

Talking trash

Illegal waste dumping is on the rise along Flanders' motorways

Angela Chambers

Whether it's soda cans or sofas, illegal waste dumping is not only unattractive, it's also a hefty burden for taxpayers. Last year, 3,570 tons of trash were found next to roads and motorways in Flanders, the largest amount in five years, according to information released by Flemish mobility minister Hilde Crevits.

That's the equivalent of 300 rubbish trucks and €4.4 million paid out to collect the illegal waste. Along major arterials, it's even more expensive since more security and signs are needed. While the waste continues increasing, only 98 people were caught last year. The region has created communications campaigns in an effort to reduce illegal dumping, but, so far, it hasn't been effective.

"Throwing rubbish outside is bad for the environment and costs a lot of money," says Ilse Luypaerts, spokesperson for the Flemish Roads and Traffic Agency (AWV). "But it's very hard to catch them." The AWV works with the police on projects to monitor areas where illegal dumping has been a problem.

Luypaerts says that the AWV wants to work on collaborating with the various departments dealing with waste management, including the Public Waste Agency of Flanders (Ovam).

"The problem is that there are different governmental agencies responsible for different things," Luypaerts says. "We are only responsible for rubbish near the roads, and the other rubbish is for the local municipalities to manage. We try to work together, but it's been difficult."

Crime and punishment

Ovam is open to co-operation, says spokesperson Sofie De Keyser, but there hasn't yet been a concrete initiative. Municipal governments each collect data on their area's illegal dumping and it's difficult to compare this information. This year, however, Ovam is conducting its first research project to compare numbers from local authorities on littering and illegal dumping so that Flanders can work on a joint solution. The results of this report are expected by the end of the year. Because local governments have the



Authorities in Flanders have launched various initiatives to deal with those who dump their waste illegally

authority to enforce actions against illegal dumping, the punishments for offenders can vary. If someone is caught dumping in the Leuven district of Oud-Heverlee, for instance, they face a €400 fine. In other Flemish jurisdictions, the fine is €150.

At the end of last year, Laakdal, in south-eastern Antwerp province,

began installing cameras to catch those dumping waste illegally. Members of Neighbourhood Initiative Against Litter have for several years been taking measures to tackle dumping, after the municipality noticed that it was a big problem.

At the regional level, there are laws in place to hand out significant

punishments for illegal dumping that causes a serious risk to human health. This can be anything from a few months to a few years in jail, and also possibly thousands of euros in fines.

Belgium is ranked as one of the best EU countries when it comes to overall waste management, according to the European Commission. This includes top marks on total waste recycled and waste disposal prices. One area where Belgium ranked lower than the other countries is in not fully complying with the EU Waste Framework Directive, which sets standards for all member states to follow.

Belgium also is a leading EU country in recycling electronic waste, which is one of the fastest-growing forms of waste in Europe. Last year, Interpol conducted an operation to catch the illegal trade of electronic waste, which includes electronic equipment like computers and monitors, in Belgium and other EU countries. The actions resulted in Belgian authorities returning 100 tons of illegal e-waste to the Netherlands.

The green light

Smart systems are directing Flemish traffic towards a less congested future

Andy Furniere

To reduce traffic jams, the Flemish mobility ministry is investing in the intelligent management of traffic lights. A supercomputer will improve the flow of cars at busy crossroads in Antwerp, while the infrastructure of the city's pre-metro transport is to be thoroughly updated. And Korte Afstands Radio (KAR), or short distance radio, technology will streamline the movement of all coast trams.

Antwerp will be the first city in Flanders to put a supercomputer in charge of the co-ordination of traffic lights at junctions. The city, public transport authority De Lijn and the government of Flanders are spending about €20 million to optimise traffic flow.

The current system, which is 30 years old, can only turn the lights to red or green on the basis of the predicted amount of traffic: It takes into account the standard peak hours, for example. A supercomputer, however, has the ability to adjust its decision-making in the case of unexpected situations such as accidents or when it's unusually busy at a certain spot. The intelligent traffic lights will be able to inform each other of the traffic that is queuing at each junction in real time.



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The gradual installation of the essential infrastructure will start in 2015 one zone at a time and should be finished within two years.

Time and money

Studies show that this intelligent technology can reduce the time wasted in traffic jams at junctions by 64%, but expert Sven Maerivoet of research bureau Transport & Mobility Leuven emphasises that

such results would be exceptional. "Experiments in Dresden suggest that public transport lost about 50% less time at congested crossroads," he says. "But drivers of cars only spent on average 10% less time in queues. However, this still considerably reduces economic losses, emission of greenhouse gases and traffic aggression. Cyclists and pedestrians will benefit as well." The Flemish government has also

approved an investment of €23.8 million to replace the current systems that for 35 years have been co-ordinating the signalling and automatic braking of Antwerp's pre-metro network. The new installations will co-ordinate the flow of trams more quickly and precisely, while increasing safety by constantly checking the speed of trams and braking automatically if necessary. The cost of maintenance

will also decrease.

Visitors to the coast will also be able to reach their destination more swiftly thanks to intelligent traffic lights on the whole of the 67-kilometre coast tram route. Following a pilot project using KAR technology, all 49 coast trams have now been equipped with the system. The trams send out a GPS signal to traffic lights when they are approaching, which improves traffic safety and flow.

"Because they are all connected to each other, the traffic lights are flexible in taking decisions such as giving priority to a certain tram or arranging a diversion," explains Maerivoet. The digital innovation is also more cost-efficient than the old electromagnetic detection technology that had to be installed under the roads. Possible defects can be tracked and solved rapidly through a software application.

To examine if the KAR system would be useful in the whole of Flanders, it will also be tested on board De Lijn buses on the Leuven-Brussels axis. Apart from investments in technology, the government of Flanders has expanded the specialised team at the Flemish roads and traffic agency with three new employees, bringing the total of traffic lights experts to seven.