

The Great Bubble Barrier & the search for a problem owner

From the first pitch at the selection rounds, it was clear that The Great Bubble Barrier (TGBB) offered a clear-cut solution to a visible and pressing issue we face in Amsterdam: plastic waste in canals and rivers that pollutes the city and floats into the world's oceans, adding to the already enormous plastic soup there. By using a bubble screen to direct waste to the side of the waterway and making it easy to collect, TGBB stops plastic waste from further polluting our water.

TGBB entered the third edition of the programme on a wildcard and was excited to get started. But what seemed to be a straightforward problem did not have a straightforward problem owner. Plastic waste, especially once it floats in the city's canals, concerns a broad group of stakeholders:

- Waternet (responsible for safe and clean canals)
- Rijkswaterstaat (responsible for national waterways)
- Port of Amsterdam (responsible for the port region)
- City of Amsterdam (responsible for quay walls)
- City districts (responsible for and owner of waste)
- Amsterdam Clean Waters (cooperation agreement between seven parties, including most of the above, dedicated to reducing waste in the city's waters)

From the onset, it was difficult for TGBB to establish which actor or combination of actors is ultimately responsible for solving the issue of plastic waste in the canals. While each party agrees to the necessity of solving the issue, so far no agreement has been reached on implementing a first pilot barrier. In addition to the fragmented playing field and the politicisation of the issue, TGBB's proposal significantly exceeded the budget that is commonly allocated to pilots.

For both the startup and the programme team it is frustrating that the collaboration did not get off the ground in the way we hoped. At the same time, we all learned a lot. First of all, the efforts of TGBB have generated insight into the complex workings of the problem of plastic waste in the city.

Secondly, this case reaffirms that in case of an urban challenge that concerns more than one organisation/department, the mandate, budget and accountability for solution architecture must be established prior to the collaboration. A third lesson is that startups that propose hardware solutions, especially when highly technical and expensive to develop and implement, must be supported in breaking down their business case into sizeable chunks. While the total expenditure may very well be higher in case of hardware, we still have to make it manageable for clients to work with until the solution has proven useful, feasible and scalable.

Paradoxically, what we take away from the case of TGBB is that ownership must exist on all fronts – the problem, the budget, the solution – and that in order to move forward, true ownership requires a little bit of letting go. We are happy to announce that TGBB and Waternet are currently exploring the possibilities for a pilot. Even though it was a rough start, the great potential of TGBB's solution has been recognised and the future is full of possibilities.

For more info on what TGBB is working on now, see www.thegreatbubblebarrier.com.

Platform Eerlijk Wonen & the search for commitment

Platform Eerlijk Wonen (PEW) applied for the third edition with a proposition to address housing fraud. By developing a portal that enables strategic data access and targeted enforcement, PEW wants to enable the city and its partners to effectively attend to this issue. For a long time, housing fraud has been a major challenge for the city of Amsterdam. The scale of the problem is widely recognised and its urgency was endorsed politically when the new City Council took office this year.

Throughout the incubation period, PEW developed its product and business case alongside their mentor and client. The startup's innovative approach, however, raised some sensitive issues that could not be easily solved. As PEW's approach implies tapping into existing data streams of the city's residents in order to track illegal subletting, questions about privacy, juridical restrictions and the ownership of data quickly surfaced. Data scientists and legal advisors were gathered to consider these questions. After this, PEW was sent in various directions and received a variety of advice from different people. Unfortunately, towards the end of the programme PEW's proposal was rejected on the highest level. The proposal in its current form, where data is stored with an external party, is considered unfeasible. However, the city is still interested in the idea and there are some other forms of collaboration that can still be explored.

What we all learned here is that the commitment to participate in the programme does not necessarily mean the client can commit to implementing the solution. Especially when civil servants deal with (politically) sensitive issues in uncharted territory, collaboration with external parties may prove too challenging.

When we asked Pieter Verstijnen, co-founder of PEW, what he would do differently if he could start over, he answered: "I would set up smaller experiments, using a closed-off 'data room'. By limiting exposure in that way, it is possible to test the working of the software without having to deal with issues of privacy and the like. This is also a way of containing the project and limiting the input from experts to relevant moments only. From my experiences during the programme, I learned that such a sensitive issue requires a controlled approach."

Please visit www.platformeerlijkwonen.nl to find out more!

