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local, regional, and national stakeholders involved in or affected by the studied city packages. These interviewees comprised local and regional politicians, public officials on all three levels of government, and business representatives. While maintaining sample comparability was a priority, the selection process varied slightly due to contextual differences and variations in the city packages. A total of 21 interviews were carried out during the autumn of 2023 and the spring of 2024, evenly split between face-to-face and digital meetings conducted via Teams. Two of these interviews included two participants. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and the project complied with the ethical data protection guidelines established by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT).

Data analysis followed a process involving a dynamic interplay between the analytical framework and the empirical material. Initially, each case was analyzed separately, with an emphasis on identifying key themes, actors, and shifts in the narrative (step 1, Figure 1). This was followed by a round of interviews and an additional phase of document collection (step 2). Case descriptions were then developed (step 3) and analyzed in relation to the analytical framework (step 4), leading to a comparative analysis across the three cases (step 5). The final phase involved the writing of academic articles (step 6).

Empirical analysis

In the following, we present an analysis of the three empirical cases, beginning with the rhetorical problem, followed by the audience and relevant constraints. The final part of this section draws these elements together to identify the resulting communication strategies observed across the cases.

The rhetorical problem

For the three city regions that have or are working to establish city packages, we have identified two main issues at the core of the rhetorical problem. The first concerns toll-road payments. While city packages include a range of measures, discussions are largely dominated by the arrangement and cost of toll-road payments. As a county interviewee involved in the Grenland package noted: "In the end, I would say that 95% of the debate concerns the design of the toll-road arrangement itself." Grenland has had toll-road payment in the city region for a decade, and interviewees suggest that stakeholders and the public have generally become less resistant to it. In contrast, the Sandefjord and Haugesund areas are more familiar with toll-road payments being used exclusively for specific road improvements. This infrastructure-oriented payment system differs significantly from urban toll-road payment, where the law allows car-paid tolls to fund public transport rather than being limited to road projects (The Road Act, §27). Additionally, the rhetorical problem associated with toll-payment structures stems from the fact that this toll-road payment is not tied to the

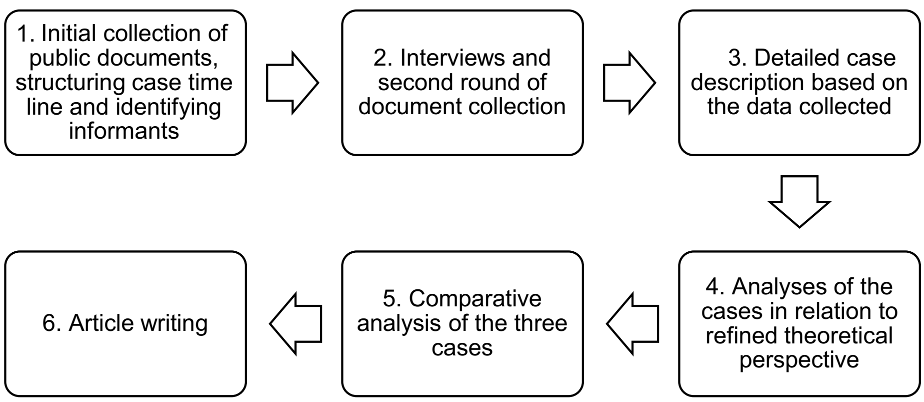

FIGURE 1
Research steps in the project.

repayment of specific road projects. Instead, they also function as a governance tool to regulate traffic volumes and reduce air pollution.

In all three cases, toll-road payments have been the deciding factor in defining the geographical boundaries of city packages. In Grenland, one municipality within the urban agglomeration chose not to participate. In the Haugesund area, only part of the neighboring municipality of Haugesund, Karmøy, was included. Meanwhile, Sandefjord opted for a single-municipality city package (Sandefjord Municipality, 2024), fearing that a larger structure would impose toll-road payments on them.

The second part of the rhetorical problem concerns a perceived lack of fine-tuning between regional and state expectations and the realities of medium-sized cities. Toll-road payment in urban areas are typically considered a "big-city" measure, and concerns are often raised about car-use reduction being challenging to achieve outside the larger urban areas in Norway. As a leading politician in Sandefjord expressed:

> If you live in Oslo, you basically don't need a car. They have so many other solutions, like car-sharing schemes and extensive public transport options that go far beyond what we could hope for. We have different needs, yet I often feel that Oslo, the government, and parliament view everything through the lens of how things work in Oslo and the largest cities.

The audience

Collectively, we have identified three main recipient groups of the strategic communication. The first involves administrative employees communicating with local politicians in both opposition and the steering coalition to build competence and anchorage for the city package. This includes not only explaining the effects of transport measures but also addressing framework conditions set by regional and national authorities. A public official from Grenland described ongoing communication efforts directed at decision-makers:

> "Those who make the decisions are the most important leading politicians. Then there's the county mayor, the mayor, opposition leaders, deputy mayors—they're in the political coordination group. (…) We must reach agreement across these organizations."

The second group includes external actors, particularly private business representatives, seen as influential players who can either hinder or facilitate transport projects. The same public official emphasized the importance of the private sector, given that they were listened to by others. In all three empirical cases, communication with businesses focused on how the city package could enhance urban attractiveness and, in Grenland particularly, how traffic regulation could benefit businesses by improving road access for goods and services. As expressed by a business representative: "[For businesses], better accessibility and avoiding traffic jams outweigh the cost of tolls."

The third group is the public—a highly diverse audience—making communication complicated due to among other challenges varied exposure to toll-road costs and differing access to public transport. Within municipalities there were communication challenges relating to different transport burdens and opportunities for inner-city and outskirt residents. This challenge was even more evident in the cases of Haugesund and Grenland, where multiple municipalities were involved. Haugesund provides an example, as one county representative noted:

> Karmøy and Haugesund are divided (…) A part of Karmøy is on an island, while the other is on the mainland and integrated into Haugesund. Especially on the island, they are far from the zero-growth goal and distant from seeing toll roads [as beneficial].

Constraints

We have identified two main constraints in the communication surrounding city packages. The first concerns financing urban transport changes. Given municipalities' numerous statutory tasks, such as education and healthcare, climate-friendly transport projects often fall outside their ordinary budgets. As a result, they rely on state grants, which typically come with conditions. While state funding structures differ across the three cases, they share key characteristics: both the reward program providing grants to Grenland and the grant structure available to Haugesund and Sandefjord require alignment with the zero-growth objective and toll roads as a local financial contribution (Ministry of Transport, 2024b; Ministry of Transport, 2025). A significant constraint is therefore the challenge of mobilizing local stakeholders to support toll roads and climate-friendly transport measures in hopes of securing the future positive spiral of state grants. This is most evident in Sandefjord, where the city package is planned without toll roads, resulting in no access to state funds. As a local politician noted:

> I see that it is such a small amount of money [available from the state]. It would take a completely different volume for us to even consider saying that "if we get [state grants] for ten years to come, we are willing to implement toll-road payment." But when you get such small amounts of money (…) then it just becomes upsetting.

The second constraint is uniting municipal partners who both have shared and conflicting interests in transport development. This constraint has clearly shaped the geographical boundaries of the three city packages in this study. Sandefjord has opted for a single-municipality package. In Grenland, one municipality in the urban-agglomeration chose not to participate, while in Haugesund, only part of Karmøy is involved. Haugesund considered a single-municipality package due to tensions with Karmøy but ultimately sought a joint structure, as explained by a county officer:

> For a while we explored the possibility of a city package just for Haugesund, but saw that it would further reinforce the dynamics of Haugesund versus Karmøy, and perhaps make it even more difficult to build common arenas to facilitate a common policy in a continuous urban area.

Having described the rhetorical problem, the audience, and the constraints, we now turn to what the public officials deemed essential components in their communication strategies.

The resulting communication strategies

The analysis identified four main rhetorical strategies, shaped by how stakeholders engaged with the rhetorical problem, their audience, and the constraints they faced. The first communication strategy focuses on how the city package reaches out broadly and *targets several travel modes*. This communication strategy addresses how the package transcends individual transport user groups, targeting both car facilities as well as measures for walking, driving, and public transport. This illustrates a well-known challenge in transport policy: balancing conflicting goals within policy packages, where measures aimed at reducing car use coexist with projects for road-capacity expansion (Tønnesen, 2015). A county representative explained why this approach was necessary for Greenland's city package to gain political approval: "We have to be able to mix the grey and the green. I would have liked to see more of the green and less road building. But then there would not be a city package." This informant also emphasized the need to adapt the communication to different audiences, saying: "[I don't] talk about climate policy if I'm speaking to an audience of 'diesel boys'. Then we would instead talk about the congestion [which the city package aims to reduce].

The first rhetorical strategy thus emphasizes the importance of conveying that the policy package is not focused solely on a narrow set of climate-friendly transport modes, but rather addresses the urban transport system as a whole.

The second communication strategy highlights how the city package distributes projects and *benefits across a wide geographical area*. The strategy addresses how the full city package area benefits, not only one municipality or the main city. Project selection for climate-friendly transport is therefore influenced by geographical balance as well as professional assessments of what benefits sustainable transport most. A county representative explained this dynamic in the Haugesund package:

> If you are going to include two municipalities [in a city package], and 100% of the good projects are located in one municipality, the other municipality will not join. It's very simple, there has to be something for both—it is almost a premise. [However], if you shave away the unrealistic extremes, you have a span in the middle that you can work within professionally.

The second strategy thus highlights that the benefits of the city package extend beyond a single municipality or localized area, encompassing the entire urban region.

The third communication strategy focuses on *demonstrating concrete results*. For Grenland and Haugesund it aims to justify the toll-road burden placed on residents and stakeholders by highlighting the benefits they receive from the city package. This approach aligns with research showing that public acceptance of toll roads depends on perceived benefits (Sørensen et al., 2014). In the Grenland case, this strategy also involves showcasing the opportunities made possible through state funding for transport-system development—projects that would have been unfeasible within the standard municipal or county budgets. Communicating regional unity is also crucial in the competition between municipalities for state grants for transport-system development. A larger population within the applying city-package area strengthens the case for national authorities, making the need for transport investments more compelling. A leading politician in Grenland described how communication efforts emphasized both the benefits of the package and the importance of regional unity:

> You have to explain this in a way that people understand, and I got a lot of support for that. We also decided that we would celebrate every single victory, every single project that the city package had financed, no matter how small. And we were all going to do it—it wasn't like the mayor of Skien was going to celebrate alone if there was a new pedestrian and cycle path in Skien. Instead, the [other two mayors in the city package] and the county mayor would also be there to cut the ribbon.

Hence, the third strategy underlines the importance of showcasing and celebrating tangible results as a way to legitimize the use of toll-road revenue.

The fourth communication strategy involves mobilizing allied spokespersons. One particularly important group was children, who were often engaged through promotional events linked to new infrastructure projects, such as bike lanes and public-transport improvements. The second key group mobilized is the business sector. While business involvement was present in all three cases, the connection between the business community and the city package was most evident in Grenland, where the package has been in operation the longest. The same Grenland politician described this approach as follows: "Get the business community on board—let them be a cheerleader team. Invite them in, and promote city package issues together with them. Because then, at least, you won't have that group against you."

Thus, the fourth strategy aims to reach broader audiences—particularly children and business actors—both to gain visible support and to mitigate potential opposition.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper addresses a gap in the literature by examining the role of public communication as a core component in the design and implementation of large-scale policy packages for urban transport-system development. Using a case-study approach focused on the three Norwegian medium-sized urban regions of Grenland, Haugesund, and Sandefjord, we applied Bitzer's (1968) concept of the rhetorical situation as our analytical framework.

Our findings demonstrate that communication plays a pivotal role in policy packages aimed at achieving sustainable urban transport. Specifically, it is central to shaping public perceptions of justice and legitimacy. Stakeholders' judgments of fairness—whether regarding spatial allocations, temporal delays related to receiving state support, or distributive outcomes—can significantly influence their acceptance of, and resistance to, policy measures. This shows the value of a complexity-based approach to communication, where different actors with competing interests are seen as shaping communication through their interactions (Lamb, 2021; Winkler and Etter, 2018).

Consequently, effective public communication is not only about disseminating information, but also about managing perceptions, mitigating conflict, and maintaining public support throughout the transition process. In this way, our analytical framework illustrated how the audience's understanding of the rhetorical situation is closely linked to the ways actor groups in different ways receive burdens and benefits from measures and projects within transport policy packages. This underscores the interconnections between the analytical lens of the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) and just transition frameworks (Sheller, 2015; Schwanen, 2021). When public authorities use strategic communication seeking to move away from polarized positions—where there is significant disagreement about facts and appropriate responses—toward greater consensus, this often involves shifting the focus from individual measures or projects to a broader, long-term perspective. The aim is to move beyond narrow debates about specific aspects, such as the organization of toll-road payment, and instead highlight what the overall policy package can achieve: addressing congestion issues, city-region attractiveness, and the potential for qualifying for increased state financial support in the future.

From our empirical analysis, we identify four interconnected key communication domains that must be addressed to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of transport policy packages. First, communication must include a broad reach by addressing several travel modes. Sustainability transitions often require reallocating limited urban resources—such as road space—from private car use to more sustainable modes like walking, cycling, and public transit. Similarly, toll-road payment systems may impose higher charges on specific groups of travelers, such as private car users with fossil-fuel engines. Hence, and in line with Wild et al. (2018), this illustrates that different groups may have different views on gains and losses from policy being implemented. Following this, communication strategies must bridge these divides, emphasizing mutual gains and systemic benefits. Framing how modal shifts alleviate congestion can show how even those who continue to rely on cars benefit from investments in alternative modes. In our case studies, messaging that highlighted how improved cycling infrastructure could reduce congestion challenges for commercial transport was key in gaining support from business communities.

Second, communication must have a sufficiently broad geographic reach, and work to overcome tensions in inter-municipal contexts. Two of the three policy packages in this study were inter-municipal. Here, the municipalities needed to cooperate despite potential disparities in costs, benefits, or visibility of improvements. A central aspect of the communication strategy was to underscore the systemic, regional nature of the transport solution—emphasizing that improvements in one municipality would contribute to regional accessibility and mobility more broadly. This approach sought to foster a sense of shared benefit and interdependence between a diverse set of stakeholders.

Third, communication should highlight both the immediate, tangible results and the long-term potential benefits. Structural transport-system change takes time, and individual policy measures may appear unjust, illogical, or disconnected in the short term. Therefore, stakeholders need to be guided through the broader policy narrative—one that clarifies how singular measures and projects align with long-term goals. This also includes articulating the rationale behind seemingly disproportionate efforts to secure small funding streams from national authorities. Later, if the cooperation is deemed successful, this may evolve into more substantial funding, opening for larger transport-system changes.

Fourth, communication strategies need to mobilize key spokespersons. In this study, we identified children as important actors to be actively involved in promotional activities. Furthermore, the business community should be engaged both to help carry the policy package forward and to prevent potential resistance that may arise if they feel excluded from the process.

Based on these findings, we offer three key recommendations for policymakers. First, communication strategies must *convey the totality of the transport system*—across space, time, and transport modes—by clearly situating every individual measure within a broader strategic vision. Our study shows that the policy package with the longest operational history and the highest level of state co-funding also achieved the strongest alignment between its communication and this systemic perspective. A critical factor here is the structure of funding streams in Norway: state grants for transport transformation allow broader framing of communication, enabling strategies, campaigns, and messages highlighting and motivating for larger transport-system change, whereas toll-road revenues often constrain communication to more narrow, project-specific descriptions.

Second and equally important is the need for *context-sensitive communicative efforts*. Policy packages cannot simply transplant blueprints from larger metropolitan areas; their messaging must be tailored to the specific social, spatial, and institutional landscapes of the implementation region. In medium-sized city regions, for example, greater distances between destinations and limited public-transit budgets may make certain sustainability goals seem unrealistic or externally imposed. By adapting narratives to address local capacities, concerns, and everyday mobility patterns, policymakers can avoid perceptions of top-down imposition and build genuine local ownership of the transition process.

Third, as emphasized by the strategic communication literature, *communication efforts should be a key component of the overall policy planning*. Some informants we spoke to pointed to a lack of communication resources as a significant shortcoming in their contact with the public. Conversely, an informant that deemed their municipality to be successful in their external communication emphasized the central role of their communications staff. While that at least in some cases may be compensated for by prominent leaders' personal communication efforts, designating specific resources to support external communication can make a material difference to the overall success of a given transport project.

In sum, communication is not merely an accessory to policy; it is a constitutive element of policy success in sustainable urban transport transitions. By addressing tensions across transport modes, municipalities, and timelines, communication strategies can help secure legitimacy, reduce resistance, and build momentum for sustainable urban change.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data is still being used by the authors in the project that the publication is an output of. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Anders Tønnesen, anders.tonnesen@cicero.oslo.no.

Author contributions

HM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. The publication is an output of the research project "Sustainable and just transport policies in Norwegian medium-sized cities (SUSTAIN)." The project is financed by the Research Council of Norway (grant number: 326784).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Banister, D. (2008). The sustainable mobility paradigm. *Transp. Policy* 15, 73–80. doi: 10.1016/j.tranpol.2007.10.005

Bitzer, L. (1968). The rhetorical situation. *Philos. Rhetor.* 1, 1–14.

Botan, C. H. (2006). "Grand strategy, strategy, and tactics in public relations" in Public relations theory II. eds. C. H. Botan and V. Hazelton (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum), 223–247.

Botan, C. H. (2021). The handbook of strategic communication. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Broom, G. M., and Sha, B.-L. (2012). Cutlip and center's effective public relations. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Limited.

Bowen, K. J., Cradock-Henry, N. A., Koch, F., Patterson, J., Häyä, T., Vogt, J., et al. (2017). Implementing the "Sustainable Development Goals": Towards addressing three key governance challenges—collective action, trade-offs, and accountability. *Curr. Opin. Env. Sust.*, 26–27, 90–96. doi: 10.1016/j.cosust.2017.05.002

Campbell, M. (2023) in "Messaging, emergencies, and public disontent: implementing active travel initiatives during COVID-19", in public participation in transport in times of change. eds. L. Hansson, C. H. Sørensen and T. Rye (Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited), 117–136.

Chaffee, E. E. (1985). Three models of strategy. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 10, 89–98. doi: 10.2307/258215

Coombs, W. T., and Holladay, S. J. (2009). PR strategy and application: managing influence. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dozier, D. M., Grunig, L. A., and Grunig, J. E. (Eds.) (1995). Manager's guide to excellence in public relations and communication management. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Edwards, G. C. (2003). On deaf ears: the limits of the bully pulpit. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Franssens, S., Botchway, E., de Swart, W., and Dewitte, S. (2021). Nudging commuters to increase public transport use: a field experiment in Rotterdam. *Front. Psychol.* 12, 1–7. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.633865

Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic management. A stakeholder approach. Boston, MA: Pitman.

Frey, H., Leth, U., Mayerthaler, A., and Brezina, T. (2011). Predicted congestions never occur. On the gap between transport modelling and human behaviour. *Transp. Probl.* 6, 73–85. doi: 10.13140/2.1.1928.5769

Grunig, J. E. (2001). "Two-way symmetrical public relations: past, present, and future" in The SAGE handbook of public relations. ed. R. L. Heath (Thousands Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications), 11–30.

Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., and Dozier, D. M. (2002). Excellent public relations and effective organizations: a study of communication management in three countries. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Grunig, J. E., and Hunt, T. (1984). Managing public relations. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Grunig, J. E., and Repper, F. C. (1992) in "Strategic management, publics, and issues", in excellence in public relations and communication management. eds. J. E. Grunig, D. M. Dozier, W. P. Ehling, L. A. Grunig, F. C. Repper and J. White (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum), 117–157.

Haarstad, H. (2025). Å studere bærekraftig byutvikling [Studying sustainable city development]. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Habermas, J. (1962). Strukturwandel der öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft [the structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society]. Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag.

Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Commun. Theory* 16, 411–426. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D. R., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., and Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *Int. J. Strateg. Commun.* 1, 3–35. doi: 10.1080/15531180701285244

Head, B. W., and Alford, J. (2015). Wicked problems: implications for public policy and management. *Adm. Soc.* 47, 711–739. doi: 10.1177/0095399713481601

Heidar, K., and Berntzen, E. (1995). Vesteuropeisk politikk: Partier, regjeringsmakt, styreform [West-European politics: parties, government power and form of government]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Ihlen, Ø. (2011). On barnyard scrambles: toward a rhetoric of public relations. *Manag. Commun. Q.* 25, 455–473. doi: 10.1177/0893318911409

Ihlen, Ø. (2016). PR og strategisk kommunikasjon [PR and strategic communication]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Ihlen, Ø., Toledano, M., and Just, S. N. (2021). Using rhetorical situations to examine and improve vaccination communication. *Front. Commun.* 6:697383. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2021.697383

Inderberg, T. H. J., Leikanger, I., and Westskog, H. (2023). Institutional context, innovations, and energy transitions: exploring solar photovoltaics with hydrogen storage at a secondary school in Norway. *Energy Res. Soc. Sci.* 101:103147, 1–12. doi: 10.1016/j.erss.2023.103147

IPCC Core Writing Team (2023). "2023Sections" in Climate change 2023: synthesis report. Contribution of working groups I, II and III to the sixth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change. eds. H. Lee and J. Romero (Geneva: IPCC), 35–115.

ITF (2023). Transport outlook 2023. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Jagers, S. C., Matti, S., and Nilsson, A. (2017). How exposure to policy tools transforms the mechanisms behind public acceptability and acceptance—The case of the Gothenburg congestion tax. *Int. J. Sustain. Transp.*, 11, 109–119. doi: 10.1080/15568318.2016.1197348

Kjeldsen, J. (2013). Retorikk i vår tid. En innføring i moderne retorisk teori [rhetoric in our time. An introduction to modern rhetorical theory]. Oslo: Spartacus.

Kunadt, F. (2025). Combining strategic foresight and strategic communication: an interdisciplinary framework of future-oriented communication in times of multiple future challenges. *Int. J. Strateg. Commun.* 1–23, 1–23. doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2025.2454676

Lamb, D. (2021). Health inequity by design: waiting rooms and patient stress. *Front. Commun.* 6, 1–12. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2021.667381

Livingstone, K. (2004). The challenge of driving through change: introducing congestion charging in Central London. *Planning Theory Pract.* 5, 490–498. doi: 10.1080/1464935042000293224

Lunke, E. B. (2020). Bystørrelse og reisevaner [City size and travel behaviour]. (TØI Report 1786/2020). Oslo: TØI.

Ministry of Climate and Environment (2021). Norway's climate action plan for 2021–2030. Meld. St. 13 (2020–2021) report to the Storting (white paper). Oslo: Ministry of Climate and Environment.

Ministry of Transport (2009). National transport plan 2010–2019. Meld. St. 16 (2008–2009) (White paper). Oslo: Ministry of Transport.

Ministry of Transport (2021). National transport plan 2022–2033. Meld. St. 20 (2020–2021) report to the Storting (white paper). Oslo: Ministry of Transport.

Ministry of Transport (2024a). National transport plan 2025–2036. Meld. St. 14 (2023–2024) report to the Storting (white paper). Oslo: Ministry of Transport.

Ministry of Transport (2024b). Prop. 68 S (2023–2023). Utbygging og finansiering av Bypakke Haugesund og fastlands-Karmøy i Rogaland [development and financing of City package Haugesund and mainland-Karmøy in Rogaland] (White paper). Oslo: Ministry of Transport.

Ministry of Transport (2025). Avtale mellom Samferdselsdepartementet og Telemark fylkeskommune, Porsgrunn kommune, Skien kommune og Siljan kommune om belønningsmidler til bedre kollektivtransport og mindre bilbruk for 2025–2028 [Agreement Between Ministry of Transport, Telemark County Municipality, Porsgrunn Municipality, Skien Municipality, and Siljan Municipality About Reward Funds for Better Collective Transport and Reduced Car Use 2025–2028]. Oslo: Ministry of Transport.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research & evaluation methods: integrating theory and practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Rittel, H. W. J., and Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy. Sci.* 4, 155–169. doi: 10.1007/BF01405730

Sandefjord Municipality (2024). Handlingsprogram til "Byutviklingsplanen". Kommunedelplan for Sandefjord sentrum [action program for "the city development plan". Municipal district plan for Sandefjord City Center]. Sandefjord: Sandefjord Municipality.

Schwanen, T. (2021). Achieving just transitions to low-carbon urban mobility. *Nat. Energy* 6, 685–687. doi: 10.1038/s41560-021-00856-z

Sheller, M. (2015). Racialized mobility transitions in Philadelphia: connecting urban sustainability and transport justice. *City Soc.* 27, 70–91. doi: 10.1111/ciso.12049

Sheller, M. (2018). *Mobility justice: The politics of movement in an age of extremes*. London/New York, NY: Verso Books.

Smith, R. D. (2020). Strategic planning for public relations. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sørensen, C. H., Isaksson, K., Macmillen, J., Åkerman, J., and Kressler, F. (2014). Strategies to manage barriers in policy formation and implementation of road pricing packages. *Transp. Res. A Policy Pract.* 60, 40–52. doi: 10.1016/j.tra.2013.10.013

Taniguchi, A., Fujii, S., Azami, T., and Ishida, H. (2013). Persuasive communication aimed at public transportation-oriented residential choice and the promotion of public transport. *Transportation* 41, 75–89. doi: 10.1007/s11116-013-9472-7

Tennøy, A., and Hagen, O. H. (2021). Urban main road capacity reduction: adaptations, effects and consequences. *Transp. Res. Part D Transp. Environ.* 96:102848, 1–21. doi: 10.1016/j.trd.2021.102848

Tønnesen, A. (2015). Policy packages and state engagement: comparing Car-use reduction policy in two Norwegian cities. *J. Transp. Geogr.* 46, 89–98. doi: 10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2015.06.006

Tønnesen, A., Krogstad, J. R., and Christiansen, P. (2023). "Governing urban transport packages in Norway: understanding conditions for public participation" in Public participation in transport in times of change. eds. L. Hansson, C. H. Sørensen and T. Rye (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited), 137–156.

Torfing, J., Sørensen, E., and Røiseland, A. (2019). Transforming the public sector into an arena for co-creation: barriers, drivers, benefits and ways forward. *Admin. Soc.* 51, 795–825. doi: 10.1177/0095399716680

Vonk Noordegraaf, D., Annema, J. A., and van Wee, B. (2014). Policy implementation lessons from six road pricing cases. *Transp. Res. A Policy Pract.* 59, 172–191. doi: 10.1016/j.tra.2013.11.003

Westskog, H., Aarsæther, N., Hovelsrud, G. K., Amundsen, H., West, J. J., and Dale, R. F. (2022). The transformative potential of local-level planning and climate policies. Case studies from Norwegian municipalities. *Cogent Soc. Sci.* 8, 1–18. doi: 10.1080/23311886.2022.2033457

Westskog, H., Amundsen, H., Christiansen, P., and Tønnesen, A. (2020). Urban contractual agreements as an adaptive governance strategy: under what conditions do they work in multi-level cooperation? *J. Environ. Policy Plan.* 22, 554–567. doi: 10.1080/1523908X.2020.1784115

Whittington, R. (2001). What is strategy and does it matter? Hampshire, UK: South-Western Cengage Learning.

Wild, K., Woodward, A., Field, A., and Macmillan, A. (2018). Beyond 'Bikelash': engaging with community opposition to cycle lanes. *Mobilities* 13, 505–519. doi: 10.1080/17450101.2017.1408950

Winkler, P., and Etter, M. (2018). Strategic communication and emergence: a dual narrative framework. *Int. J. Strateg. Commun.* 12, 382–398. doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452241