

The Christian Science Monitor Online December 20, 2006 - New German community models car-free living By Isabelle de Pommereau | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor Freiburg, Germany

It's pickup time at the Vauban kindergarten here at the edge of the Black Forest, but there's not a single minivan waiting for the kids. Instead, a convoy of helmet-donning moms - bicycle trailers in tow - pedal up to the entrance.

Welcome to Germany's best-known environmentally friendly neighborhood and a successful experiment in green urban living. The Vauban development - 2,000 new homes on a former military base 10 minutes by bike from the heart of Freiburg - has put into practice many ideas that were once dismissed as eco-fantasy but which are now moving to the center of public policy.

With gas prices well above \$6 per gallon across much of the continent, Vauban is striking a chord in Western Europe as communities encourage people to be less car-dependent. Just this week, Paris unveiled a new electric tram in a bid to reduce urban pollution and traffic congestion.

"Vauban is clearly an offer for families with kids to live without cars," says Jan Scheurer, an Australian researcher who has studied the Vauban model extensively. "It was meant to counter urban sprawl - an offer for families not to move out to the suburbs and give them the same, if better quality of life. And it is very successful."

There are numerous incentives for Vauban's 4,700 residents to live car-free: Carpoolers get free yearly tramway passes, while parking spots - available only in a garage at the neighborhood's edge - go for €17,500 (US\$23,000). Forty percent of residents have bought spaces, many just for the benefit of their visiting guests.

As a result, the car-ownership rate in Vauban is only 150 per 1,000 inhabitants, compared with 430 per 1,000 inhabitants in Freiburg proper.

In contrast, the US average is 640 household vehicles per 1,000 residents. But some cities - such as Davis, Calif., where 17 percent of residents commute by bike - have pioneered a car-free lifestyle that is similar to Vauban's model.

Vauban, which is located in the southwestern part of the country, owes its existence, at least in part, to Freiburg - a university town, like Davis - that has a reputation as Germany's ecological capital.

In the 1970s, the city became the cradle of Germany's powerful antinuclear movement after local activists killed plans for a nuclear power station nearby. The battle brought energy-policy issues closer to the people and increased involvement in local politics. With a quarter of its people voting for the Green Party, Freiburg became a political counterweight in the conservative state of Baden-Württemberg.

At about the same time, Freiburg, a city of 216,000 people, revolutionized travel behavior. It made its medieval center more pedestrian-friendly, laid down a lattice of bike paths, and introduced a flat rate for tramways and buses.

Environmental research also became a backbone of the region's economy, which boasts Germany's largest solar-research center and an international center for renewable energy. Services such as installing solar panels and purifying wastewater account for 3 percent of jobs in the region, according to city figures.

Little wonder then, that when the French Army closed the 94-acre base that Vauban now occupies in 1991, a group of forward-thinking citizens took the initiative to create a new form of city living for young families.

"We knew the city had a duty to make a plan. We wanted to get as involved as possible," says

Andreas Delleske, then a physics student who led the grass-roots initiative that codesigned Vauban. "And we were accepted as a partner of the city."

In 1998, Freiburg bought land from the German government and worked with Delleske's group to lay out a master plan for the area, keeping in mind the ecological, social, economic, and cultural goals of reducing energy levels while creating healthier air and a solid infrastructure for young families. Rather than handing the area to a real estate developer, the city let small homeowner cooperatives design and build their homes from scratch.

In retrospect, "It would have been much simpler to give a big developer a piece of land and say, 'Come back five years later with a plan,' " says Roland Veith, the Freiburg city official in charge of Vauban.

But the result is a "master plan of an ecological city ... unique in its holistic approach," says Peter Heck, a professor of material-flow management at Germany's University of Trier, pointing out that this was a community-wide effort involving engineers, politicians, city planners, and residents - not just an environmental group's pilot program.

Today, rows of individually designed, brightly painted buildings line streets that are designed to be too narrow for cars. There are four kindergartens, a Waldorf school, and plenty of playgrounds - a good thing, because a third of Vauban's residents are under age 18, bucking the trend in a graying country.

As Germany's population ages - and shrinks - experts say Vauban's model will become more important as officials increasingly tailor-make communities in an effort to attract citizens .

"We have fewer young people. What you need now is a good quality of life with good services, a good infrastructure for kids and older people," says Thomas Schleifnecker, a Hannover-based urban planner.

Across Europe, similar projects are popping up. Copenhagen, for instance, maintains a fleet of bikes for public use that is financed through advertising on bicycle frames.

But what makes Vauban unique, say experts, is that "it's as much a grass-roots initiative as it is pursued by the city council," says Mr. Scheurer. "It brings together the community, the government, and the private sector at every state of the game."

As more cities follow Vauban's example, some see its approach taking off. "Before you had pilot projects. Now it's like a movement," says Mr. Heck. "The idea of saving energy for our landscape is getting into the basic planning procedure of German cities."