

Estonia, Westminster begin cultural exchange By Megen Wessel, Times Staff Writer Saturday, December 28, 2002

In 2000, leaders from Westminster began visiting Estonia in an effort to begin looking for a city in the 1,800-square-mile Baltic country with which Westminster could enjoy a cultural exchange.

Westminster chose Paide early this year, but the partnership between the two cities is still in its early stages, due mainly to changes on the Westminster City Council in 2001, which included the election of a new mayor and two new council members.

Westminster's interest in creating a relationship with Paide grew from a program called Partners for Peace, a once-time military program that started in 1991 to help the newly independent country become stable, train management and improve communication between civilians and military personnel.

The program, headed by the Army National Guard, developed into a partner-city program in 1993 and now includes several Maryland municipalities, as well as 14 other states.

The first official step toward the partnership came in June when two Westminster staff members - Thomas B. Beyard, director of planning and public works and Ronald Schroers, supervisor of recreation and activities - visited Estonia and learned that Westminster and Paide share many similarities.

Now the next step in the partnership, which includes working together in the future to create cultural, educational, governmental and philanthropic exchanges, has begun.

The visit from the Estonian Television Girls Choir is only the first of at least four possible exchanges next year, said Beyard.

"Culture is a major area of interest for them," Beyard said.

For that reason a Westminster singer may be selected to take part in one of Paide's festivals next year, Beyard said.

But details of who will go and how they will be picked are still being decided, he said.

Other planned exchanges include hosting an Estonian student who would attend Carroll Community College and a vacation package to Estonia for area residents, Beyard said.

In order to support these activities, a fund has been created at the Carroll Community Foundation.

"We're hoping that it will be self-sufficient," Beyard said.

Ticket sales from the Estonian Television Girls Choir performance on Feb. 8 at Winters Mill High School will go to the fund.

For more information, call 410-848-9002.