

# Dutch RUC – on the way at last?

**ITS Solutions** charts the progress being made in The Netherlands towards road user charging – a subject which is bound to be one of the main talking points at Intertraffic 08 in Amsterdam.



*Sorry, ladies. For the purposes of the kilometerprijs, I'm afraid that you do constitute a vehicle*

Once again, in 2008, Intertraffic Amsterdam is taking place in the capital of a country where road user charging (RUC) is at the top of the transport policy agenda. In his definitive announcement: 'We've finally made our decision', Dutch Transport Minister Camiel Eurlings expressed firm hopes that a technically-sophisticated RUC system, based on four key principles (see table 1) will start operating in the Netherlands as early as 2011 – with its charging costs restricted to 5% of total revenues.

Initially, this will apply to lorries. The intention is for it then to extend in phases to cover passenger cars from 2012, and for the whole country to be covered by 2016.

Six years ago, Intertraffic 2002 took place just a month after the then Dutch Government had launched its original 'kilometerheffing' (kilometer levy) plan for nationwide charging. By the time of Intertraffic 2004, a first-phase, regional rollout was to be well under way.

By the second day of Intertraffic 2002, however, the Dutch Cabinet had resigned (for unconnected reasons). Subsequently, the kilometerheffing concept lost headway and political consent.

So what is different this time round? The scheme will, Eurlings has confirmed, have essentially the same core characteristics. It will be distance driven-based, using satellite technology. Road tax will be

abolished. Road users will no longer pay sales tax on new vehicles (these were to be reduced in the earlier scheme).

There will be more winners than losers. By charging for vehicle use rather than ownership, the system – pledges Eurling – will mean that most road users will be paying less than they do now.

Six years on, therefore, the Dutch Government still sees itself, with some justification, in a pioneering role with a planned national scheme. No other country has overtaken The Netherlands in the interim and the recent astonishing statement by UK Secretary for Transport Ruth Kelly – that the technology for national road pricing is 'unproven' – suggests that the country will

maintain its lead for some time to come. The Dutch Government is, unlike the UK's, winning the argument by stressing the 'fairness' principle of paying differently. It also sees itself as being, politically, in a much stronger position than before, because the overall context has changed in a number of ways.

First, Dutch drivers have had another six years of congestion to contend with in their daily lives – a not inconsiderable incentive when it comes to gaining increased public acceptance. Second, the political process has been intelligently managed, widely consultative, eminently thoughtful and, above all, transparent.

Eurling's statement marked the end of a period of gathering



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momentum, from the Dutch Government's Cabinet's June 2007 announcement of an 'irreversible and significant step' on the road to a fairer system of payment for mobility, to its early-2008 announcement.

As part of the process, Connekt/ITS-Netherlands has played a central role in bringing together Ministry officials and private-sector stakeholders, and in coordinating the work of the Special Knowledge Group Anders Betalen voor Mobiliteit (Other Ways of Paying for Mobility).

With confidence gained as a result, the Dutch Government has decided – after giving detailed consideration to a number of variants (see panel) – to head straight for the 'final objective' of a national kilometerprijs (price per kilometre) scheme rather than, as once planned going through a number of intermediate stages or variants. There will, however, be a number of preliminary contributory projects.

It is citing evidence of considerable public support, not least from a number of 'societal organisations' – especially since the 2005 publication of the Nouwen platform report.

Set up in May 2005 by former Dutch Transport Minister Karla Peijs, under the chairmanship of Paul Nouwen, a former chair of Dutch motorists' organisation ANWB, this achieved a remarkable degree of agreement – once, that is, it had seen off a proposal for a first phase of clustering charging spots around notoriously congested

roads, which aroused the wrath of the chair of the Dutch Employers' Association. There has, not least, been widespread political agreement – essential in a country where governments tend to be coalitions.

Individual contributory projects due to get under way during 2008 will focus on areas including the Noordvleugel region (the northern 'wing' of The Netherlands' western Randstad conurbation which contains its four largest cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht). The aim is to test appropriate technology, monitor behavioural and accessibility impacts and provide an informed view of alternative combinations of price incentives and mobility management.

The Noordvleugel suffers particularly heavy congestion, and the plan is to tackle, at the infrastructural level, some of the worst bottlenecks as part of the process of building up towards the kilometerprijs. The Government is carrying out this programme in close cooperation with leading local employers with a view to getting the business community firmly on board.

The Dutch Government is also seeking 'intensive technical and policy cooperation' with neighbours and near neighbours, eg Belgium, Germany and France, in reaction to reports that they are considering moved towards LRUC following the German example, possibly as early as 2011.

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## Variants considered

### First-step motorway variant

This would initially have involved restricting the sections of the Dutch road network to which the kilometerprijs would apply. Using electronic tags, all passenger cars and goods vehicles would pay a basic rate, designed to incorporate environmental criteria, on the Dutch motorways (approximately 2600km of roads).

This would cover some 50% of all km driven in the Netherlands. At the same time, there would be a higher peak-hour rate for driving in highly-congested areas (between 50 and 60 identified bottlenecks).

This would have allowed about 25% of the Dutch motor vehicle tax take – as well as 100% of the Eurovignette charge for commercial vehicles – to be converted into the kilometerprijs.

This gantry and in-vehicle tag system could have been readily bought off the shelf. But collection costs would have worked out at around 20% of revenues, compared with the prescribed 5%.

Other counter arguments included:

- Lack of support from societal organisations, which associated the concept with the introduction of tolling gateways;
- Likely reactions of road users, who would experience the first phase of a kilometerprijs without full reductions in motor vehicle taxes;
- Possible obstacles to the eventual achievement of the kilometerprijs on all roads if this first step led to reduced traffic congestion on major roads, putting at risk further movement away from fixed vehicle taxes; and
- The need for intensive consultation with regional authorities to identify and secure agreement on the highly-congested areas for the imposition of additional peak-rate charging.

### Congestion zone variant s

All passenger cars and lorries would pay a peak-rate charge to drive through the 50-60 highly-congested bottlenecks. Automatic numberplate recognition (ANPR) could be considered as the enforcement means, so rendering in-vehicle equipment unnecessary.

Key counter arguments included:

- A very limited reduction in fixed car taxes, which would have to apply to all road users in the Netherlands, not just those in the congested areas (although a regional phasing-out of fixed vehicle taxes could be achievable through provincial surtaxes);
- The need for intensive consultation with regional authorities;
- Operating costs running at 18% of revenues;
- Lack of public support (not least because of associations with earlier RUC initiatives eg rekeningrijden that proved unpopular); and
- The need to calculate differential rates for goods traffic.

### Regional initiatives variant

Reflecting their urgent need of a solution to their congestion problems, the local authorities in the Noordvleugel announced in 2006 that they wanted to look at a regional RUC initiative – within the overall kilometerprijs framework. The proposal was they would levy a charge during peak hours on defined roads leading towards Amsterdam – the 'strengvariant'.

Key counter arguments included:

- Lack of support from societal organisations; and
- Costs of up to 15% of revenues, depending on the technology being used. (The cheapest would involve the use of ANPR cameras).

The level of interest expressed has secured the region priority status in the allocation of resources for preliminary contributory projects that are due to get under way during 2008.