

## **Navigating the Complexities of Municipal Community Real Estate Management: Ensuring Coherence Across Programs, Functions, and Stakeholders**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This contribution concerns the province of Drenthe in the Netherlands, focusing on four municipalities in the southeast of Drenthe where real estate vacancy is a top priority of ministers and interested parties. This study introduces questions, ideas and solutions. The municipalities are developing and are responsible for the developments in the field of economic developments, community real estate, vacancy and reallocation. But what is the uniting force? The skill in managing community real estate lies in asking questions and having patience with answers. Answers may develop by asking questions and entering into the dialogue with the community. Municipalities are continually attempting to establish a balance between the opportunities of interested parties and those of themselves. A balance between public values, legitimacy and organization (capacity). Einstein discovered surprising answers because of the many questions he asked. Always asking questions stimulates personal knowledge, expertise and skills. Just like sailors running a tight ship who are always on the lookout for wind and currents. The study in economic developments, community real estate, vacancy and reallocation was carried out by the readership for Community Real Estate with 77 professionals in four municipalities with a total population of 195,000 and a surface area of approximately 1,200 square kilometers, comparable to the province of Utrecht.

**KEYWORDS:** municipals, entrepreneurship, reallocation, public value

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Reallocation of real estate is a uniting force for the maintenance and reinforcement of a vital rural area, city or village. Sometimes we do not realize sufficiently that the dynamics of buildings is different than several years ago. The demands are changing faster than the circulation of a building. The decreasing population and economic growth cause changes in the scale and size of real estate vacancy. The supply of vacant buildings exceeds the demand. Vacant buildings are no longer just farms, residences and village shops, but also town halls, schools, post offices and libraries require a replacement function. In addition, there are insufficient funds available to maintain buildings. As a result, vacancy is becoming a more prominent factor in the image of cities and villages, and thus automatically in the spatial quality of Drenthe. People are worried and they want to do something about this.

We have observed that it is becoming more important to gain insight into the process of vacancy and reallocation. Having expertise of the various solution variants is essential. Applying both theory and practice, we are looking for answers to this community task. A blueprint is not required, but tools will help us take the right steps. We are looking for examples that have worked well so that we may learn from those, but most of all we want to find answers to the concrete questions of municipalities.

This makes reallocating real estate a difficult task. Not only because of demographic and economic reasons, but also because the participating parties have varying interests. This article describes our initial findings in exploring the question of vacancy and reallocation. The province of Drenthe takes its responsibility and has cooperated with the municipalities to investigate what contribution we might offer to this process. Reallocation of buildings is crucial for maintaining our rural areas.

### **II. CASE 1: MUNICIPALITY OF BORGER-ODOORN: LEARNING ABOUT SCHOOLS**

In the municipality of Borger-Odoorn the main theme is vacant schools. When a school becomes vacant, the municipality often wonders if they should reallocate the building or if it would be wiser to sell it. In the latter case, selling, the following questions are quick to come up: should the building be made available as it is or should they have a plan for their offer? and what should be done in the mean time?

There are currently four of these buildings on which the municipality should decide, and within five to ten years many schools will join this list as a result of the integral housing policy for schools. The main question in Borger-Odoorn is which buildings they want to keep and which they want to sell. The current problems seem to have arisen from not having asked these reflective questions before. Although the municipality has already taken several steps, the challenge remains to reach clear agreements on which buildings to keep or sell, including reasons why. People often reason that, if the municipality already has the building, there is no point in selling it. This mindset is a problem that the municipality wants to solve.

The schools in the municipality of Borger-Odoorn are not all located in monumental buildings or buildings that enhance the municipality's image. There are many vacant school buildings that are standard buildings. Since selling is currently quite problematic, the question rises as to what the financial and economic possibilities are of the building. This financial-economic question hangs above the municipalities like the executioner's axe. The financial calculation they could make is the annual vacancy expenses times the expected vacancy duration. They could decrease the price of the building by the result of that calculation, which in turn allows them to decrease the market price. Demolition may in some cases be an option. The advantage of that is that the municipality will not have any further annual (operation) expenses.

What the municipalities want to know is how they can give a function to vacant buildings and what market position these buildings would then have.

Another scenario is that vacant or soon-to-be vacant buildings that are in technically good shape still prove to be impossible to sell. An investor may be interested, but he would want something in return. The question that the municipality of Borger-Odoorn should ask itself is how to deal with the function of the building. Should it remain a school? Or is it possible to change its function? The goal of this is to interest other parties in the object by expanding and showing the opportunities. This allows you as a municipality to approach the market more actively rather than assuming a reactive attitude.

But what should the municipality do if they expect that a vacant building will not be sold within the next five years? The municipality of Borger-Odoorn have not yet decided on that. Vacancy is financially undesirable, but the technical state, too, reduces quickly if the building is not used. Making the premises available for anti-squat housing would be an option. This should not be seen as a source of income, but rather as an interim solution to prevent deterioration.

The municipality does not have the goal to keep the buildings, nor to create more public areas. Another question for the municipality, then, is what they do wish to accomplish, what they need for that and how this relates to the current property. The difference between those uses is the task of the municipality of Borger-Odoorn.

The question then rises what action should be taken when a building is sold. Will it be maintained or should it be demolished? Experience shows that when clearly announcing a predetermined closing date and/or demolition date of the building, people come to the fore to prevent this. That way municipalities can essentially legitimise the demand of the community. If no one comes forward, the interest is apparently insufficient and the municipality could sell or demolish the building.

So far the discussion has been limited to the separate objects themselves. Another and/or additional way of viewing facilities is to map the facility demand of the entire municipality for the next five to ten years. By creating an overview it can be decided which facilities to maintain and which to close in various locales in the municipality.

A question that seems to keep returning is how the municipality should act in case a school becomes vacant: what is the correct order of the options that should be considered, and by extension the corresponding decisions? A note may formulate a framework surrounding real estate, but you cannot plan for everything.

### Lessons learnt

- It remains a challenge to make clear statements on the maintenance or selling of real estate and why. People often reason that since the municipality already has the building, why sell it? This mindset is a problem that the municipality wants to solve.
- The trick is to interest other parties for an object by expanding the possibilities and to actually show those.
- What do we want to achieve, what do we need for that and how does that relate to the current use?
- Experience shows that when announcing a predetermined closing and/or demolition of a building, people will come to the fore to prevent this.

### III. CASE 2: MUNICIPALITY OF COEVORDEN: LEARNING ABOUT ORGANISATION

Currently many departments of the municipality of Coevorden have their own real estate. Although people are convinced that everyone handles their real estate properly, centralizing real estate management might increase control even more. A first step could be to centrally coordinate from a financial-economic perspective the 28 FTEs that are currently distributed among all departments and all teams related to real estate. Currently the base company is confronted (too) often with policy decisions. Professionalizing may create a healthy opposing force. Real estate departments are able to give advice right from the start, whether it has been requested or not. This instigates a discussion on financial and community profits: what is the value and how does that relate to what you can do?

The municipality of Coevorden has indicated that it wants to professionalize, but they do not yet have a vision of how they could realize that for a municipality of their size. Professionalizing real estate management in the municipality only relates on a secondary level to municipality size: the primary goal is to professionalize one's approach. There is no blueprint for that, precisely because every municipality is different. If professionalizing has been given a shape, it can be followed up by the discussion on the FTEs and the further composition of the formation.

When looking at the various levels on which real estate management can be organized (strategically, tactically, operationally), the operational aspect is usually suitable for outsourcing. The strategic and tactical levels often end up in the portfolio management. This knowledge can be used to plan the organization. According to the municipality the strategic, tactical and operational issues are currently (too) intermingled. A vision should be used to determine what professionalizing real estate management should do for the municipality. It should be the focus to increase cooperation (from multiple disciplines) to approach real estate issues.

Discussion has also been taking place in the municipality of Coevorden on which facilities and objects they should want to maintain and which they want to sell. They have indicated to only be able to make this decision responsibly when they have an overview of what they have and what the vacancy expectations are. In addition, they should also consider which premises the municipality wants to keep for the future and which they believe are less important for that. This might have the consequence that the planning capacity for certain areas has to be downgraded, and the municipality should not be afraid to do so if it is required. However, this does lead to the requirement of a greater focus on programmes and areas rather than single objects. If the municipality controls programmes, they may be able to adjust scarcity levels and maintain objects that might be in demand in the future. It is important to formulate programmes, functions, goals and ambitions in order to bind and interest people for the area. However, if establishing growth in one area means a worsening in the situation in another area, it would not be a good decision. That is why knowledge of the programmes is important.

The town centre of Coevorden also requires attention. The centre is the place where everything used to happen. Currently entrepreneurs are often relocating to the edges of the town, causing the centre to become vacant. The municipality of Coevorden believes that this issue requires a broader approach utilizing multiple policy areas. These policy areas are currently focusing too much on their own area. The municipality wants to strive towards a greater coherence in programmes, functions and people.

The questions relevant to the municipality of Coevorden mainly concern the organization of municipal real estate. A task discussion should be held in this regard: who does what and how many people are required for that? A first step would be to make an inventory of the number of FTEs currently employed for managing real estate and where these people currently are in the organization. After that, the question of what the college and the board should know needs to be addressed: who takes or will take final responsibility and how the real estate portfolio is organized. That information can be used to propose a (re)allocation of FTEs and to initiate the

transformation. To create visibility of the results, it is important to keep track annually of how much this new form of organization returns.

In addition to this question, the question remains of what the municipality should do with buildings that will soon be vacant. In what areas does the municipality make policy decisions among itself and how are those decisions translated to a possible real estate company and the portfolio? Enschede might provide a good example for the introduction of a structural meeting so that everyone can understand everyone else on a policy level.

#### **Lessons learnt**

- The primary goal is to professionalize the approach, and there is no blueprint for that.
- When professionalizing real estate management, the focus should be on approaching real estate issues from multiple disciplines.
- The consideration should be made of which buildings the municipality wants to maintain and which they believe are less important for the future.
- The focus should shift from single objects to also include programmes and areas. When the municipality controls programmes, it might be able to adjust scarcity and maintain objects for which demand may rise in the future.
- The municipality wants to strive towards a greater coherence between programmes, functions and people.

#### **IV. CASE 3: MUNICIPALITY OF AA ENHUNZE: LEARNING ABOUT TAKING A POSITION**

In the municipality of Aa enHunze vacancy is not a problem (yet), but maintenance is. For example, the shopping centre of Gieten has been centralised so that vacancy will begin to dominate the old shopping street. This affects the attractiveness of the village for both inhabitants and visitors. It also affects the safety of the place. Considering those issues, it might definitely be a problem. Aa enHunze is aware that they should take steps on a regional level, and has actually been doing so. For example, they have contacts with other municipalities concerning internal management and dealing with vacant schools. However, the municipality of Aa enHunze still believes that there are more steps to take. Many problems are shared problems.

One of the problems for the municipality of Aa enHunze is that there are a number of small multi-functional centers (MFC) where one party drops out. As a result, the business case of the building is no longer complete. It is often difficult to complete it again because it is hard to find a suitable fellow user. It was considered to initiate constructions to combine private and community use: why could someone not live in a school? This stimulates the creativity that, within certain bounds, should be given free rein. Organizing such a private-public combination is very precise work.

In addition to investigating just the business case of a single MFC, we can also approach this with a focus on the area. An example of this is the Kulturhus in Borne: a board was installed there to protect the entire Kulturhus rather than any of the separate units. This grants the Kulturhus more freedom to reorganize operation and, say, letting units commercially. One could wonder how far municipalities want to go in that and which conditions should apply.

Back to the example of the partially emptying MFC: would there be a commercial or private candidate who wants to rent part of the school? Especially in depopulating municipalities this seems to be a problem. Sometimes you have to be creative and take rigorous steps. For example, the municipality of Nijmegen demolished several schools and replaced them with a single building to realize savings. The difficulty in this, however, is estimating the space required in the future. That actually applies to the entire portfolio. What happens in 10 years? That is roughly the financial horizon concerned here. The question that follows is whether it can be done differently and how that should look. The difficulty in this is that the political horizon is different from the financial horizon.

The financial issue, however, is only one side of the story. The other side is that the municipality of Aa enHunze also focuses quite extensively on the livability of the area. If they would consider only financial issues, the choices would not be as complicated. What does livability mean? Not every village should have an MFC. The facilities should suit the lifestyle and the corresponding needs of the inhabitants of the village. In order to determine needs, it is essential to know how particular villages work.

Another problem is that real estate is still considered ‘sexy’: there are multiple reasons that developing new buildings is still more interesting than reusing vacant spaces. This can also be observed in Gieten: a school plans to construct emergency classrooms while there is a vacant building just a couple of hundred meters away. In addition to the attractiveness of new buildings, there is also a large chance that multiple interests are involved that do not improve the utilization of the vacant building. It would be good if various directors and stakeholders would discuss the issue in order to define shared interests.

As a municipality, you could also assume a principled attitude. ‘No new buildings will be constructed’, full stop. As long as there are vacant buildings, those buildings should be utilized first. After all, new buildings will probably be vacant soon, since depopulation is expected, so why build new units? Another principled attitude may be to give vacant buildings a certain term within which they should be reutilized and if that fails, they will be demolished. Being consistent seems important, and perhaps it is not bad in this municipality to legitimize the demand from the community in such a way.

When asked about the vision of real estate, accommodation policy or livability, the room remained silent. There seems to be a vision, but apparently it is not very active in the minds of the municipality employees. A vision should contain starting points to decide on, say, schools that are soon closing their doors. A vision is important to discuss these matters among each other, to draw comparisons and to explain decisions. The organization of real estate management is highly decentralized with this municipality. In addition, they seem to adopt a reactive stance: if something needs to be sold, the right people take actions, but there is no vision for preventing and anticipating vacancy. Involvement of both the board and the political organization is crucial for this.

### Lessons learnt

- Why can’t we just combine private and community use in one object?’
- To determine the demand for facilities it is important to know how the villages are organized.
- In addition to the attractiveness of a new building, there is a large chance that multiple interests are involved that hamper the utilization of vacant buildings. It would be nice to organize a meeting with the various directors/stakeholders to define a common interest.
- As a municipality you can also assume a principled attitude. ‘No new buildings will be constructed’, full stop.
- Being consistent seems important, and perhaps it is not bad in this municipality to legitimize the demand from the community in such a way.
- When designing a vision for preventing and anticipating vacancy, the involvement of both the board and the political organization is crucial.

## V. CASE 4: MUNICIPALITY OF EMMEN: LEARNING ABOUT ANTICIPATING

The municipality of Emmen, and especially the city centre, struggles with the question of whether they should attempt to manage vacancy. For example, usually it is known for quite some time that a building will become vacant. Currently the municipality often responds only when the building has actually become vacant: you cannot start arranging issues before that even though the vacancy was long anticipated. The current dynamic requires a quick response. The municipality is aware that they should move along with the current. Is that which happened yesterday still relevant today? As a governmental organisation this sometimes goes slower than people would like. In addition, clear decisions are needed: why do you do what you do and what is in the best interest of the community?

The question that the municipality asks themselves is whether they actually do want everything to just happen or whether they want to establish a concentration of functions. However, the latter is quite difficult in practice. Cooperation with market parties is definitely an option, but it is difficult to organise in practice. In addition, there is also the ‘political reality’ to consider: many different interests may be involved, so sometimes a decision is taken to which the rest should adapt.

If action should be taken to effect reallocation in the centre, the next challenge is to determine the new function of the building. Living seems to become less and less interesting, although that does not apply to the older target demographic. Among them, the need for a combination of living and healthcare is essential. More specifically, there is a demand for housing (and/or apartments) in which people can live on their own but with the option to purchase healthcare facilities when they need. Elderly like to live in the centre: it is close to myriad facilities and the atmosphere is fun and lively. The role of the municipality in this issue could be to be an active guide, to be aware of the problems and issues, and to know the various interests, including the interests of the building



owners. Then one could consider to establish a plan and thus determining which initiatives to support. It is essential that municipality employees are backed by the municipality when they address certain issues. The municipality of Emmen clearly needs frameworks within which they can approach these issues. These frameworks should be widely supported if the aim is to have the processes take place successfully.

This broad support should take the shape of quickly established internal processes so that the municipality can anticipate more appropriately and respond faster to (looming) vacancy and/or other current issues. It is important to keep track of the current situation in order to find problematic areas in the process and to see how these can be prevented or at least limited.

Currently all votes are equal: every discipline has an interest, so clear decisions are sometimes absent. It might be a good idea to have that process managed by someone who serves the general purpose. Someone who makes decisions based on that general purpose. Political backing is again paramount for this.

Meeting with multiple parties to discuss in this capacity various cases does happen in Emmen. Numerous bodies have been established to collaborate on certain issues. However, it is not clear to everyone what these bodies deliver or have to deliver. Streamlining (information) processes seems to be an important issue in Emmen.

#### **Lessons learnt**

- The current dynamic requires a quick response: is that which happened yesterday still relevant today?
- Clear decisions are required: why do you do what you do and what is in the interest of the community?
- It is essential that employees of the municipality are supported politically to address certain issues.
- We need frameworks.
- Broad support should be utilised to smoothly establish internal processes so that the municipality is able to anticipate better and respond faster to (looming) vacancy and/or other current issues.
- Every discipline has its own interests: install someone who serves the general purpose and bases his/her decisions on that general purpose.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS: ACTING CONSISTENTLY**

The tour of the four municipalities has shown us that these municipalities need to learn about schools, organizing, taking a position and anticipating on community real estate and its context. This is a conclusion that fits the original commission of the province of Drenthe, which attempts to organize discussions on content that exceed single domains in and between municipalities. Addressing the issues of community real estate, vacancy, reallocation and economy from a multidisciplinary approach creates a new understanding, including possible solutions that may differ from project to project and from area to area. What the municipalities have in common is that the core issue is learning in a new reality through coherence in programmes, functions and in people.

The tour of the four municipalities has led to the following conclusions. Municipalities wonder what they want to achieve when it comes to the community, what they need for that and how this relates to the current property. In addition, there is no clarity as to the financial and community value of this for the municipality compared to what the municipalities can do. This requires a consideration of which buildings the municipality wants to keep and which they believe are less vital for the future. When designing a vision on preventing and anticipating vacancy, the involvement of both the board and its ministers and the governmental organization is crucial. A parallel can be drawn between the coherent relations of these three parties and the model by Mark Moore (1995). Acting consistently seems to be important in order to legitimize the demand from the community.

#### **Limitations reveal the master**

What is the demand from the community? In order to determine, say, the demand for current and potential facilities, it is important to know how the villages are organized: which people are living where and what do they want? If the facility demand is known, what is the best follow-up step to take: a new building or a multi-functional centre? When combining multiple functions into one building the issue is not just working in one building, but also – perhaps even more so – utilizing the advantages of synergy. Improving synergy by working together for everyone's sake and the sake of the community as a whole. That is why it would be good to organize a meeting with the various directors and stakeholders in advance to define a common interest.

When the common interests are clear, it is still a challenge to make clear decisions on keeping or selling real estate and the reasons why. Do not reason that, if the municipality already has the building, it is best to just keep it. This mindset is a problem that municipalities want to solve by basing their thinking and actions on demand rather than supply. Experience shows that when a predetermined closing and/or demolition of a building is announced, people will come to the fore to stop it. The trick is to interest and mobilize other parties for the

object, for example by expanding the options and actually promoting this. Municipalities could also assume a principled attitude: 'no new buildings will be constructed', full stop. Limitations reveal the master.

### Coherence in programmes, functions and in people

Another question you could ask yourself is this: why can't municipalities combine private and community purposes in a single object? There may be opportunities here for an achievable, sustainable operating result. You do need to consider how far you can and want to take this and which conditions should apply. A test may be carried out to establish frameworks. Every exception proves the rule, but ensure that entrepreneurship is the top priority within the frameworks established.

The four municipalities certainly strive towards professionalizing their real estate management. In addition, they want to address real estate issues together from multiple disciplines. They should focus more on programmes and areas rather than single objects. If the municipalities can control programmes, they might be able to adjust scarcity levels and maintain objects for which the demand is expected to rise. The municipalities want to strive towards a greater coherence of programmes, functions and people. This is the most important conclusion of this case study of four municipalities

## VII. REFERENCES

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### About the participants

The meeting below shows who was present. The meetings are organized in order of the date on which they took place. At the bottom are the speakers and organizers who contributed to the course, with their contact details. Joint start in Borger, January 9, 2014

Marco Out	Major	Municipal Borger Odoorn
Jur Wiersum	Alderman	Municipal Aa en Hunze
Ruud Wilting	Alderman	Municipal Coevorden
Bas Dijkema	Policy advisor living & demography	Province Drenthe
Bonnie Kiers	Policy advisorspace	Province Drenthe
Charles Houx	Cultural history policy	Municipal Aa en Hunze
Dick Haandrikman	Public Housing	Municipal Aa en Hunze
Dennis Mous	Chairman	Foundation Restruijnte
Edo Jans	Economic Business	Municipal Aa en Hunze
Gerrie Ruitenber	Ground Issues	Municipal Borger Odoorn
Henk Gortmake	Strategic policy advisor space	Municipal Coevorden
Hermie Rijkens	Coordinator of cultural heritage	Libau
Ineke den Hollander	Policy officer cultural history	Municipal Coevorden
Jaap Scholtens	Policy officer accommodation policy	Municipal Coevorden
Jack Brandsma	Board Member	Foundation Restruijnte
Jan Dirk Huising	Policy officer urban planning	Municipal Emmen
Jelle Langeland	Policy officer heritage	Province Drenthe
Jeroen Klaassen	Planeconomie	Municipal Coevorden
John Hofsteenge	Trainee	Municipal Coevorden
Kirsten Klasen	Policy employee living	Municipal Coevorden
Luit Hummel	Project coordinator	Foundation BOKD
Marcus Petstra	Board Member	Foundation Restruijnte
Martin Broers	City secretary	Municipal Coevorden
Merijn Wienk	Advisor monumentaal real estate	Libau
Michiel Sportel	Policy officer RO and ground company	Municipal Coevorden
Petra Brant	Social Services	Municipal Aa en Hunze
Piet Flap	Project manager	Municipal Aa en Hunze

Rene Jonkman	Manager qualityand control	MunicipalCoevorden
Ruud Dorenbos	Senior project manager	Platform31

**MunicipalBorger Odoorn, January 29, 2014**

Jacob Bruintjes	Alderman
Dirkjan Haan	Economic affairs and tourism
Gerrie Ruitenberg	Ground issues
Harmen Post	spatial planning
Henk Brink	spatial planning
Jaap Gorseling	Project Core and Framework
Jan Hermes	Urban design and culture
Theo Sieling	Public real estate
Wietze van der Harst	SocialHousing

**Municipal Coevorden, February 6, 2014**

Bert Bouwmeester	Major
Ruud Wilting	Alderman
Geert Roeles	Alderman
Henk Gortmaker	Strategic policy advisor space
Ineke den Hollander	Policy officer cultural history
Jaap Scholtens	Policy officer accommodation policy
Jeroen Klaassen	Planeconome
Kirsten Klasen	Policy officer living
Rene Jonkman	Manager qualityand control l

**Municipal Aa en Hunze, February 13, 2014**

Jur Wiersum	Alderman
Annemarie de Groot	Libau
Bas Dijkema	Policy advisor living & demography Province of Drenthe
Charles Houx	Policy culturalhistory
Det Plat	Groundisssues
Dick Haandrikman	Socialhousing
Edo Jans	Economic Business
Mimoent Benali	Trainee Province Drenthe
Petra Brant	Social services
Piet Flap	Project manager
Robert Olde Benneker	Department controller

**MunicipalEmmen, March6, 2014**

Dennis Mous	accommodation policy
Jan Dirk Huizing	director vacancy
Nico van Amerongen	graduate vacancy retail
Martijn Prent	accommodation policy and vacancy
Frans Hardenberg	Real estateandground issues
Erik Keulen	Real estate manager
Lisa Schuitema	graduateprovince Drenthe
Jelle Langeland	policy employee heritage province Drenthe