

Lange Wapper: Antwerp's controversial viaduct

The *Lange Wapper* in Antwerp (Belgium) was set to become one of the biggest and most impressive viaducts in Belgium: a 1,5 kilometre long cable-stayed bridge suspended on two 110-metre high pylons, with a curve, which is not common for these kinds of structures.

This undertaking by the Flemish Government, to be executed by the *Beheersmaatschappij Antwerp Mobiel (BAM)*, was designed to be part of the controversial highway "Oosterweel-connection", completing Antwerp's highway infrastructure by means of a short tunnel under the Scheldt river and a viaduct over part of the harbour area.

Over the years, several citizens' protest groups have made their opposition to this prospect clear.

stRaten-generaal (meaning 'the streets' general' a wordplay on 'States General'), agreed that the ring road should be closed, but proposed to do this by boring an extended tunnel through the port area, which would avoid residential areas and rejoin the Antwerp ring at a more northerly point.

Ademloos (Breathless) opposes the Lange Wapper mainly because of its detrimental health aspects, and has been collecting signatures for their petition in favour of a referendum, to allow the people of Antwerp to have a say in this matter.

Five years ago, the cost was an argument in favour of the viaduct, the price of which was estimated to be around €500 million, while a tunnel was considered too expensive.

Since then, the estimated cost of the Lange Wapper has risen to more than €2.5 billion.

Earlier this year, a survey of all proposed alternatives for the closure of the ring road around Antwerp, commissioned by the Flemish Government and executed by a team of investigators from *Arup/Sum Research* put the tunnel alternative, proposed by action group *stRaten-generaal* in first place, while the combination of Lange Wapper and a short tunnel proposed by BAM was given second place.

Surprisingly, *Arup/Sum* spontaneously added yet another alternative proposal, an upgraded version of the *stRaten-generaal* tunnel alternative.

Both *stRaten-generaal* and BAM considered themselves to be the winner. *stRaten-generaal* observed that despite the EUR 80 million BAM spent on research and design, and the years of preparation it had taken, its project couldn't stand even the first test and confrontation with a viable alternative.

BAM, on the other hand, believed its project to be the only option, as the tunnel option hinges on allowing lorry traffic through the Kennedy tunnel (under the river Scheldt), a possibility

they refuse to envisage, even though traffic circumstances would be very different from what they are today, and the tunnel itself could be adapted and upgraded to today's standards..

The result of the Arup/Sum survey has caused discord within the Flemish government. One Minister wanted the tunnel alternatives scrapped, as he was set dead against allowing lorry traffic in the – as it is now indeed tired and outdated - Kennedy tunnel.

Flemish Minister-President Kris Peeters (CD&V) decided that both remaining proposals had their merits and disadvantages and required further investigation.

The Flemish government decided to allow the city of Antwerp some time to commission further studies from Arup/Sum. These were completed by the beginning of the summer of 2009 and form the basis of the information pack the City of Antwerp has had delivered to its citizens in the second half of September. This is meant to provide the necessary information to every citizen who wants to go and cast his vote to express whether or not they want the Lange Wapper to be built, in the referendum wrested from the City of Antwerp by Ademloos, to be held on October 18th.

Yet clearly the Flemish Government doesn't trust the City of Antwerp, as it is also running a Barnum campaign on local television and in the dailies, promoting their project. *Noriant*, the consortium of construction firms scheduled to execute the BAM project, are financing part of this campaign. The rest is paid with taxpayers' money. Meanwhile, the action groups are selling T-shirts and organising benefit concerts to raise at least some meagre campaign funds.

The City of Antwerp will take the result of the referendum into account when formulating its recommendation to the Flemish Government as to whether a building permit should be delivered.

Should this advice be negative, then the ball is back in the Flemish Government's camp...