

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Report to the Flemish Parliament

#### ***Spartacus line 1 (Hasselt-Maastricht) - Substantiation of the choice for a trambus***

*With the Spartacus plan, initially designed as three express tram lines and connecting bus and express bus lines, the Flemish Transport Company 'The Line' in 2004 wanted to make public transport in the province of Limburg a fully-fledged alternative to the car in ten years' time. Between May 2020 and June 2022, the Flemish Government decided not to use an express tram, but a trambus for all lines, based on feasibility, cost prices and flexibility, among other things. Flemish Parliament asked the Court of Audit to investigate the decision-making and substantiation of the choice for a trambus for line 1. The Court concluded that the supporting comparative study was properly carried out, but that successive decisions have nullified the original ambitions of the Spartacus plan.*

#### **Spartacus plan**

The Line's Spartacus plan would initially include three express tram lines and connecting bus and express bus lines, which would bring strong passenger growth by 2015 and make public transport in Limburg a fully-fledged alternative to the private car. A very important starting point of the plan was the realization of a time node model, which should allow travelers to transfer smoothly. Resistance from the city of Hasselt led to the choice of an alternative route on Hasselt territory, which meant that the time knot model had to be abandoned. The route change would also have a negative impact on the passenger potential and on The Line's transport revenues. In a series of decisions between May 2020 and June 2022, Flemish Government successively chose not to implement lines 2, 3 and 1 with a light rail, but with a trambus, based on feasibility, cost prices and flexibility of the solution, among other things. Line 1 was already ready for tender at that time and The Line had already invested 31 million euros in the light rail solution. Flemish Government opted for a trambus for line 1, referring to a comparative study by the engineering firm Sweco, without explicitly stating why. On July 13, 2022, Flemish Parliament asked the Court of Audit to investigate the decision-making and substantiation of the choice for a trambus for line 1

#### **Substantiating comparative study for line 1**

The Sweco study followed several comparative studies between a light rail and an HPT trambus connection, where HPT stands for high-quality public transport. They all concluded that the advantage of the light rail, especially the excellent connection, would be lost with a trambus, but that the trambus option would be cheaper to build and more flexible to operate. Furthermore this option could be implemented in phases. According to the Court of Audit, the new study assignment was carried out properly, even though time

pressure did not make it possible to analyze alternative scenarios in depth and many uncertainties still remain, for example with regard to eligibility and prices.

### Conclusions of the comparative study for line 1

Based on the criteria of required space (amount of free track), travel time, implementation speed (roughly estimated based on permit eligibility) and primary transport potential, Sweco reduced the scenarios to be compared to three: express tram and trambus on the Boulevard route and trambus over the N2. The engineering office then tested these scenarios against the criteria of effective transport potential, appropriateness of investments already made, and investment and operational costs. Ultimately, the study did not put forward a preferred scenario, but described the most important advantages and disadvantages of the light rail and trambus versions. The light rail scores better in terms of operational costs, implementation speed and usefulness of investments already made; the trambus scores better in terms of investment costs, passengers and travel time. Both modes of transport score similarly in terms of comfort, stops, frequency, amplitude and space consumption.

### Conclusions of the Court of Audit

The Court of Audit concluded that the ambition to give public transport in Limburg a major boost with three express tram lines from Hasselt station has been given up. The time knot model was made impossible by a political agreement. This will lead to longer travel times and a substantial loss of travellers. An important argument for the Flemish Government decision was the rapid feasibility of the HPT trambus, but it is uncertain whether the trambus will have a completely free track in the short or even medium term. In order to meet the principles of Spartacus, it is necessary that the trambus runs all the way up to the Hasselt station, that the trambus has its own track for comfort, speed, safety and punctuality and that leaving the time nodes starting point is compensated by adequate measures. There is currently no certainty about any of these elements.

### Response from the minister

The Flemish Minister of Mobility and Public Works responded on January 5, 2024, that the Flemish Government used the principles of the comparative study in its decision and that its findings are in favour of High-quality Public Transport (trambus).

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### Information for the press

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on the *Spartacus line 1 (Hasselt-Maastricht) - Substantiation of the choice for a trambus* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: [www.courtfaudit.be](http://www.courtfaudit.be).