

Community Information Session — June 21, 2018

OPENING REMARKS — VEIKO PARMING

Hello ja tere õhtust,

My name is Veiko Parming, I am President of the Estonian House. I've been asked to make a few introductory remarks for tonight's meeting from a positional perspective, before others get into some of the details.

The central purpose of tonight's meeting is to announce that each of the four boards – ECU, EFC, Tartu College, and Estonian House – has voted “yes” to proceed past the due diligence phase of this project and for these four boards to work together to deliver this project. The “yes” votes by each of these boards are the next step in acting on the 2/3 majority resolution of the Estonian House shareholders of April 2017 and this step gives effect to the disposition of the Estonian House and the adjacent EFC properties and the direction of the proceeds to the Estonian Centre project.



I will describe in a minute why the Estonian Centre is really a generational project for our community but first I would like to acknowledge that this has been a long process that has lasted at least a decade, with many unexpected turns – including attempts to rebuild on the site of the Estonian House that fell apart in due diligence. In spite of all of that, this point today is the farthest along our community has been.

I sense there are people, on all sides, who perhaps viewed a “go” decision as a fait accompli – if so, I can aver that it was anything but. For the board of Estonian House in particular, parting with Eesti Maja is hard. Of course, the Estonian House's declining usage and severe lack of capital funds necessary to renovate or rebuild into a sustainable community centre to last us generations more, are issues that have been presented and discussed for the last ten years with at this point no apparent viable on-site options. Of course we all know that if we took a poll in the community, we would find there are so many diverse views on what is ideal – parking, subway, highway

access, location and so forth. And there are many features of EH – the familiarity, the history, the unique elements like the range – that make it tough. But all of us also know, that waiting for a proposal that everyone is going to agree on means sitting on our hands forever. We cannot afford to let abstract fantasies, whimsical what-ifs, and artful siren calls lead us astray from the ultimate priority of having a stable and sustainable community home for the future. I encourage all who agree with this sentiment to be candid and categorical in expressing it.

And I'd like to speak as well to why I think this Estonian Centre project is not only an okay project, but a very good one – and specifically five factors that make this the kind of generational project that we are doubtful to find elsewhere if we wait around to see what is behind some amorphous Box #2.

- 1) The Annex is already a familiar neighbourhood to eestlased, and having Tartu College and the Estonian Centre adjacent to one another will enable us to share space, hold bigger events, perhaps share some costs, and to be an unambiguous central hub and gathering point for Estonians in Toronto.
- 2) An urban, downtown location in a vibrant neighbourhood is good news for renting the place out and generating the funds necessary to support our operations. But it also signals and embodies a forward- and outward-looking identity for our community. The Estonian Centre will be a place to meet other Estonians, but also a place to attract our friends, partners, and so on who may not be Estonian themselves but who support our community. Casting a wide net in defining our community is not only a good idea but in my opinion is our only option for ensuring the community's sustainability. I sometimes wonder whether if I had one wish, I would really like to experience our community 30-40-50 years ago – to be transported to a time when our laagrid, leeriklassid and eesti kooli klassid were massive, and eestlased would gather at someone's house and sing eesti laulud all night – ja rääkida meie ilusas emakeeles ja mitte mingis naljakas segakeeles – because I think I would really like that. But I also think it's very cool what we have today – opportunities to go back and forth to a free and prospering Estonia; and a second and third generation that are still so proud of our heritage. I am so impressed by some young estos who maybe don't speak Estonian very well but are so active organizing events in our community. I am so impressed by some non-esto spouses or partners who are even spending time learning eesti keel – because they think that Estonia and the culture and community are pretty neat. I think there are many, many people on the periphery

that have been involved in the past and can be brought more into the fold, and I sincerely believe that this project – in its location, its function, and with Alar Kongats’ architecture – is as good an embodiment of this forward-looking spirit as we will find.

- 3) It’s become more and more clear over the last months that this project can do more than consolidate our Toronto Estonian community, which was the initial aim. I don’t believe that there is another Estonian community on this continent that has endeavoured to do what we are doing – build a new community home for the next 50 years. And Toronto has traditionally been the largest and most active Estonian community outside of Eesti. It makes eminent sense that if ever there was going to be an international Estonian Centre abroad, our city would be as fitting a place as any to host it. So while we in Toronto are going to be the regular users of the new centre, we’re also building this so that our friends from Hamilton, from right across Canada, from the United States, and from Eesti and beyond can see this as their home, too. We’ve also seen strong initial support for a capital campaign beyond just our local community. The Estonian people in North America have been industrious and have had a good deal of success, and yet so far we have not had a real history of philanthropy within our own community – capital campaigns and everything that comes with it. But I’m very hopeful, based on what we have seen so far, that this project will uniquely capture the imagination – and by that I mean if our parents and grandparents can dig deep – very deep, in time and money – to build everything they did, can we as Estonians born here do even half as much as they did to build a modern, beautiful Estonian Centre. And by “we,” I don’t include only those Estonians who have already been active, I also mean those who have been less active but who are proud of their roots and pleased to contribute to the right cause.
- 4) Leveraging this central site that we are securing at a very favourable price, our ambition is that the Estonian Centre be more than a community centre – that it also be a place of business. That starts with the Estonian Credit Union but also extends to other opportunities for Estonians to work out of the building, such as potentially a café or business accelerator space. And we also believe that this Centre along with Tartu College can function as a bridge to Estonia – including catalyzing more awareness in Estonia about our active Toronto Estonian community, so that Toronto will be top of mind alongside the New Yorks and San Franciscos for Estonians who are drawn abroad.

- 5) Fifth but certainly not least importantly, this is not only the Estonian House pursuing an Esto House 2.0. This is a project led by four community organizations, which are working together, taking joint ownership of a project steering committee, and each committing a good deal of time and money towards making this happen. This project is not about any one person, group or organization. It's a team effort.

I want to sincerely thank everyone who has been so heavily involved in this project, certainly from the four organizations as it has not been easy getting even this far, but also beyond –starting from legwork that dates back years and continuing through the recent community meetings. But I'd also like to say that our celebrations must be tempered, since in many ways we are only at the beginning.

The fact is we can do all the due diligence, all of the number crunching in the world, and it can tell us that the project is feasible and viable – but that doesn't mean that all the money is in hand or that the concrete has been poured. There surely will be curveballs ahead and risks, as well as difficult decisions. I think this project will ultimately be successful if we are able to leverage the full force of our community – all of our time, energy and expertise. So I'd like to ask those who are here today, and those who could not make it here tonight and are watching this recording online, to give some thought to how you too could contribute. It will be a multiyear process. There will be more community sessions to come, and there is so much ahead, not just building this centre but memorializing Eesti Maja; and I do think all of us –whatever our background, whatever our generation, whatever our personal views – have ways to contribute.

Before passing it on to the next speaker I'd like to finish with a few words in Estonian.

Ma mõistan hästi, et teatud ringkondades on tekkinud küsimused, et kuidas saab olla, et meie nooremad põlvkonnad võivad toetada Eesti Maja müümist, mistahes seisus see maja on – kas tõesti on katkenud meie vanemat ja nooremat põlvkonda ühendav lüli?

Aga vaatame ringi. Rannikust rannikuni sellel mandril me näeme kuidas meie rahva ehitatud majad, kirikud ja muud hooned on rahalises ja muu raskuses; üksikud tublid ja pühendunud isikud üritavad oma kõigest jõust neid üleval pidada, kuid lõpuks ei jää muud üle, kui neid järjest maha müüa.

Kuid see millest me täna siin räägime on hoopis midagi muud. Me vaatame tulevikku, me sihime järgmist viitekümmend aastat.

Meie ühiskonna jõud ei ole mitte kinni kivis ja betoonis. See elab edasi meie endas. See, et meie rahvas ja kultuur kestab siin tänapäeval on tänu eelkõige meie vanema põlvkonna pühendumusele kanda edasi eesti meelt uues riigis. Ja see, et meil on sedavõrd aktiivne teine ja kolmas põlvkond nagu meil on – kes tahab veel vaeva näha meie ühiskonna edasi kandmisel – see on kõige sügavam tõend sellest, et meie vanema põlvkonna töö on kandnud vilja. Pärandada meile selle tahte – et olla eestlane – ei ole sugugi väike saavutus; ma pakun isegi, et see on ülim teene.

Edgar Marten – Soomepoiss, meie armastatud kauaaegne Eesti kooli juhataja – kahjuks ei saanud täna õhtul siin viibida, ta väga tahtis ise sõna võtta. Ta saatis täna Ehatarest siiski sõnumi: “Teil on hea grupp koos. Ma toetan seda terve rinnaga!”

Ma tahan südamest tänada hr Martenit ja meie vanemat põlvkonda tervikuna. Me vajame veel teie jõudu, teie usku ja teie eeskujulikku julgust ja visadust.

