

Northern Birch Credit Union 2024 Annual General Meeting Summary

This year's Northern Birch Credit Union Annual General Meeting took place as usual in April. In addition to the board and members, representatives from a number of other credit unions were present. This was a special AGM as it marked five years since the merger of Estonian and Latvian credit unions. On this occasion, the Ukrainian Credit Union gifted a beautiful painting called "*Birch Forest*", which was accepted by Northern Birch CEO Anita Saar and board chair Ellen Valter.

The merger of the former Estonian & Latvian credit unions was the first time in Ontario's history that two credit unions based on different national backgrounds decided to merge. While navigating a merger, the credit union also dealt with converting to a new banking system, moving out of the Estonian House to the Latvian Centre, alongside a global pandemic. Despite the challenges, the credit union has thrived and stands as an example of how to navigate the increasingly complex financial sector.

Both Anita Saar and Ellen Valter addressed various banking-related topics in their reports. As noted in previous meetings, the number of credit unions has been declining each year. In Ontario, only 53 remain—whereas about 15 years ago, there were nearly 200. The sector holds over \$100 billion in assets and has nearly two million members. Of course, this does not compare to the "big banks". However, those who bank with credit unions consistently rate the service highly (yet again, Northern Birch received the *Toronto Star Reader's Choice 2024 Diamond Award*). Additionally, deposits are insured up to \$250,000 (with no limits for registered deposits) compared to \$100,000 provided at big banks. Considering how few choose a credit union as their financial institution compared to our population, it is clear that many still don't realize the benefits of banking with a co-operative financial institution.

Northern Birch has continued the tradition of credit unions supporting community activities and talented young individuals. This time, fifteen young people were recognized with the Northern Birch Community Roots scholarship: Alex Kness, Elizabete Eglite, Emma Nipernado, Eva Nearchou, Felix Tamm, Johanna Kiik, Joonas Kasekamp, Kalle McFarlane, Katarina Sõrra Stanfield, Miks Maksins, Monika Siim, Natalie Jenkins, Stephen Jenkins, Tarvo Oliver Toomes, and Teija Hogg. They are worth following in the future as they continue to be a part of keeping our local traditions and culture.

Some may have noticed new team members at the credit union, helping in the areas of member service and compliance oversight. At the same time, Mara Leja retired after 29 years of dedicated service. She played a vital role in making the merger between the two credit unions successful.

Changes have also occurred within the credit union board. Lea Kõiv and Liene Kirss were honored for their contributions as they stepped down, while their places were taken by David Flude and Matthew Fitzgerald. The latter is the first board member without direct Estonian or

Latvian roots, though his partner is Latvian. Both bring extensive experience, skills and fresh perspectives that will be a strong asset to our board of directors.

New products were also highlighted, with Anita Saar mentioning the new First Home Savings Account (FHSA) for first-time homebuyers that was introduced in 2024, and announced an upcoming new product – a 1-year cashable GIC. Feedback from members has also driven improvements in digital banking. With this came a reminder that both the credit union and members must remain vigilant against AI-generated fraud schemes.

Last year's focus was on marketing development, which proved very successful, reversing the trend of declining deposits and achieving growth above the sector average. The outlook for 2025 remains positive.

At the end of the meeting, attendees toasted the fifth anniversary with sparkling wine and enjoyed refreshments while discussing the future and how to spread the word about the credit union advantage—encouraging friends and acquaintances to invest or apply for loans and mortgages.