

The Queen and Almere Celebrating Tradition and Innovation

An EU-Digest special report by Rick Morren

On this final Saturday of April 2006, every Dutch town and city will be the setting for what undoubtedly is the Netherlands' most enjoyable holiday, the Queens birthday, known in the Netherlands as *Queens Day* !



Queen Beatrix

The main ingredients of this holiday usually are:

- * a massive number of free music events, with both national and international artists performing on large and small stages in the streets, as well as in bars
- * free open air theatres;
- * numerous free open air dance parties
- * peoples flea markets (Vrijmarkt) like you won't find anywhere else in the world. For this day only, flea markets are run by individual citizens who have emptied their attics and sell used goods for bargain prices on the streets where they live.
- * numerous family oriented sport events
- * food from every corner of the globe

Also traditionally on this *Queens Day* the royal family always visits a city in one of the 12 Provinces of the Netherlands. This year Queen Beatrix will be visiting the Flevoland Province towns of Zeewolde and Almere.

ALMERE



downtown Almere

photo by Flickr

The city of Almere is viewed throughout Europe as a leading example of successful and revolutionary modern urban planning. Remarkable, if one imagines that only 30 years ago the area was under water, and fishermen had a thriving industry along its coasts.

In 1968, large polders were formed from draining the sea in what had formerly been an inland sea to the north of Amsterdam. It was the beginning of the construction of Almere, a polynuclear city in the southernmost part of the new polder.

Today Almere consists of a number of urban districts, built in phases according to the insights and experience at that time. The resulting differences in character are enhanced by wide green zones separating the urban districts. Apart from the road system, an extensive network of bus lanes and cycle paths provide the necessary transportation links between these districts. Four major cores together with Almere Stad form the expanding metropolis. By the end of 2005 Almere already had a population of 170.000 inhabitants.

People From Over 200 Countries

Nel Huttenga at the Almere City Council notes: "When you look at the population of Almere it probably reflects what the Netherlands population as a whole will look like in the future. The city is population is made up by young professionals, upper middle class, students and retirees, people of traditional Dutch origin and ethnic minorities. Almere is truly a multi-cultural city. We have immigrants living here from over 200 countries and about 22% of the Almere population is foreign born."

Almere is also close to two of the largest urban regions in the Netherlands, Amsterdam and Utrecht. It is connected by a direct and fast rail link to Amsterdam and Schiphol, the country's largest international airport. In addition there are a number of high quality natural features near Almere: a wetland area, lakes, woodlands, and the open spaces of the polder landscape which make living there very enjoyable.



Innovation in architecture and open spaces

City planners in Almere say they consider the city a living organism. They figured out that the city had to continue to be functional in the midst of continuous large scale construction activities and infrastructural changes. It is all part of a 40-year development plan for the city, which retains the flexibility necessary to adjust to changing circumstances.

In 1976, architects were given the freedom to design non-traditional, energy efficient and innovative housing surrounded by an abundance of space, greenery and water. These same characteristics are still part in the design of housing in Almere today.

Today the municipality of Almere consists of: Almere Buiten, Almere Haven, Almere Hout, Almere Poort, and Almere Stad. Almere Haven (Almere Harbour) was the first sector to be built. It is characterized by its maze of "spaghetti neighborhoods", designed to encourage social contact, by its many circular roads and cul-de-sacs. Almere Stad (Almere City) and Almere Buiten (Outside Almere) followed shortly, each with its own identity and urban atmosphere. Almere Hout, Almere Poort followed, with several more districts in the planning stages.

The New City Center

For the past 10 years Almere's downtown has been undergoing a major design phase as the city sought to define its heart. In Almere stad the municipality, investors, developers and interest groups work closely together. The construction is organized in urban blocks. Some of these blocks are



Avant-garde city center

being designed by single independent architects and others by groups of architects. Both leading international architects and young talented local designers are being commissioned by the city to provide for innovative expression in architecture. The results so far have been spectacular. Completion of the city center is planned for 2007.

By 2010, the construction of Almere will have reached the outer limits of the current structural plan. The potential need for expansion in the surrounding regions is expected to remain high, and based on statistics Almere will continue growing rapidly.

In view of this, the municipality is now developing an urbanization strategy on a province wide level. It is expected that if the growth continues at the present rate of 3,000 homes a year, Almere will be the fifth largest city in the Netherlands within 10 years time.

The Almere Economy: A Fiber-Optic Community

The business community of Almere is represented by VBA (Business Circle Association) and includes more than 700 companies. VBA works closely with the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce and various regional and national consultative bodies. The largest largest employers are, IBM, Mitsubishi Caterpillar Forklift Europe, Alpha, Leaseplan Nederland, Royal Postal Service, Accenture Technology Solutions. Overall the business structure is versatile and the building and industrial sector are obviously well represented. Almere has been experiencing a strong rise in the number of companies and employees, with the business service sector being somewhat over represented. Some 60 % of the approximate 63,000.00 jobs in Almere are held by locals and the rest by commuters from surrounding towns and villages. The local government wants to achieve a yearly growth of 5000 jobs through 2010, and so far have come close to reaching its targets.



WTC Almere

Another support pillar in the Almere business community is The World Trade Center Almere Association, based in the new Alnovum building. The WTC is a full member of the International World Trade Center Association headquartered in New York with 300 world wide locations. The principal goal of the WTC in Almere is to promote global trade for its members with the main focus on business matchmaking, trade missions, networking, facility management, and economic business promotion of the area.

The Almere Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Flevoland is another business focal point for the local business community. International businesses interested in setting up a company in Almere should know that it is impossible to set up a business in the Netherlands without first registering their company with the local chamber of commerce.



A connected community

Almere has also undertaken a bold plan to attract investment by creating a connected community linked through fiber-optic technology.

As the world economy started to slip in 2001, local officials in Almere realized they would have to do something spectacular to be noticed by inward looking investors, and the idea of creating a "connected community" was born.

The city, together with its commercial partners, has laid an optical fiber network to over 2000 homes and 500 businesses. For €40 a month, residents have access to services like flat-fee phone calls, super fast Internet, digital radio and television (with 90 channels), and IP telephony, where voice calls are sent over the same network as data. This means calls made to numbers within the network are at no charge. With the help of funding from the Provincial government and the European Union and with an investment of €3.5 million from the municipality itself, Almere owns the optical fiber infrastructure involved in the project.

Comparing the housing market with other parts of the Netherlands, home prices in Almere are significantly lower than elsewhere, especially urban centers such as Amsterdam. For those seeking a low density, residential environment, Almere offers excellent value and choice for money. In addition to a supply of existing properties for rent or sale, new projects are continually under development.



Real estate opportunities are plentiful

Any real estate agent operating in the Almere area can usually help with rentals and purchases of properties in the *vrije sector*- private sector housing. The Almere Woonmarkt (Almere Housing Market) is the central contact point for new building projects. Some projects, mainly the lower income and subsidized housing, are allocated through a lottery system. Those qualifying for lower income rental can register through the electronic Woningnet system.

Education, Culture and Recreation

Education is high on the list of the City Council, and Almere provides a variety of educational choices from primary schools to university, including bi-lingual (English-Dutch), adult and evening education. Approximately 68 % of the population is under 40 and 25% under 19.



Education in a multi-cultural setting

Almere's location on the water and its urban design concept and development provide a large number of options for sport and recreation. Each year many national sport and cultural events are held in Almere, attracting thousands of visitors. Following the completion of the new city center of Almere with its numerous restaurants, theaters and other entertainment facilities, the social life will certainly be on par with any large city in the world.

Medical Services In Almere

Every neighborhood of Almere has a poli-clinic and pharmacy servicing the residents of that area. Almere Flevo Hospital in the city center provides special care to patients with more serious ailments, including surgery or to those who need to be hospitalized.

Several years ago the Dutch Electronic-Highway Platform (EPN) made an inventory of telecare projects in The Netherlands. It found that the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tends to reduce the pressure on health care professionals, saves time and delivers better quality for the patient. The research was based on seven projects in which tele-consultation facilities between dermatologists, general practitioners, physiotherapists, ophthalmologists, and radiologists played a key role. Projects in Almere, Salland, and the Gouda region served as leading models for this inventory.

This means that in Almere, each inhabitant can also have access to his own health portal if he or she has the proper equipment. Authorised health care providers can also consult the data, relevant to their patients. Today almost every general practitioner has become a member of the Care Group Almere. The city has supplied the funding for the development of these personal health care portals. In addition, the municipality of Almere, which likes to promote the city as knowledge base, has also

actively stimulated the provision of a contemporary telecommunications infrastructure, including an accelerated implementation of fibre optic to each home address.

Politicians and the Public Find Each Other In the Political Marketplace Of Almere



Annemarie Jorritsma
mayor of Almere

The dynamic mayor of Almere, Annemarie Jorritsma - Lebbink (56), member of the VVD political party, uses all her expertise, including her former membership in Parliament and government as minister of transportation, minister of economic affairs, vice-minister-president and acting Mayor of Delfzijl, to preside over a politically divided city council and to manage this ever expanding multi-cultural city of some 170,000 people.

A recent novelty inaugurated by the city council to speed up government action on a variety of issues is the Political Marketplace Concept. This new concept to bring the public, civil servants and politicians closer together in open discussions on the future of their city is attracting many interested parties, including council clerks, councilors and members of executive committees from other parts of the Netherlands. Some marketplace meetings have even been attended by town councils from other countries. First indications are that this new concept is cutting red tape and speeding up the decision process of local government.

When Almere citizens party with their queen this Saturday, they will not only celebrate the queen's birthday, but also the emergence of their vibrant new European city on the world scene.