



Brief History of the Westminster – Paide Partnership

In 1993, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Maryland and Estonia began a robust State Partnership Program, leading up to Estonia's entry into NATO and the European Union. The relationship between Maryland and Estonia has been extremely beneficial to both sides and many experts believe the special relationship between Maryland and Estonia is the model for a successful program. While the State Partnership Program has been primarily focused on military and related security issues, some very productive relationships developed between Maryland and Estonian communities. One such program developed between Westminster, Maryland and Paide, Estonia.

The Westminster – Paide Partner City Program dates back to 2002, when the first exchanges occurred. A written agreement was developed and approved. The agreement addressed five main areas of cooperation: culture, philanthropy, education, business and government. The agreement and cooperation also laid the foundation for the creation of the Westminster – Paide Partner City Fund. The fund is a special purpose fund of the Community Foundation of Carroll County that was created to provide a private revenue source to support Westminster – Paide exchange projects. Contributors can make a tax deductible contribution to the fund under the 501(c)(3) status of the Community Foundation of Carroll County.

In addition to focusing on the five areas of cooperation under the written agreement, Westminster also agreed to pursue a work visa to hire an Estonian citizen to work in Westminster and support the exchange program. A H1B1 visa was obtained for Mari Taalman, who moved to Westminster in early 2003 and worked until later that year when she obtained a Rotary World Scholarship to attend Bradford University in England. One of the major areas of exchange events focused on cultural activities. For example, the Paide Girls Choir visited and performed in Maryland, then Paide hosted the visit of the Children's Chorus of Carroll County to Estonia. Other specific activities included employee swaps, business owners' exchanges, an exchange student studied at Carroll Community College in Westminster and the creation of an "American Corner" in the library in Paide, with the presentation of 759 children and adult books. Overall, a total of 1,759 children and adult books were presented to each each county in Estonia to allow for the creation of an "American Corner" in very jurisdiction.

The prime contact for Westminster has been Thomas Beyard, who has historically worn two hats – one with Westminster government and one with the Maryland National Guard. There have been a number of different contact people in Paide. Due to deployments and related matters, there were fewer exchange activities in recent years, but personal contacts have

remained strong. Those ongoing personal contacts brought some exciting events over the last two years.

In late 2015, a Paide resident made contact with Thomas Beyard and requested local assistance to support the visit of two Estonian youth folk dance groups to Westminster in the Summer of 2016. The request was reviewed and the Westminster – Paide Partner City Fund decided to sponsor the event. On April 2, 2016, at the Culture House in Paide. Estonian folk dancers from the combined groups “Südameke” and “Keerutajad” performed for a group of visitors from the Maryland National Guard and US Embassy in Tallinn to showcase their talents in preparation for their visit to Westminster. Those same folk dancers visited the Westminster area from June 27 – July 5, 2016. The 26 talented young men and women, ages 14-19, plus 10 adults, performed traditional Estonian folk dances in their beautiful national clothes, as well as sang and played musical instruments. They gave a showcase performance in Common Ground on the Hill Evening Concert Series; performed at the Rotary Ampitheater at Carroll Community College and performed at the Old Fashioned 4th of July Festival at the Carroll County Farm Museum. The group’s favorite performance was for Airmen of the 175th Wing in the Maintenance Hangar at Warfield Air National Guard base. The video of their performance was watched over 41,000 times online. They also visited the City of Westminster, Ocean City, Baltimore Inner Harbor and Towson University.

In the Summer of 2017, a group of four Estonian young men and women from last year’s group, plus one adult, visited Westminster from July 2 - 14, 2017 to teach Estonian folk dance and culture at Common Ground on the Hill, a summer cultural festival at McDaniel College in Westminster. They also performed for a large group of Soldiers and Airmen at Fifth Regiment Armory in Baltimore, plus at the Carroll County Farm Museum on July 4th and 8th, 2017. In October of 2017, Maryland Lieutenant Governor Boyd Rutherford visited Estonia and spent a day in Paide. While there, he toured the largest bakery in Estonia and present a small donation from the Westminster – Paide Partner City Fund to the local church to support the renovation of a historical pipe organ.

In the Spring of 2018, the first exchange activity was the Paide Civic Leader Visit from May 10-16, 2018. Attendees included Paide Mayor Pritt Värk, Council Chairman Aivar Tubli and City Architect Marje-Ly Rebas. They interacted with City of Westminster officials, visited the Downtown Flower Show and Jazz Festival, met with Maryland Lieutenant Governor Boyd Rutherford at the State House, as well as attended a Mayor and Council meeting and Orioles game. Mayor Pritt Värk was the fourth Paide Mayor to visit Westminster and the Council Chairman Aivar Tubli was the third Council Chairman to visit Westminster. Additionally, a team of students from Paide State High School “virtually” participated in the Mid-Atlantic Gigabit Innovation Collaboratory (MAGIC, Inc.) “Capture the Flag” ethical hacking competition at the Community Media Center on November 3, 2018. Finally, Thomas Beyard was honored by Paide officials with the award of the Paide Vapimärgi (City Seal) on Paide’s 727th anniversary on September 30, 2018 for his outstanding contributions to the success of the Westminster – Paide exchange program.

Planning is underway for various exchange activities in 2019. The “Kabujalake” Folk Dance Group, a group of eight Estonian young men and women, ages 13 – 16, plus two adults, from Paide Hammerbecki Basic School will visit Westminster from April 7 – 15, 2019 to participate in a variety of activities in both Westminster and throughout Maryland. They will perform as part of the Maryland National Guard’s 14th annual “Unity Day” celebration on April 12, 2019, and as part of the Children’s Chorus of Carroll County’s “Spring Celebration” concert on April 14, 2019. They will also visit and perform before various local organizations in the Westminster area including Springdale Preparatory School, Boy’s and Girl’s Club of Westminster and the Community Foundation of Carroll County. Additionally, the group will attend a meeting of the Mayor and Common Council of Westminster, participate in a radio interview on local station WTTR and attend the seventh MAGIC, Inc. “Capture the Flag” ethical hacking competition at the Community Media Center on April 13, 2019, along with one additional Estonian guest, Dr. Birgy Lorenz, a leading cyber educator from Tallinn University of Technology and currently in the United State as a Fulbright Scholar. Building upon 2018 when only one Estonian team participated, we anticipate up to 10 Estonian teams, including Paide State High School and Tallinn University of Technology, will “virtually” compete on April 13, 2019. Finally, the group, along with Dr. Birgy Lorenz, will visit and tour Towson University and Carroll County College. Their last event before they depart for Estonia will be a tour of Washington, DC.