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## Speech by Joris BENGEOVOORD, Mayor of Winterswijk, Treasurer of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)

*Check against delivery*

### Debate on “Regional strategies for the protection of the environment”

22 March 2023

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor to stand before you today and speak about a topic that is very close to my heart: sustainability. As Mayor of Winterswijk, I am proud to share with you something about this topic and how we are taking it up in our region and specifically our municipality.

On September 9, 2021, Winterswijk, as the smallest municipality ever, won the European Green Leaf Award 2022. The European Commission established this award in 2008 for smaller municipalities and cities that distinguish themselves in the field of environment and climate. A recognition for the work we had already done in this area as a municipality. But also an extra incentive to continue working towards a sustainable future. One of the main reasons we won the award was the fact that we as a municipality embrace and facilitate sustainability initiatives that come from the society itself. As the smallest Green Leaf municipality in Europe, Winterswijk actively contributes to the implementation of the SDG within the network of which we are a part. Together with cities such as Valencia, Tallinn in Estonia and Grenoble, as well as smaller municipalities in Europe, we are part of a network that meets regularly. The region Achterhoek where Winterswijk is situated contains 6 municipalities. In 2021 we decided to become the first SDG region within the Netherlands. The knowledge we gain together from the Achterhoek and the Province of Gelderland, but also as members of different networks within the VNG, we share with other governments and organizations within this network.

Today I would like to share with you how we as the Winterswijk, a municipality with nearly 30.000 inhabitants, are taking big steps in the field of sustainability, while starting small to achieve our goals.

Sustainability is a task we face as an international society, and this task is more urgent than ever before. We must all work to combat climate change and adapt to the changes that have already taken place. We in Winterswijk are aware of this task and have therefore drawn up our climate adaptation strategy. This contains our goals and actions to prepare the municipality for climate change and with it increasingly extreme weather conditions. It is our task to ensure that we are prepared for this. Investing in water storage, green roofs and greening the city center are important steps in this.

We want to set a good example and inspire other municipalities to follow our example and we like to share our experience. To achieve this, we need to think big, while starting small.

What do I mean by this? I mean that while we need to set big goals, such as reducing our carbon emissions, increasing biodiversity and conserving our natural resources, we also need to start with small, achievable steps to reach our goal. This could mean separating our waste better, building more bike paths, greening our municipal buildings or reducing our consumption of energy. Every small step counts.

Winterswijk is a municipality that is proud of its border region. We therefore like to cooperate with our German colleagues to achieve our goals in the field of sustainability. Europe in miniature, as we like to call it. Working together in the region is important to address the cross-border challenges of sustainability. We have already achieved much by joining forces and we remain committed to a sustainable future.

We live with our German neighbors, share experiences and learn from each other on cross-border issues. The Grenzhoppers network has been making a major contribution to this for years, including when it comes to the realization of European goals. More and more often Landräte and mayors are explicitly instructed by their councils to be active across borders or in Europe.

Whoever wants to achieve something locally must think internationally. The EUREGIO in which we find ourselves is a member of the AEBR, the Association of European Border Regions. It's an organization that discusses border obstacles in Europe and works on solutions step by step. Hierbij hebben we al verschillende keren gebruik gemaakt van het medium b-solutions. b-solutions is a pilot initiative to tackle legal and administrative border obstacles along EU internal land borders. It is promoted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) and managed by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) as one of the actions proposed in the Communication "Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions". The essence of b-solutions is to provide solutions for cross-border obstacles of a legal and administrative nature. This means that border-adjacent municipalities and regions as well as cross-border entities have the chance to submit information about a border-related legal or administrative obstacle they face. Our last border obstacle was the possibility to exchange renewable energy with our German neighbors. Of course, there is a long way to go until we might be able to exchange energy across borders, but we are still looking for possibilities.

One of the tasks I get to perform as a member of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) is participating in the Dutch delegation to the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states and assessing the application of the European Charter of local self-government. Cooperation with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe promotes consultation and political dialogue between national governments and local and regional authorities as the voice of Europe's municipalities and regions.

As of March this year, I have the honor of being a member of the Covenant of Mayors in support of Europe's leadership and ambition to become the first climate neutral continent. Cities and partners committed to the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy share a long-term vision to combat climate change. Together, we are working towards a low-emission and climate-resilient future and I am proud to be part of this network.

While thinking big and cooperating in international networks we should never forget one major aspect. Initiatives are only successful if they are launched bottom-up.

Cooperation with residents and entrepreneurs in this is very important. They have an important role in making our municipality more sustainable and we therefore want to involve them in our projects and initiatives. As a municipality, we are committed to stimulating and supporting sustainability, for example by providing subsidies and sharing knowledge and expertise. But we cannot do it alone. We need the help of our residents and entrepreneurs to achieve sustainability goals.

Participation is crucial if we want to achieve our goals. We need to listen to our residents' concerns and ideas and make sure they are involved in the process. This can mean involving residents in policy development or supporting them in making their own homes more sustainable.

I am proud of the steps we have already taken in our province, but certainly also in Winterswijk and the entire Achterhoek region, in the area of sustainability and working on the realization of the SDG's. At the same time, there is still a long way to go before 2030.

Let's keep thinking big, but at the same time do small.

Thank you.