Looking at today’s distinguished audience, I am happy to see that the stress placed on the current financial crisis does not prevent taking a longer term view on economic development, in which infrastructure investments play a key role, as advocated recently by the report “Infrastructures: time to invest” of the Dutch think tank WRR (wetenschappelijke raad voor het regeringsbeleid), the scientific council for government policy.

Actually, infrastructure projects could benefit in a timely manner from the recovery plans being formulated by the European countries and the European Commission. The French President, Mr. Sarkozy, should announce next Thursday the details of the French recovery plan, which should ultimately comprise a list of priority projects and actions, including a component that our Minister for ecology, energy and sustainable development, Mr. Jean-Louis Borloo, labelled recently “green Keynesianism”. Seine-Nord project should definitely be a prime candidate for benefiting from this initiative.

The promotion of “greener” transport alternatives, like fluvial navigation, to road haulage, in the context of increasingly saturated conventional transport networks, is becoming a dominant paradigm of recent transport policies in our countries, and that’s one of the reasons why the Seine-Nord project received at its inception, a few years ago, a benevolent attention from the former Dutch Minister of Transport, Mrs. Karla Peijs, who continues to support the project in its new capacity as coordinator of inland waterways on behalf of the European commission: the Seine-Nord project is one of the 30 priority transport projects of the TransEuropean Network, and has received a financing pledge from the European Commission for an amount of 383 million euros.

Indeed, the Seine-Nord project has an European dimension, being the missing link allowing the great Paris and Nord-Pas-de-Calais catchments to be connected to the 20 000 kms of inland waterways extending to the Rhine, the Danube and the Black Sea. The project will therefore enable the Seine-Scheldt link to be completed and this justify the involvement of the French government, the Wallony and Flanders Region, with the support of the Netherlands, in the governance of the project for which the Intergovernmental Commission should be put in place in the coming months, followed suit by the creation of an European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG).

I strongly believe that this project will entail opportunities for the development of the freight flows from the 7 maritime ports of the Le Havre – Rotterdam range (60 % of the European trade with the rest of the world) to the Hinterland. It could also benefit in the future from the Carex (Cargo Rail Express) project launched by Roissy Charles de Gaulle and Liège Airports to create multimodal platforms with high-speed cargo rail to connect with London, Cologne, Francfort, Brussels, Amsterdam and Lyon, as well as from the first quadrimodal platform in Europe to be developed around Cambrai.

I welcome today’s event which occur after significant developments this year showing the commitment of the French government for the success of the Seine-Nord project:
- the declaration of public utility has been signed last September by the French Prime Minister, Mr. Fillon,
- the project is part of the 2009 finance law for its inscription to the budget of the French Agency for the financing of transport infrastructures (AFITF), and the financing protocols with the French local governments, regions and departments, are in the process of being signed.

Today’s event main objective was to mobilize Dutch private companies for the call for proposals that should be launched at the very beginning of next year, to initiate the competitive dialog process. I would like to stress the importance perceived by the project sponsors to benefit from world-class expertise, be it architecture, engineering or civil works, and Dutch companies may have their word to say when it comes to build waterways!

Last but not least, I would like to thanks the Dutch Ministry of transport for its continued support as well as the Port of Rotterdam, and look forward for an increased cooperation between our two countries for the success of this project and the development of business ties around it, in particular to structure logistics activities along this high capacity waterway link.