

Council president talks about business in Estonia By Carrie Ann Knauer, Times Staff Writer
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The women in Business Network meet monthly to share information and contacts in the business world of Carroll County, but also to relax and learn about something new. Wednesday's topic was something quite unfamiliar to the group - the economic development opportunities and culture in Estonia.

Westminster City Council President Damian Halstad shared his experiences and observations of Estonia with the Business Network members Wednesday. Halstad and Thomas Beyard, Westminster director of planning and public works, visited the Baltic country from Feb. 24 to March 2 as part of the Army National Guard's partner city program between Maryland and Estonia.

One of the first cities the Westminster representatives visited was Parnu, a resort city known for its spas and new concert hall. Halstad said the resort properties have doubled their value since 1995, making the town attractive to outside investors.

"Money follows money, no matter where it comes from," he told the Business Network. During their visit, Halstad and Beyard tried to start a partner-city program between Ocean City and Parnu.

While in Estonia, Halstad said he learned about a company, Estonia Piano, that is well known in Europe for its quality pianos. Halstad said Maryland National Guard Lieutenant Colonel Larry Betz is planning to talk to Maryland's Peabody Institute about buying and featuring an Estonia piano.

Another big company that Halstad said he thought may have a potential market in the United States is Viking Windows, which makes Scandinavian windows that are particularly heat efficient, Halstad said

Marilynn Phillips, who was sitting in on the Business Network lunch, asked if these companies advertise on the Internet and could make connections with the United States that way.

Halstad said he wasn't sure if these companies were on the Internet or not, but said the Estonian people are very technology-savvy and he wouldn't be surprised if they were.

Jennifer Matthaei of the Business Network said she has heard about online consultant services, where people bid to help manage and develop time schedules from projects over the Internet. Matthaei said she has heard there are a lot of these online consultants based in Estonia.

Another area of the Estonian economy that could use help is the agriculture, Halstad said. The farms in Estonia had all been collectives until 1991 when Estonia became an independent nation. Now the farmers are having trouble marketing their products, Halstad said, and he is hoping the University of Maryland can put something together to educate the farmers.

"It's hard enough making money farming in the United States, let alone when you know nothing

about the entrepreneurial aspects," Halstad said.

Halstad said he encourages people to look into the Estonian culture and opportunities to help that country. He even recommends it as a vacation area - the U.S. dollar goes pretty far in Estonia, he said.

"You start forging these relationships and something positive will come out of it," Halstad said.

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