

CASE

# A tale of two municipalities

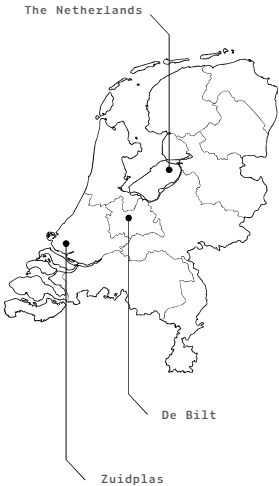
Two examples of relevant use of alternatives in SEA



Two municipalities in the Netherlands, about fifty kilometres apart: De Bilt, in the forest-rich centre of the country, and Zuidplas, a stone's throw from Rotterdam, at the deepest point in the Netherlands. Both conducted a strategic environmental assessment with effective use of alternatives. What can we learn from their approach, challenges and outcomes?

Text Pieter Jongejans

*“The Zuidplas polder is located in one of the lowest parts of the Netherlands, a few metres below sea level.”*



**D**e Bilt means “the bump”, and this municipality is indeed on a low hill. Most Dutch people associate the place with the national weather station located here. De Bilt has around 43,000 inhabitants, distributed over several residential centres and

the surrounding areas of forests and meadows.

Under the new Environmental and Planning Act that came into force on 1 January 2024, each municipality must develop a long-term environmental vision for its spatial development. The vision includes important decisions about housing, mobility, the generation of renewable energy and the planning of rural areas. In the run-up to this new legislation, De Bilt had already started to develop its vision. Among the specific challenges De Bilt faces are climate-related water management (in other words, coping with droughts and flooding), soil and nature preservation, and water quality management.

Fifty kilometres southwest of De Bilt lies Zuidplas, which has as its slogan “village-style living in the Randstad suburbs”. It has four residential hubs

and a population similar in size to De Bilt's but increasing rapidly. A new settlement has therefore been planned in the Zuidplas polder. This “Fifth Village” will have 8,000 houses, 65 hectares of business park, facilities, infrastructure, nature areas and water bodies. Because this polder is in one of the lowest parts of the Netherlands, a few metres below sea level, the area is very vulnerable to the effects of climate change and soil subsidence. This requires careful consideration, with attention to the long-term consequences, in order to prevent negative impacts being felt by future generations or in other areas. The development plan of the Fifth Village has a long history. Various government levels have been involved in determining the location and other decisions. Zuid-Holland province, the Water Board and other stakeholders have all contributed their perspectives to the development of this new residential area.

**The use of alternatives**

The De Bilt and Zuidplas SEAs both made use of alternatives to explore possible directions for development and their consequences.

**De Bilt**

De Bilt municipality had proposed a somewhat conservative provisional

Artist impression of the ‘Fifth Village’  
Image: municipality of Zuidplas



**The SEA procedure**

An environmental vision like the one developed for De Bilt outlines the spatial development of a municipality and therefore sets the framework for developments that have significant environmental consequences, such as the building of homes, the expansion of business parks, or the installation of wind turbines. Under the Environmental and Planning Act of the Netherlands, every environmental vision must undergo a strategic environmental assessment to check its soundness.

Zuidplas municipality has drawn up zoning plans for the Fifth Village. These are less strategic, but still set the framework for further design and licensing, which is why another SEA is needed to endorse them.

course that assumed low ambition and little change. Partly based on extensive conversations with residents and other stakeholders, in the SEA it was decided to explore the extremes of what was possible, using two axes: a y-axis going from low to high dynamics and an x-axis going from local to regional profiling. The exploration yielded four alternatives to which various strategic options were then applied, such as where to site housing and business parks, the number of houses, the arrangement of water, nature and agriculture in rural areas, and the locations and forms of renewable energy generation.

This approach clearly made visible which topics required choices to be made and what the effects of these choices would be. Using elements from the four explored alternatives plus some additional measures, a preferred alternative was composed. It is substantively very different from the provisional course. Its ambitions for nature, water and sustainable mobility are higher—enhancements that

can be attributed to the greater public participation and the elaboration of alternatives that was part of the SEA.

**Zuidplas**

Because of its location, new developments such as housing pose major challenges to the planning for Zuidplas, which is why preconditions and high ambitions were set for the development, particularly in relation to climate resilience and sustainability. The SEA for Zuidplas did not focus on

*“The preferred alternative is substantively very different from the provisional course.”*

selecting the right locations for housing and other facilities but was applied to determine the ideal concept for this new residential area. The SEA report showed that the original “basic alternative” fell short of the ambitious requirements. Using four other alternatives, the SEA explored how the ambitions could be achieved. The first alternative focused mainly on climate resilience, the second on sustainable mobility, the third on circularity and sustainable energy and the fourth on what is called the green-blue framework (in other words, how nature and water work best together in this specific area). Based on a comparison of environmental impacts, proposals to get the best out of each alternative were developed and largely incorporated into the zoning plan, for the municipality’s approval, on which the municipal county decides. For each of the environmental aspects, the SEA report described which measures could be taken to limit any negative effects.

Using four distinctive alternatives to explore the “corners of the playing field” proved to be very valuable for decision-making. The preferred alternative incorporated many elements from the four variants and turned out to be much more in line with the ambitions set for this area than the “basic alternative”. The impact assessment showed that the final plan has significant environmental and other



The beautiful surroundings of De Bilt.



Watch the two-minute video of Ruwan Aluvihare looking back at the SEA process for Zuidplas polder.



A visual representation of the four alternatives as explored by de municipality of De Bilt.



An artist impression of the 'Fifth Village'. Image: municipality of Zuidplas.

advantages compared to the original plan. “This in-depth process, for example, led to a much stronger focus on water infiltration and an improved water management plan”, says Ruwan Aluvihare, who was involved as an urban planning expert in the NCEA working group conducting the SEA review: “It also resulted in a comprehensive mobility plan instead of

just focusing on cars. And it entailed much more”.

**Success factors**

Because De Bilt and Zuidplas both applied the SEA early in the planning process, the assessment played an important role in every step of the process. An SEA and a vision or plan usually need largely the same kind of information. The SEA report provides an important source of information and ensures transparency. This worked out well in both cases.

In the case of De Bilt, another success factor was the involvement of the municipal administration and the city council in the SEA process. This increased the support for the choices made. “I had no previous experience with SEA, but I’m going to recommend my colleagues to use it too”, says alderman Pim van de Veerdonk. In both cases, a third good practice was the early involvement

of the consultancies responsible for making the SEA report. Instead of merely producing the report, the consultancies contributed intensively to the process and the consultation rounds. This improved the readability of the reports, as did the graphics, especially those presenting the alternatives.

In 2021, the NCEA in collaboration with a number of municipalities developed a guidance document on SEA for environmental visions. Pieter Jongejans, Technical Secretary at the NCEA: “It’s great to see how our recommendations work out in practice. In both cases, there is still room for improvement. But it is clear that the municipalities of De Bilt and Zuidplas explicitly embraced SEA as an approach to improve their vision, their plan. That has certainly paid off.”

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**Next steps**

The municipality of De Bilt has adopted the final environmental vision and will draw up programmes for its elaboration on specific themes and sub-areas. The basic information provided by the SEA report is reusable and will be constantly updated and supplemented, thus also forming the basis for monitoring. Monitoring and evaluation are important steps in the so-called “policy cycle” of the Environmental and Planning Act in the Netherlands.

The municipality of Zuidplas is further elaborating the zoning plans for the Fifth Village into urban designs, exploitation plans and implementation plans. The province, Water Board and

other public and private stakeholders are closely involved in this phase, to ensure that all ambitions will actually be achieved. Construction of the first phase of the Fifth Village is planned to start in the second half of 2025.