

Remarks by Eric Sehr at the Estonian Centre Community Information Session on March 14



My name is Eric Sehr, and I have had the privilege of serving as a Director on the Estonian House Board for nearly three years. Like Veiko Parming at our first, and Urve Tamberg at our second information meeting, I wanted to share why I have chosen to be involved in this project.

Like most of you here tonight, I have a long history with this building. Coming here has connected me to so many positive things in my life.

Coming here connected me to the city and the Estonian community. I

remember that the trip to Broadview was a weekly adventure. Some of my earliest memories involve making the crosstown journey with my Ema or Vanaisa on Saturday mornings. It opened my eyes to how the city was bigger than just my neighbourhood and school. I connected with people who were from across the region - from different schools, different neighbourhoods, who had different friends. But we all came to Eesti Maja every Saturday. We were all Eestlased.

Coming here also connected me to our organizations. I still remember the excitement of going upstairs to the bank as an 11 or 12-year old to open my first bank account.

And for me the greatest gift was that coming here connected me to my Vanaema and my Vanaisa. In this building, I studied their language, sang their songs, learned their history, and was humbled by their sacrifices.

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

But obviously this was not the case. As time passes, we have to take responsibility and ownership of the legacies that our parents and grandparents leave us.

I first felt the true weight of this responsibility in September 2016. I had been on the Board of Eesti Maja for a year and half and we faced two major issues.

First, after four years of looking for a partner who would share the risk of redeveloping 958 Broadview, our attempts were unsuccessful.

We were back to square one.

Second, our treasurer and financial manager were warning us that without drastic measures we would max out our credit limit in less than three months.

2016 had not been strong year for the Eesti Maja's finances.

January began with a major expense when the old steam boiler, which heats the old school house, completely shut down. The expenses kept coming. There were trees that needed pruning, a leak in the hot water heating system, repairs to the refrigerators in the banquet hall, to the floor in this hall, electrical work, a major sinkhole in the driveway to fill, a chimney liner that needed to be replaced and then, to cap the year, the boiler stopped working, again.

Compounding our issues inside was the major construction outside along Broadview, which pushed business away.

It all adds up.

September 2016 felt bleak. We were on the brink. Our priority was to make it to January 2017, which we only managed by cutting expenses and large increases in lease rates.

It was in this context that Alar Kongats and David Kalm came to us in October with a proposal for new centre on Madison Avenue.

They say in business that success is more than a good idea, it's the timing too. In this case, both the timing and the idea arrived perfectly.

The vision for Eesti Kesksus is impressive.

It will connect us to the city through Estonia Square, which will be an amazing asset. There is a reason that we all end up in Raekoja Plats when we are in Tallinn. As the noted Dutch urban designer John Gehl writes “cultures and climates differ all over the world, but people are the same. They’ll gather in public if you give them a good place to do it.” This square can welcome Torontonians and Canadians to learn, grow and connect with our community in ways that are simply not possible right now.

It will connect us to the remarkable communities that surround it in the Annex. The University of Toronto, the Bloor Street Cultural Corridor, the Madison Avenue Heritage District, Hot Docs Cinema, the Alliance Francaise, the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, the Istituto Italiano di Cultural, the Japan Foundation, and the Native Canadian Centre and so much more.

We can be potential collaborators and partners. According to the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, each year more than three million members of the public go to the Bloor Street Cultural Corridor to attend exhibitions, performances, and events. Together, the cultural organizations along Bloor Street generate more than \$630 million in economic impact. Imagine being part of that?

It will connect us to our institutions and organizations. Having the Bank, Sihtkapital, and Tartu College as partners makes our community so much stronger. One of the most welcome developments in the last year has been how we have been able to build real partnerships.

It will also connect me to my Vanaisa and Vanaema, because it will provide a space where I too can share their language, history, experience and songs with my daughter, who will be celebrating her first birthday this week.

We cannot take the future existence of a space where we can share our culture for granted.

I’ve seen the way this story could end if we don’t try something different, something bold.

My roots are in both the Estonian and German communities. Growing up, every Christmas I would go with my Oma to the Blue Danube Club, for the German version of rahvajoulupuu.

Their club had parking, a hall, a restaurant. But it didn't thrive. Its restaurant closed and like many post-war communities the centre had trouble motivating a new generation who were too busy to learn the language and customs of their grandparents and great-grandparents.

Our challenges are not unique, but I'm afraid all too common.

But there are differences. We have strong organizations, like the bank and koolid. We have lasting traditions like rahvatants and laulupidu. We have dedicated volunteers that run programs that tie us together from lastead to the Pensioners Club. We have innovative cultural programs and institutions, like EstDocs and VEMU.

We have these organizations, traditions, programs, and innovations because they are all created by hard working family and friends, leaders in our community who like my Vanaisa started building our community in homes, church basements and rented classrooms as soon as they arrived in Canada, long before the purchase of Eesti Maja.

We are a community of builders, dreamers, and doers.

Looking forward, how do we stay relevant? How can our community evolve and respond to changing needs?

We must invest in our community, in our future, and in our dreams.

We must invest our time, our money, our ideas

Eesti Keskus will be an outstanding investment for our community.

Instead of merely keeping the doors open and doing only patchwork repairs, we can invest in a centre that responds to the community's needs – a centre with the resources to support and operate programs for seniors, families, children, young people and new immigrants from Eesti. Programs that nurture the future leaders of our community. Programs that will transfer knowledge between generations. A 21st century centre that responds to the 21st century needs of our community.

We will be able make these investments because we will have a signature facility in a world-class location. A centre without its bleak Septembers.

I look forward to the opportunities the Eesti Keskus will bring to our community.

I look forward to the events, the friendships, and to the new connections.

But most of all, I look forward to walking my daughter up Madison Avenue to begin her first day of Täienduskool, a legacy I know my Vanaisa, her Vana-Vanaisa and many, many others have worked to build for her and her generation. A legacy she will one day hopefully also decide to carry forward.

Thank you.