

Delegation from Paide, Estonia, visits Westminster By Robert Brodsky, Times Staff Writer
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From squirrels dashing across Main Street to cars driving a leisurely 25 mph, Heli Suvi is fascinated at the sights and sounds of Westminster.

Suvi, the mayor of Paide, Estonia, Westminster's sister city, arrived with a nine-person delegation from the Eastern European city on Tuesday for a weeklong visit as part of a government/business exchange between the cities. Westminster officials made a similar trip to Estonia in September.

"It's a beautiful town," Suvi said. "I like the houses and how much Americans love their flags. It's all very interesting."

Westminster's relationship with Paide grew from Partners for Peace, a one-time military program that started in 1991 to help the newly independent Soviet-block countries become stable.

The program, headed by the U.S. Army National Guard, matched Maryland with Estonia in 1993. The partner-city program developed after that, and in 2002, Westminster was partnered with Paide.

The Estonian delegation arrived in Westminster late Tuesday night after a seven-hour flight, Suvi said. The group, which includes members of town and county government, are staying in rooms at McDaniel College.

The Estonians, most of whom are visiting America for the first time, took a brief tour of Westminster Wednesday morning before meeting with Thomas Ferguson, the city's new mayor, at City Hall.

The delegation later gathered at the college for a series of seminars where representatives from both cities provided overviews of their local economy and business practices.

"The world has gotten a lot smaller over the past two decades," Ferguson said. "This is an opportunity for the people of Estonia to come here and meet with our business leaders to talk about economic development. It's a sign of just how small the world has gotten."

Speakers at the seminar addressed many subjects, including Westminster's commercial and residential growth, housing, economic development, education, tourism and philanthropy. Meanwhile, the Estonian representatives provided an overview of life in their country.

Kristjan Prikk, secretary of economic affairs for the Estonian Embassy, said the country had experienced a growth in foreign trade, particularly since joining the Eastern European Union last year. Businesses also benefit, he said, from a flat 24 percent corporate and personal income tax.

And, while Westminster and Paide have obvious differences, Estonian leaders also see many similarities between the two cities.

Ullar Vahtramae, county governor for Jarva County, where Paide is located, points out that both cities have relatively similar population sizes, are the seat of government for their county and have a strong focus on agriculture.

Vahtramae said his goal is now to expand the relationship between the two cities to include more of Carroll and Jarva counties.

"We want have this partnership cross borders," Vahtramae said.

As part of that expanded relationship, Vahtramae and Suvi will meet with the county commissioners today. The meeting is the first time Carroll County government has participated in the government and business exchange.

During the rest of their trip to the United States, the Estonian contingent will be touring New York City, Annapolis, Washington, D.C., and the Gettysburg National Battlefield in Pennsylvania.

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