

Q&A: HENK JAN MEIJER

A team effort

ZWOLLE IN THE NETHERLANDS ENJOYS GOOD TRANSPORT LINKS AND A HIGH-QUALITY WORKFORCE BUT IT IS THE CO-OPERATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS AND EDUCATION THAT DRIVES ITS ABILITY TO ATTRACT INVESTMENT, THE MAYOR TELLS COURTNEY FINGAR

Q What attributes do you feel Zwolle has as a business location?

A The location of the Netherlands is very important for our development because from this country you can reach 95% of Europe within two hours [by air]. In Zwolle we are in the central north-eastern part of the country, with good connections by rail and motorway to the rest of the Netherlands. From Amsterdam it is one hour and eight minutes by train – it's very easy.

We have some major economic sectors, such as plastics, polymers, e-commerce and agribusiness and food. There are large-scale sectors, which is important for stability because when there is a crisis in one sector, there are other sectors to compensate.

It is important as well that we have a very good knowledge structure. There are lots of vocational educational courses at the intermediate and higher level, and we have [several high-quality] education institutions.

And the most important thing that makes the Zwolle area unique is we have very good co-operation between the government, educational institutions and companies. It's very normal for us to do things together, to be generous to other people: it's not a case of 'can I make the most profit?', but 'together how do we make the most profit?' We were part of the Hanseatic League, so we did those kinds of things six centuries ago.

Also, there is a lot of innovative entrepreneurship. We are a city with a large number of SMEs – [something like] 90% to 95% [of companies in Zwolle] are SMEs. Their innovative power gives us as a city a high ranking on the national economic score; over the past 10 years we have been in the top five best-producing economic regions in our country. We connect [these SMEs] with the bigger firms in our city, so that the innovative power of the SMEs can [assist and inspire] the big firms. We are testing what kind of renewable plastics are used to make new products, for example – the development of plastic products is one of the main topics at the Polymer Science Park in Zwolle.

Our international ambitions are not so developed, but [they are] growing. The SMEs want to have more international positions to build up their markets in Europe.

There is a lot of investment capacity in the region. The SMEs that are growing here want to

invest their profit in our region. The most important issue is human capital, and finding your labour force, so we plan to create a fund that will help give people the opportunity to learn for life. That fund will be €60m, which we want to invest in the development of our labour force in the coming five years.

Q In terms of foreign investment and new companies coming in, what would you like to attract? What are the priorities for you?

A First, we like to keep to keep the companies we already have from foreign countries. For example, we have Scania [a Swedish manufacturer of commercial vehicles], which has a workforce of 2000. It is a very important establishment here in Zwolle. We have Abbott [an American healthcare company that produces food products such as PediaSure, Isomil and Ensure at its Zwolle factory]. We want to give these companies the possibility to develop here. Then you go to new companies.

Q You have been mayor for almost 20 years. What has changed the most in the city?

A We are less modest than we were 20 years ago, and we are more of a player in the national field. We have a museum that is nationally famous. We have a football club that won the national cup a few years ago. We hosted King's Day celebrations a couple of years ago – every year the king celebrates his birthday in a different city. It was in Zwolle two years ago, and everybody said [we were fantastic]. It made us proud.

There is no longer [a situation where everything happens in] the western part of the country... and we don't get anything [in the eastern part]. We are part of a system. Of course we need Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague – but they also need Zwolle. ■



CURRICULUM VITAE

HENK JAN MEIJER

200
Zwolle
Mayor

Previously

The Hague, deputy mayor;
People's Party for Freedom
and Democracy, chairman

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Boom town: Zwolle's economic growth and labour participation are higher than the Netherlands national average

Squaring the triangle

A GROWING POPULATION, A HEALTHY ECONOMY AND SPECIALITIES IN A DIVERSE RANGE OF SECTORS ARE FUELLING ZWOLLE'S AMBITIONS TO JOIN THE NETHERLANDS' POWER TRIO OF AMSTERDAM, ROTTERDAM AND EINDHOVEN.
COURTNEY FINGAR REPORTS

Economic power and influence in the Netherlands is generally concentrated in the 'triangle' of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Eindhoven. The Zwolle city region would like to reshape that axis of power into a square, making itself the fourth point. A place that has had the feeling of being left in the shadow of its neighbours is now primed to try to assert itself more on the national stage.

Having had a population of 685,000 people in 20 municipalities, Zwolle added another municipality in October 2018, bringing the population to 840,000. Economic growth (3.3% in 2017) and labour participation are higher than the national average while unemployment is lower (4.2% in Zwolle versus 4.9% nationally in 2017) thanks to the large numbers of job-creating SMEs and family businesses in the area.

A diverse mix

Zwolle's local economy is based on a diverse, balanced mix of sectors such as plastics, polymers, agri/foodtech, logistics, health, IT and e-commerce – a factor that enabled it to avoid too much damage during the global financial crisis and keeps it on stable footing.

"We are a logistics centre. We also want to attract companies within our specialities of polymer science and e-commerce – which are two sectors that are growing," says Zwolle first deputy mayor René de Heer, whose cabinet portfolio includes the economy, education and work.

"The other thing we want to do – there are big opportunities that we have on climate and energy transition. But you also have to be attractive to firms who work in that kind of development. So we have a climate campus connecting all firms working on climate adaptation, in the hope that if there are large firms and educational institutes working in this area, they will want to come here as there huge advantages."

The appliance of science

Zwolle is also putting a heavy focus on applied science and open innovation through such centres as the Polymer Science Park, Perron038, TopCentrum E-Commerce, Health Innovation Park and the Agri & Food Innovatie Cluster.

Polymer Science Park, an open innovation centre focused on plastics technology, created a local pride point in the form of a bike path made completely from recycled bottles. The park carries out research into high-performance polymers, including composites, rubbers, engineering plastics, coatings and biopolymers, bringing ideas to product-ready prototypes and working with recycling technologies and 3D printing.

Perron038, another innovation hub that is creating a buzz, is a collaborative space for companies working in smart industries that is set up in old factory buildings (Perron means 'platform' in Dutch and 038 is the local dialling code).

Laurens de Lange is commercial director at Unica (an insulation company with 2500 employees), a member of the economic board for Zwolle and the chairman of VNO-NCW Zwolle, a business and entrepreneurs association. He believes there is a bullish mood in this once understated region. "Zwolle has one of the great entrepreneurial ecosystems in the Netherlands, with an excellent track record in recent years. This is an area with very well trained people and a highly ranked education system – there are three universities within a one-hour drive – and the ethos and work ethic of people here is very good," he says.

"The infrastructure is also very good. We are well connected and close to the main economic area of Germany, we have three harbours and we are the second rail hub of the Netherlands. Importantly, quality of life is excellent," he adds. "The triangle is absolutely becoming a square." ■