



DUTCH  
SAFETY BOARD

# Summary

## Monster truck accident Haaksbergen



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On 28 September 2014, the AutoMotorSportief 2014 event took place in Haaksbergen, closing with a monster truck stunt show. What should have been an exciting finale to the yearly event, instead ended in a horrific tragedy, with the monster truck ploughing into a crowd of spectators, killing three people and injuring 28 others.

The Dutch Safety Board launched an investigation following the accident, focusing specifically on the event permit granted for the event. The issuance of the permit by the government is an important guarantee that the event organiser understands and can manage the risks. Shortfalls in these permits or the manner in which they are granted put public safety at risk.

The Public Prosecutor is investigating the technical circumstances of the accident as part of a criminal investigation into the driver of the monster truck. The results of the investigation were still pending at the time of publication of this report.

The Dutch Safety Board believes that the granting of an event permit is a safety-critical process. If the issuing authorities fail to set clear safety standards for the applicant to adhere to, they effectively abandon their responsibility for public safety. In the case of the AutoMotorSportief 2014 event permit, the Municipality of Haaksbergen did not act according to the safety-critical nature of this process, giving it too little attention. None of the parties involved in the granting of the permit assessed in any detail the specific risks associated with a monster truck stunt show.

As promoter of the stunt show performer, the event organiser failed to identify the risks associated with the stunt show. Because the organiser did not know the risks, he could not determine whether, and under what conditions he found the risks acceptable.

The company that performed the stunt show allowed it to be carried out while the margin for error by the driver or technical failure of the vehicle was very slim. All of this has led the Dutch Safety Board to conclude that the company had little knowledge of the risks associated with its own activities, or did not consider itself responsible for identifying and/or managing these risks.

The mayor and permitting officials failed to take cognisance of the specific content of the AutoMotorSportief 2014 event. This made it impossible for the municipality to fulfil its regulatory duty, which is to impose such requirements on the permit as may be necessary to ensure adequate management of the risks associated with the monster truck stunt show. Since no requirements were set, none could be enforced by oversight officials either.

The Dutch Safety Board concludes that the issuance of the permit for the AutoMotorSportief 2014 did not contribute to the safe performance of the final part of the

programme. This was due to a lack of vigilance on the part of the municipal organisation of Haaksbergen and the lack of necessary knowledge and expertise to identify and assess the risks.

The causes for the lack of vigilance are, according to the Dutch Safety Board, due to the permitting authorities' lack of understanding of their responsibilities, the involved parties' perception that the event was low-risk, a limited ability for learning in the municipal organisation, and the lack of sufficient involvement by the management and mayor. More in general, the permitting process in any municipality is at risk of being marginalised as a result of pressure to allow events to go on as scheduled and thus to cause the least possible inconvenience to businesses and the broader community. This pressure could turn the permitting process into an administrative procedure that does not allow room for a critical assessment as to whether the organiser has the ability to control the risks. These risk factors are not unique to the Municipality of Haaksbergen. The Dutch Safety Board believes that they could affect the quality of the event permitting process in many more municipalities.

The identification and management of risks requires knowledge and expertise. The investigation shows that the availability or limited availability of knowledge and expertise is an issue that plagues many more cities than Haaksbergen alone. The Dutch Safety Board concludes that access to the necessary knowledge and expertise to identify and assess risks constitutes a vulnerability for the event permitting process. Four factors contribute to this: the limited ability of organisers to oversee and control their risks, the lack of adoption of such knowledge and expertise among permitting authorities, bottlenecks in the mobilisation of knowledge, and the lack of a proper knowledge-sharing infrastructure.

# CONSIDERATION

Events do not revolve around safety concerns. They are primarily designed to be fun and festive and to contribute to viable, economically healthy local communities. Safety is a precondition. Thus, the Dutch Safety Board does not believe that municipalities and their mayors should seek to rule out every risk. The mayor must instead make an informed decision, weighing the safety risks against other interests associated with events.

Such informed considerations were, in fact, lacking in the case of the AutoMotorSportief 2014 event. The mayor, as the competent authority, and the permitting officials in Haaksbergen did not take cognisance of the contents of the event and, as such, had no knowledge of the risks associated with the monster truck stunt show and were unable to consider the interests referred to above. The safety instructions stated on the permit, including the much talked about '10-metre distance rule', are included without taking cognisance of the contents of the event, and bear, at most, an incidental relationship with the risks that had to be controlled. The municipality therefore failed to fulfil its role as the guardian of public safety.



Figure 1: Monster truck stunt show. (Source: National Police)

Citizens should be protected from dangers they cannot arm themselves against. The responsibility for providing this protection rests first and foremost with the individuals that create such dangers. Event organisers and their suppliers must therefore understand and be able to manage the risks inherent to their activities. But a significant responsibility for protecting public safety also rests with the government. When balancing interests, it should determine the level of protection that must be provided for citizens and ensure that it is actually provided. Event permitting should also be considered in this light. A mayor has the legal responsibility to determine whether and under what conditions an

event can take place without compromising public safety. He must also enforce compliance with those conditions. The event permit is an important tool in this regard.

When the government drops the ball on event permitting, it shifts responsibility for public safety to the organisers, who cannot be entrusted with this responsibility in all cases. Either because they do not have sufficient risk control capabilities or because they rely on suppliers who do not prove worthy of their trust. Event permitting can therefore be viewed as a safety-critical process that requires a vigilant commitment by all parties concerned, as well as adequate knowledge and skills. This investigation shows that such vigilance was lacking in Haaksbergen and that other municipalities are also vulnerable in this regard.

The Dutch Safety Board realises that vigilance is not something that lends itself to organising easily and that mayors and officials are exposed to all kinds of incentives that undermine vigilance and critical attention in the event permitting process. Yet it is essential that they actively determine that an event will not present unacceptable risks to public safety. Although procedures, guidelines and tools may be helpful in that regard, they are far from sufficient. Permits are granted by people on the basis of craftsmanship, administrative and otherwise. The parties concerned must therefore be aware of their responsibility for public safety in relation to other interests, and act accordingly. Ownership is key. It is not about having, but about showing responsibility. That responsibility goes beyond the mere fulfilment of formal duties.

Although the primary responsibility for managing risks rests with the individual responsible for creating the risks, officials must not simply rely on what the permit applicant chooses to tell them. Mayors must not give an unqualified mandate for processing applications for event permits and must actively monitor how their mandate is complied with.

The relationship between government and citizen is changing. The government takes a step back while citizens, supported by developments in digital communication, take more and faster initiative to personally organise events. This poses new challenges for the municipality, if it does not want to be overtaken by events. The municipality must increasingly take a proactive approach to ensuring public safety at events. The vigilance that was lacking in Haaksbergen will only grow in importance.

This requires municipalities to invest in their event permitting process. Mayors must seek support from their local city councils for a clear political mandate and from their executive board for the people and the resources. Permitting is a core regulatory task, even though it is generally under the political radar. The essential responsibility of the government, i.e. guaranteeing the safety of its citizens, must not turn into an administrative task, especially in times of scarcity. Permitting requires active verification. In other words, a municipality, and especially the mayor, must maintain a vigilant approach and apply a thorough knowledge of issues to proactively verify whether citizens at an event will be adequately protected from dangers they cannot arm themselves against. If municipalities fail to do so, then permitting has no added value and it merely creates an illusion of safety.

# LESSONS FROM THE INVESTIGATION

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From this investigation four lessons can be learned that enable municipalities in the Netherlands to strengthen the safety-critical nature of the event permitting process. These lessons aim to empower officials to pay due attention to matters of risk and risk management when drafting an event permit, rather than altering the framework of rules and regulations which is, in the opinion of the Dutch Safety Board, adequate in most regards. Seen that the human agent involved in issuing an event permit is decisive in the effectiveness of said permit, it is of the utmost importance to create and maintain the proper circumstances for them to exercise their duties.

The four lessons are:

- Position the mayor as the 'owner' of the event permitting process
- Upgrade the profession of permit issuing official
- Improve the opportunities for permit issuing officials to share knowledge and expertise
- Improve the ability of event organisers to identify and manage safety risks

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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This investigation has led the Dutch Safety Board to conclude that event permitting is a safety-critical process. The process in Haaksbergen is shown to have some shortcomings. The Dutch Safety Board therefore puts forth the following recommendation:

## **To the Executive Board of the Municipality of Haaksbergen**

Organise the granting of event permits as a safety-critical process where the mayor (or the officials acting on his behalf) actively verifies that the event organiser is cognisant of the risks and can manage them without compromising public safety. Invest in the knowledge and skills of officials tasked with granting permits. Explicitly position the mayor as 'owner' and take measures to allow him to continuously monitor the quality of the permitting process. Public safety will be his primary focus.



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