

ESTONIAN CENTRE PROJECT UPDATE

Community consultation and design details presented at third community information session March 14



Estonian Centre Project panel answers questions at the Community Information Session on March 14.

The Estonian Centre project team has been very active over the past month meeting with a wide range of community groups to gather feedback and input as an integral part of the design process.

The information was presented on March 14 at the Estonian House at the third of four information sessions on the proposed development of the new Estonian Centre on Madison Avenue in downtown Toronto.

About 70 members of the Estonian community attended the session to hear updates and ask questions of the project team.

Consultants, volunteers and representatives from the four organizations leading the project (Tartu College, Estonian House, Estonian Foundation of Canada and Estonian Credit Union) were on hand to answer questions.

Estonian House board member Eric Sehr, started the session with remarks on his experience growing up under the beloved guidance of his grandparents, who shared their culture in a way that has impacted him throughout his life.

“For me, the greatest gift was that coming to the Eesti Maja connected me to my Vanaema and my Vanaisa. In this building, I learned to speak to them in their language, understand their history and experience, their songs, and their sacrifices.

In all those years of coming here, I took the place for granted. My grandparents built this place. They would look after it, just as they looked after everything else.

Inevitably, we have to take responsibility and ownership of the legacies that our parents and grandparents leave us. We have to make choices that address the realities of today.”

(Full text of Eric’s comments appears elsewhere in this publication and on the project website at www.estoniancentre.ca)

Design update:

Project architect Alar Kongats described how the project team has been meeting with community user groups over the past month to gather input into the design of the proposed new centre.

The community input has helped inform the design and provide the architect with information on how to make more effective use of space.



“We have had tremendously useful input from the user groups,” Alar said.

“For example, we heard how Eesti Kool really wants to build an identity and consolidated space for the school, so it is clear that this is the learning space for

Estonian students,” he said. “We can design a designated area for learning, comprising flexible classrooms that can also be rented out to other users. The area can also incorporate a comfortable seating area for parents.”

“We have also put a lot of thought into the drop-off zone in front of the centre and how that would work so people who travel by car can transport passengers and children safely.”

As previously mentioned, parking is not a huge issue for the younger generation, as this demographic is very accustomed to and often prefers to use public transit. Two subway stations are within easy walking distance of the new centre.

Alar also provided more details on where the rentable space would be located in the centre. The first floor would potentially include permanent rental tenants, such as the Estonian Credit Union and a café. The preference is to have a café run by Estonians.

The second and third floors would accommodate Estonian community user groups, such as the school, lasteaed, folk dancing groups, choirs, art/cultural groups, etc. It would also contain flexible space that can be rented out to other users and contribute to the centre’s revenue.

For example, suur saal (grand hall) and classroom spaces could be rented out to organizations who wish to hold conferences at the centre. The classroom spaces can function as breakout session rooms for conference use.

The consultation process is thorough and inclusive. Follow-up sessions will be held with all the user groups to let them know how their input and ideas have been incorporated.

Project management details:

Project Manager David Kalm brought the audience up to date on how planning and approvals are proceeding.

David reminded everyone that the team is managing two simultaneous projects right now – the development of the new centre and the sale of the Estonian House property at 958 Broadview Avenue.

“This is a complex process with many moving parts, and it is progressing well,” David explained.

These are the major tasks underway:

Development of the centre’s conceptual design – this involves creating the “big picture” in terms of how the new centre will function and what it will look like. Concept sketches and models are prepared by the architect.

Site plan agreement submission – this work involves the preparation of a number of reports and drawings that need to be submitted to the City of Toronto (15 in total, ranging from electrical and energy reports to geotechnical and soil reports and architectural drawings.)

Capital campaign feasibility study – this is continuing and involves a series of community interviews to ascertain the community’s giving capacity. The project is attracting good benefactor interest. Naming rights are of interest to potential donors. A naming rights inventory is being drawn up.

Sustainability model is being developed – A very important component of this project is determining the ratio of leasable space to non-leasable space. The project managers are corroborating their analysis with a respected consultant to confirm that the model is viable. The goal remains that third-party leases will cover operating costs and event revenue will contribute to a capital reserve fund to ensure the long-term viability of the centre.

Legal considerations are progressing – A tremendous amount of work is underway by the project’s legal committee, which is meeting frequently to work through key considerations. This includes the ownership/legal structure of the centre, governance of the centre, tax management (including managing tax issues in the sale of the Estonian House) and charitable status of the new centre, including capital campaign considerations.

The final information session will be held on Wednesday, April 4 from 7 – 8.30 p.m. Please plan to attend to be informed of the latest updates and information.

These sessions are designed to update the community and to hear your ideas. The new centre will belong to everyone, and the project team welcomes all feedback, questions and ideas.

For more information, please go to estoniancentre.ca or email to info@estoniancentre.ca

Note: Regarding Eda Sepp's article in the recent issue of Eesti Elu, we had apologized to Eda regarding the miscommunication, and have been communicating with TEMKK for a revised meeting time. We assured TEMKK that its input is valued and thanked them for the list of TEMKK needs Eda provided to Alar Kongats after the Information meeting.