

DUTCH TECHZONE TO BECOME REGION OF SUPER SPECIALISTS AND NICHE PLAYERS

‘PERSEVERANCE IS PART OF OUR DNA’

‘Do you hear that? That’s the elephants in the new park behind the town hall’, says Emmen’s alderman for economic development Bouke Arends midway during the interview. Over the past 1-2 years, Wildlands Adventure Zoo has been taking on the spot of Emmen Zoo. FC Emmen, the only professional football club in the Dutch province of Drenthe, was recently promoted to the Dutch Premier League for the first time in the club’s history. In short, there are a lot of great things going on in the region. Dutch TechZone is certainly a part of that too; it’s a powerful alliance between the business community, educational and knowledge institutes and the region’s government authorities.

BY LUCY HOLL

Dutch TechZone aims to be one of the Netherlands’ industrial hotspots by 2030. It wants to become known for its specialised and high-quality (manufacturing) industry, international outlook, high-quality applied science and craftsmanship, and its attractive living environment. Apart from Emmen, Dutch TechZone covers the municipalities of Hoogeveen, Coevorden and Hardenberg. The region is home to 19,000 businesses, which provide 112,000 jobs.

Bouke Arends: ‘It’s worth noting that almost 16% of people here work in industry; nationally, that figure is 9%. This shows how incredibly important industry is for the region. A number of large companies, like Philips Lighting, have downsized or simply left, but there’s a lot of potential in our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). We have a wide range of excellent suppliers, for instance for high-tech systems and materials.’ The municipality is very committed to supporting SMEs and helping them develop, as well as attracting new companies to the region. Who wouldn’t want to live in this part of Drenthe? It’s green, peaceful, spacious and safe. The idea is that suppliers can grow into powerful super specialists and niche players. Major assets in the Dutch TechZone include high-tech systems and materials, energy transition, logistics and a chemistry/bio-based economy.

PERIOD OF BLOOM

Zuidoost-Drenthe – and Emmen in particular – was a prime example of an area that could be shaped after the Second World War, says consultant Niek Wehkamp of Emmen muni-

cipality. ‘The region got a lot of economic help: there was huge employment potential and a surplus of cheap ground.’ Industry bloomed for years until contractors started shifting their business to lower-income countries. The region was suddenly faced with global competition: the manufacturing industry, and in particular the chemistry industry, suffered a lot as a result. ‘At their peak, the Enka factories, which later became AKZO, employed 8,000 staff; they employ a quarter of that number now.’ But times change, and the shift to China and elsewhere in the world has slowed. There are countless new opportunities for suppliers investing in smart industry. Existing companies are growing and new companies are welcome. Wehkamp: ‘Compare our region to a silo, full

‘Other regions may be further along than us, but we’re catching up’

of job potential. We have well-trained workers with a lot of experience.’ Emmen and the surrounding municipalities are still proud of the fact they are industrial municipalities, says alderman Arends. ‘We don’t have a 9-to-5 mentality here; people are used to working hard. There’s still enough industry, but if we don’t keep an eye out, it may thin out.’ That’s why Dutch TechZone is investing in structural improvements. The triple helix

of government authorities, the business community and educational and knowledge institutes is joining forces. The so-called economic programme Firmly for Work maps out the region’s strong and weak points. A programme board has been set up to decide and oversee Dutch TechZone’s strategy. A programme agency is coordinating the implementation. The region has also had a very successful business scheme for the past few years that has provided businesses with subsidies for particular investments, creating jobs and covering financing costs.

ONE BIG ASSOCIATION

Herman Koning, Managing Director of Landes High End Machining in Emmen, set up Techniek Sociëteit Zuidoost-Drenthe with fellow business owners, and is now the association’s chairman. Business owners meet up with each other more than ever before. There are plenty of topics to discuss, says Koning. ‘The hiring of technical staff, 3D printing, process innovation – the list goes on. We’re also currently working on merging several business associations. We want to form a single association, with a number of divisions, including technology. We’re starting in Emmen and will then make the move to other municipalities. Business owners in the region are already welcome to join our association evening in Emmen. ‘What you’ll hear there

then is: ‘Gee, that stuff you’re buying from overseas is something I can make for you too.’ This summer, a group of about 25 people from the local business community and government authorities visited Brainport Industries Campus and ASML. ‘You’re spending the whole day in the bus talking to each other. This helps foster interesting relationships. What added value can we offer each other?’

TRANSFER WITH EASE

To tackle the huge demand for well-trained technical staff together, businesses and colleges for intermediate vocational education (MBO) in the region have already set up a number of vocational training schools, including the Bedrijfs- vakschool Techniek Drenthe. This school offers the BBL learning track for all-round machining at MBO level 3. 'A vocational training school like that is great for one particular training. We also want to look at innovations in all regular education,' says Bouke Arends. The region's providers of preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO), MBO and higher vocational education (HBO) have concluded agreements to work together on continuous learning paths and being able to transfer with ease between vocational education programmes. They're thinking about how they train people for the future: What kind of

staff does the business community need, what skills are important? A wide-ranging plan for technical vocational education is being drawn up, and this will cover such topics as smart manufacturing. A new course in machining technology at a higher MBO level is also being developed.

This is also about other forms of learning: more training on the shop floor, so to speak, more guest lectures, more dual tracks and more modular courses that are immediately suitable for on-the-job training. Stenden University of Applied Science in Emmen will be getting a research group for high-tech systems and materials. Bouke Arends: 'Stenden is comparatively small, but a number of its technical courses should become *top of the art* in the Netherlands.' Companies can show their commitment by providing good work placements and graduate positions. What's more, graduates should want to stay to work in the region once they've finished their studies.

PURE INDUSTRY 4.0

Local government authorities don't have to answer for the Ministry. One of the regional government's important responsibilities is to continuously innovate the technical curricula and attract more young people to technology, says alderman Arends. Being able to do a technical course for free, for example, could be a good measure. But it takes too long to wait for the Ministry. 'That's why we're trying to sort things out for our own region by looking at the essential innovations together with all relevant parties.

All the discussion will help vocational educa-



From left to right: business owner Herman Koning, alderman Bouke Arends and consultant Niek Wehkamp: 'We are trying to sort things out for our own region by looking at essential innovations with all relevant parties.' Photo: Henk Benting

tion providers in the region to better align their curricula with what companies need, Herman Koning adds. He knows for sure that 'good jobs and interesting work are in strong supply here'. His own company, Landes High End Machining, is very much looking forward to taking delivery of two brand-new automated production cells in December. They will be linked to the ERP system, so soon a treasure trove of information will be available in *real time*. It's pure Industry 4.0. 'That's what we're going to give our people extra training for.' Dutch TechZone will also be looking at in-house training for existing staff: what do staff need and where do you get the right training, in-house or externally?

OPEN ATTITUDE

Herman Koning is very happy with the open attitude of the municipality of Emmen. It's prepared to go that extra mile for the region. 'The business community needs a government authority like that that actually facilitates things.' Naturally, the financial resources are not endless, and often a lot of time can go by at local government authorities before anything is arranged. However, four municipalities coming together with the province for Dutch TechZone has created significant support. Arends: 'We take SMEs very seriously. As a municipality, we're going to move from a supply-driven approach to more of a demand-driven one. What's more, we're getting an ever-stronger partner to work with. Until recently, the business community was somewhat fragmented, with many companies just doing their own thing. As a region, we're

increasingly presenting ourselves as a united front.

Herman Koning sees a change too. The mentality in Drenthe was and remains a little closed and modest. People don't say when things are going well. The same can be said for when things go wrong. 'But there's a new generation of business owners on the horizon who are very clearly seeking collaboration and looking further than their own company.' He looks with admiration to Brainport Industries Campus and what suppliers there do and share together. It'd be great if in the near future Dutch TechZone could realise *shared facilities* for industry and education. 'But remember, it also took a long time before Brainport Industries Campus arrived on the scene. If we continue to invest in a robust network and keep talking to each other, great initiatives are destined to be created. Perseverance is in our DNA. The past has taught us that nothing in the region happens just like that. It takes blood, sweat and tears. The parties involved in Dutch TechZone must remain realistic however, says alderman Bouke Arends. Boosting the region together will take some years. 'We're not simply going to rise from the bottom right to the top, just like that. Having ASML in the region will make it a bit easier: An OEM like that carries SMEs along with it. Other regions may be further along than us, but we're catching up.' ●

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