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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Flanders can boast a rich history. Our countless wonderful buildings rightly attract visitors from around the world. In centuries past however architects rarely if ever gave any consideration to universal accessibility. Today, our society is no longer able to accept access to public buildings being exclusively reserved to those among us fortunate enough not to have to live with restricted mobility. We are striving to create an inclusive society.

From a tourism perspective, we need to tackle this problem in a structural, comprehensive way. As far back as 2001 Tourism Flanders drew up an Accessibility Action Plan, following a study into the accessibility of overnight accommodation in Flanders. This pinpointed two main shortcomings.

1. The first is the physical accessibility of tourism infrastructure.

The Accessibility Action Plan is based on a number of key ideas for improving tourism buildings and estates. First and foremost we want to create conditions in which tourism is open to all. 'Design for All' goes further than accessibility for people with a specific mobility problem. The older generation, families with children, people with temporary restricted mobility or even just people with luggage – they all benefit from improved comfort and accessibility.

The choice of attractive design is a principle that ensues from this. Our tourism industry will not benefit from accessible rooms that no one wants because they look like something you would find in a hospital.

We therefore reserve substantial subsidies and technical assistance for renovation projects, provided the owner gives due consideration to accessibility.

Clear accessibility criteria have been identified in association with accessibility experts, with a view to basic accessibility and independent use of infrastructure by all. These criteria have been adapted into practical information cards tailored to the situation of owners, architects and contractors.

Throughout the renovation process the owner can call on a specialised consultancy, which is typically obliged to conduct a feasibility study in advance. The Tourism Flanders inspectors have also been given accessibility training and they assist the owners on the ground. We are currently subsidising accessibility-related renovation projects at hotels, camping sites, youth

accommodations, and other 'Tourism for All' houses and tourist information services. These subsidies make up 30 to 70 per cent of the total renovation costs. The accessibility premiums for the hotel industry for instance have risen spectacularly since 2002. Five years ago a total amount of 50,000 euros was paid out. In 2006 that was up to 743,566 euros for 14 hotels. Government investment since 2002 is almost exactly two million euros, just in the hotel industry.

We set up a new legal framework for the 533 Flemish youth accommodations in 2004. We also provide substantial assistance to youth tourism centres, and youth hostels so that young people with a disability are also able to use them without difficulty. I can show you two examples.

This holiday centre for young people in Ieper for instance has four rooms that are fully accessible to wheelchair users. The other 14 rooms are at least accessible 'with assistance'. In total, 100 beds are suited to wheelchair users. A great many of those beds are designed for a broad public, with mattresses measuring 2.10 metres. The sports facilities are also accessible.

A second example is the new youth hostel that is now under construction in the centre of Antwerp. It is not only in full compliance with all accessibility requirements, it also boasts an attractive design.

Accessible tourism is not simply about buildings however; it is also about people. That is why we are investing in special training for all persons involved. The yearly courses on how to ensure people with a disability are given a warm welcome, offered to staff and owners of tourism companies and the special training for tourist guides regularly attract a lot of interest. Technical courses on physical accessibility for architects and owners of tourist infrastructure and the 'train the trainer' sessions for teachers of tourism courses meet an urgent need.

2. A second shortcoming is the lack of reliable and available information on the accessibility of tourism infrastructure.

It is the task of Accessible Travel Info Point to fill gaps in knowledge here. This service of Tourism Flanders offers tailored information to people with a disability and tourism entrepreneurs alike. The service's website at www.toegankelijkreizen.be and www.accessinfo.be is another important source of information, which serves between 10,000 and 20,000 visitors a month.

We have driven major efforts to collect objective accessibility information of tourist infrastructure in Flanders. The results of these specialised screenings continue to be added to the Accessible Flanders databank. The databank cum website contains detailed information on every building that has been evaluated, including precise measurements, to enable people with a disability to make their own decisions on how accessible the building is for them. The measurements are conducted through social employment projects, among other channels. Our contribution to payroll costs naturally alleviates the costs incurred by participating companies and services.

Our total investment to now in these evaluations is 117,500 euros. The databank currently contains information on 180 accommodations. Another 120 accommodations will be added in 2007. The databank will contain a good sampling of the tourist infrastructure by 2009.

I am delighted that the efforts made here can get a larger impact by the Europe for All e-service. This project deserves my full support.

But I want to go further by introducing an analogous accessibility label. My services are finalising the introduction of the label for the tourism industry in Flanders. In due course, we hope to see

the development of a generally recognised, reliable European accessibility label based on the information collected.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In ending I would like to thank the organisers for this marvellous initiative. Flanders can learn a lot from countries with more extensive experience of the inclusive model. Is the foundation of European thinking not that every exchange of insight and experience ultimately helps us advance?

