



Tickets still available for Icebreakers Festival

page13



Ice, ice baby!

Sasha and Dane Bes, from the Tillsonburg area, visited Niagara Falls on the weekend and stopped by the Outlet Collection. It was their first experience of an Icewine Festival, and they said they would like to come back. The Queen Street Icewine Village will be open the next two weekends. For story and more information see page 20. (Penny Coles)

Urban, rural divide made obvious during governance hearings

Mike Balsom

The Local

A seeming divide between smaller rural municipalities and larger urban ones became evident during last Wednesday’s open meeting with the Ontario government’s Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy at the Holiday Inn in St. Catharines.

It was the first of several to be held across the province in a little more than a week.

During the afternoon session with the committee’s 10 members and Niagara’s four MPPs, both West Lincoln Mayor Cheryl Ganann, Niagara-on-the-Lake Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa and Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekop all questioned the need for any changes to the way their municipalities are governed.

On the other hand, Niagara Falls Mayor Jim Diodati and his St. Catharines counterpart Mat Siscoe both spoke passionately and urgently about their preference for the abolishment of regional council and the 12 current municipalities in favour of a four-city model for the region.

Zalepa began his delegation by making four requests to the committee.

“One is that we acknowledge, respect and protect the distinctiveness of our communities,” Zalepa listed. “Two, that we budget infrastructure funding for municipalities to achieve housing targets. Three, prioritize shared service funding for local municipalities so we can efficiently deliver services. And four, keep local decision-making at a local level.”

The lord mayor went on to boast of NOTL’s consistently high voter turnout and engaged local electorate and added that the part-time nature of NOTL council makes local politicians more accountable.

Continued on page 4

Town backs off on heritage trail proposal

Kris Dube

The Local

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Niagara-on-the-Lake councillors have backed out of an offer it recently made to a local developer, just days after it was accepted, but with few details released following the closed-door session last Friday.

Late last year, council voted to offer builder Benny Marotta and his company Solmar a portion of the Upper Canada Heritage Trail to use as access from Charlotte Street to his Rand subdivision, a massive project with initial plans to build 172 units.

The town said then that Solmar would need to make a request for that access, and Solmar lawyers have recently said they would take the town up on its suggestion. That response was made public through a lawyer’s letter to SORE (Save our Rand Estate), dated Jan. 8, and published in an update on the citizens’ group’s website Jan. 9.

But after a nearly three-hour closed session meeting Friday, Jan. 12, council passed two resolutions — one of them that the town was withdrawing its offer for the access over town-owned property.

The in-camera portion of Friday’s agenda did not name the development, but referred to the addresses of potential accesses that have been considered for the easement, an issue that has drawn ire from the public.

The recommendation to rescind the offer was read in open session following the closed-door discussion by clerk Grant Bivol, along with another that said council would proceed as directed in closed session.

Tony Chisholm, long-standing member of the heritage trail committee, was prevented from talking about the issue of a portion of the trail’s possible use for legal reasons, but said at the time he was hoping to be involved in the process and would want to make sure “the trail isn’t compromised in any way.”

Responding to Friday’s news about the retraction of the offer, he told The Local it was particularly rewarding to see “the terrific local groundswell of support for the trail,” and that renewed support “seems to be stronger than ever.”

It was after a December closed session that the town made public its offer of a Charlotte Street easement over the trail to provide access to the planned subdivision, on the condition it would have to be requested by the developer.

Judy McLeod, a member of SORE, spoke to The Local last week about the news that Solmar was accepting

Continued on page 2



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‘Terrific groundswell of support’ for trail



This is the entrance to the Upper Canada Heritage Trail from Charlotte Street. No details were released about how this could be used as part of paved access to a subdivision. (Penny Coles)

Continued from page 1

the town’s offer, which at that time was still on the table. SORE members were as perplexed and as angry as the public about why council ever entertained the heritage trail idea in the first place, she said.

SORE was “vigorously opposed” to council’s offer, and the closed-door meetings process by which councillors agreed to it, without any public involvement. SORE is a group of residents who have been involved in Rand property discussions, has its own lawyers

and planners involved, and provides updates on proposals for those lots and for the Rand Estate development, which at one time was the location of a plan to build a hotel and conference centre. Some of the group are neighbours, and some are residents who have become

involved because of their commitment to preserving valuable heritage attributes of Niagara-on-the-Lake. The group said in its Jan. 9 post on the SORE website that it intended to raise the fight over heritage trail access at a hearing with the Ontario Land Tribunal, “assuming that council does not change its mind,” reiterating its position expressed previously that they support the idea of the “historic” access between 144 and 176 John St., as it “does not require interference” with an important town-owned recreational asset.

McLeod told The Local that SORE is aligned with the

town on all other aspects of the subdivision proposal. It fully supports the report by the town’s former senior heritage planner Denise Horne about preserving heritage attributes, and suggests a minor difference in the number of units — the town is recommending no more than 135 units, while SORE has called for a reduction to 128 units. It is clear that the John Street access was not being pursued, the recent SORE update said, because Benny Marotta was refusing to use property owned by another of Marotta’s companies. SORE members are expecting that to be part of an up-

coming Ontario Land Tribunal hearing. “The resolution made it clear that the only reason that access was not being pursued was because Benny Marotta was refusing to make it available to himself,” said SORE’s Jan. 9 update. The letter sent by Solmar lawyers saying it was accepting the trail access offer says: “Solmar supports this approach provided it’s understood that the final, approved design must accommodate an appropriate road access for the proposed residential development on the subject lands, which would function as both the sole vehicular access and an emergency access.” The town has promised to release more details about access to the subdivision Wednesday, Jan. 17, which is too late to include in this week’s printed edition of The Local. Look for updates at notllocal.com.





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Lord Mayor answers questions about conflict

Penny Coles
The Local

At a special council meeting held at the community centre last April to discuss the Rand subdivision and preservation of its heritage attributes, and at every council meeting on the same issue since, Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa has declared a non-pecuniary conflict of interest. He has not taken part in meetings, discussions or votes about the application for a subdivision.

It came as a bit of a shock that first time, surprising the large crowd of people gathered, when he made his declaration at the opening of the proceedings and then left.

He continues to do the same before each closed session on that proposal since, and although he has explained why, he fears not

all residents understand, and that there may be some who think he is avoiding the issue.

If residents don't understand what is driving his decision, "in the absence of that interpretation they may think I'm trying not to be taking responsibility," he told The Local after the recent closed session about the Upper Canada Heritage Trail and access to the Rand subdivision.

Before making what was a difficult decision early last year, he says he consulted with the town's integrity commissioner, and also sought independent legal counsel regarding a potential conflict due to his home's proximity to the proposed development.

He lives on Charlotte Street, and his property is only about 200 feet away from one of the Solmar property boundaries, he says. He was advised by both his

lawyer and the town's integrity commissioner that there would be a risk to him and the town if he didn't declare a conflict.

The response from the integrity commissioner, dated Dec. 2022, says in part: "It is accordingly, in my view, a reasonable conclusion that the proximity of your residence to these projects could lead the 'reasonable person' to conclude that your decision as a Member on the applications currently identified as likely to come forward, constitutes a non-pecuniary Conflict of Interest on your part ... it would be prudent for you to declare a conflict of interest and withdraw from participating in debate/discussion or voting on the matters you have identified as likely to come before Council."

Under the Ontario Municipal Act, there are penalties for

failure to consult with the integrity commissioner if there is any doubt at all about a conflict, and failure to follow their recommendations could make a penalty worse if he was later found to have a conflict.

"To act contrary to their advice would jeopardize the town," Zalepa says, as well as cause "reputational harm" to the lord mayor.

The range of penalties seems broad, as evidenced by what has occurred in other municipalities, he added. "I've looked at different decisions, and they vary. It isn't cut and dried," says Zalepa. "I think there could be improvements (to the Municipal Act, regarding conflicts) that should be pursued, and that could be one of the ways it could be improved."

With the continued public and media interest in the ap-

plication from Benny Marotta's Solmar Development Corp., first about the subdivision application itself, and recently about a decision on access through the Upper Canada Heritage Trail, Zalepa says he wants to remind residents about the risks should he choose not to follow the advice of both the integrity commissioner and his lawyer.

A non-pecuniary conflict, he adds, "means there is no financial gain or reward," the usual reason for declaring a conflict. "The integrity commissioner's written opinion was that he was confident in saying I would have a non-pecuniary conflict, and the independent lawyer's advice was also the same. So I decided to exclude myself from the discussion. I want residents to understand that decision was not taken lightly. I did my due

diligence as best I could, and realized it would be irresponsible not to follow the advice."

"It was a heavy decision not to take part in discussions," Zalepa continued, and he was "taken aback" by the media reports that followed.

If he could have found a way to "push back" against the advice he was given by the integrity commissioner, he would have, which was why he sought his own legal advice, at his own cost, to see if he would get a different opinion, but after what he learned, he feels confident in his decision.

While it was both frustrating and disappointing to come to that conclusion, "I made the decision a while ago, and we're going forward to the hearing. I cannot be seen as furthering the topic or influencing it in any way."

Speed camera at Crossroads now operational

Kris Dube
The Local
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

One of four stretches of road in front of schools in the region that were equipped with cameras to catch speeding drivers at the start of the new year is in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

As part of Niagara Region's Vision Zero program, automated speed enforcement efforts are set up along Niagara Stone Road in Virgil near Crossroads Public School.

This location, along with

ones in Fort Erie, Grimsby and Lincoln, are community safety zones, areas near schools, where drivers could be instantly ticketed for going above the limit — without the physical presence of a police officer.

The camera on Niagara Stone Road will be in operation for about 90 days, according to the Niagara Region's website.

The new addition to the busy thoroughfare was also part of a discussion at the town's committee-of-the-whole planning meeting Tuesday night.

During the new business portion of the meeting, Coun.

Erwin Wiens raised the issue about whether motorists are aware of the enforcement tool at the location, saying he'd like to see more adequate signage.

"Getting a ticket in the mail two weeks later — it doesn't stop speeding at the time," said Wiens, adding that social media and other channels like print media have played roles in spreading the word — but that he'd like to see better warnings on site.

"It's meant to reduce injuries — not increase coffers," said Wiens.

Bruce Zvaniga, the town's

new interim chief administrative officer, said he would follow up with the Region, but noted that the signage currently in front of the school is provincially regulated, and that additional markers may have to be "somewhat remote" from what's already been erected so they don't interfere with what's there currently.

Coun. Gary Burroughs asked if the camera is catching speeders headed in both directions along Niagara Stone Road, to which Zvaniga said he would also ask regional staff.

Starting in April, the four

cameras will rotate to other spots in the region until the end of June, one of them staying in Niagara-on-the-Lake — along York Road between Queenston Road and Concession 3 in front of St. Davids Public School.

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa also provided councillors with information about the program, explaining that the speed limit in front of Crossroads Public School is 40 km/h from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays when the school is open.

After those hours, it is 50 km/h. But either way, the camera is running 24 hours per day.

"It's about making roads safer and changing behaviour," said Zalepa, who also sits on regional council. He said Tuesday night that the Net Zero program is a "great project."

Concerns about speeding are something he hears from constituents about regularly — and that he believes the regional government is "open to listening to what the public has to say" about the Net Zero program, he added.

Zalepa also said revenues generated by tickets are reinvested in road safety initiatives at the Region.



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Governance, housing crisis discussed at hearing

Continued from page 1

“Our governance structure has created this rich heritage, distinctive community attributes and a proven, effective government,” said Zalepa. “We feel it must remain an independent municipality so we can maintain that important blend of cultural significance, economic vitality and community engagement, all of which is a testament to the success of local government.”

Similarly, Ganann told the committee that her community, the 11th of the 12 municipalities population-wise with just under 13,000 residents, would not support a change to one big city of Niagara.

“We are already working with other nearby municipalities,” Ganann pointed out, speaking of recent moves to share some services with Lincoln and Grimsby. “We would support our existing model but would be open to some changes with improved service delivery.”

Much of Redekop’s delegation focused on housing and the need to build more homes faster in Niagara.

“There seems to be a disconnect between rapidly approving the construction of new homes and the actual construction of those homes,” said the Fort Erie mayor. “Municipalities are responsible for receiving and processing appli-

cations for construction. It’s the builders and developers who are actually responsible for putting the shovels in the ground.”

With infrastructure demands often being the reason for that disconnect, Redekop insisted that his municipality of almost 30,000 residents has developed an asset management plan that has successfully addressed the issue.

“I’m proud to say the Town of Fort Erie bridged what’s called the infrastructure gap in 2022,” said Redekop. “I don’t know if there are any other municipalities that have done that. No one else in Niagara has.”

Amalgamation, Redekop insisted, will not get homes built any faster.

Diodati made it clear from the outset that the status quo is not good enough for him.

“This has been discussed for many decades,” he told the committee. “We’re hoping that we’re at a point now that we’re going to actually make some changes. At the Region we have 32 members. I wouldn’t call that good governance. It’s hard to make good decisions with too many cooks in the kitchen.”

With 13 governments, he pointed out, that means 13 sets of by-laws, 13 sets of rules and 13 CAOs.

“That leads to overlap, duplication and red tape,” he summarized. “Time is money, and we use up too much time,

which costs too much money. It’s hurting and impeding business. There’s a whole set of rules whenever you move to a new community.”

Diodati said he believed that one day Niagara will be one city, but that should be perhaps 50 years in the future. He stated his clear preference for the four-city model, which would allow for a better balance between rural and urban communities within the region.

“It respects the uniqueness and the commonalities that we have between municipalities,” said Diodati. “I also believe that four cities is better than one because we will still have competition. Competition between municipalities is good. Two levels are too expensive. Four cities is the sweet spot.”

Similarly, Siscoe opined that multiple levels of bureaucracy in Niagara have resulted in systemic barriers which have been impeding growth.

“In St. Catharines council voted unanimously in favour of our pledge to build 11,000 homes,” said Siscoe. “As we embarked on this process we have run into issues that have made continued progress difficult. Regional governance results in decisions and resources spread over a large area of 12 towns and cities with conflicting goals. This dilutes accountability for supporting housing.”

Siscoe’s opinion is that the

four-city model, with the urban centres of St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland along with the more rural western municipalities as the fourth.

“Creating four larger cities would make reform economically feasible,” Siscoe added, “and would allow for major efficiencies to be created that would allow our communities to focus on the priority that we share with the provincial government, to get more homes built faster.”

Earlier in the day the committee heard from the mayors of Welland, Thorold and Lincoln as well as Regional Chair Jim Bradley.

“It is important to learn from past experiences,” said the former Liberal MPP who sat at Queen’s Park from 1977 until 2018. “Many long-term academic studies have demonstrated that the projected benefits of past amalgamations often failed to materialize, leading to the same outcomes if no changes had been made.”

“Once we start pulling at these threads,” warned Bradley, “the entire system may start to unravel.”

Pointing out that “no system is perfect,” Bradley suggested that rather than a full-on reform of governance, instead a series of incremental changes could strengthen Niagara while avoiding governance experiments that would be costly and distract from the region’s goals.

He suggested the creation of an approvals facilitator or provincial chief planner to expedite construction approvals, a streamlining of the Ontario Land Tribunal appeal process, and the introduction of more provincial incentive programs to encourage the private sector to build more purpose-built and affordable rentals.

Niagara’s opposition MPPs, Jeff Burch, Jenny Stevens and Wayne Gates, as well as PC MPP Sam Oosterhof, were all in attendance and were given time to ask each speaker, who had exactly seven minutes to present, questions.

“The smaller municipalities were very clear in their defence of their particular communities,” Gates told The Local Wednesday evening. “They don’t have a problem with sharing some services, but they want to have their own elected councils. Niagara-on-the-Lake is a wonderful town with its own character and challenges.”

Gates wouldn’t hazard a guess as to what will come of the meeting with the commit-



NOTL Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa, St. Catharines Mayor Mat Siscoe and Grimsby Mayor Jeff Jordan talk of governance at a standing committee hearing last week. (Photos by Mike Balsom)



MPPs Jeff Burch, Jenny Stevens and Wayne Gates were at the hearing to question speakers.



Niagara Falls Mayor Jim Diodati and West Lincoln Mayor Cheryl Ganann had very different opinions on the topic of a four-city model in Niagara.

tee when the process comes to an end. And he added that when he is out in public people aren’t talking about the governance issue to him.

“They tell me they can’t afford to buy groceries, their kids are living in their basements,” Gates said. “Our seniors are struggling to find places to live. There’s homelessness and refugees. That’s what people are talking to me about.”

Gates added that any talk of governance reform expediting the home building process is wishful thinking.

“You’ll have a whole different set of rules that have to be put into place,” he said. “That’s not going to speed up the process. This particular meeting should have been about where we are at on housing. The (regional) chair said today Niagara has 39,000 housing units already approved for development. We need shovels in the ground. This should have been about helping us do that.”

And he said there’s one other misconception about any form of amalgamation.

“All the studies say that it doesn’t save money, it doesn’t reduce your taxes,” he said. “The other side is trying to say it will save us money. But the experts are clear that none of the other amalgamations across Ontario and in other provinces has saved any money. Why would it be any different in Niagara?”

Where the governance issue goes from here is unclear. Although there has been mention in the media of the standing committee holding another meeting in Niagara, the hearings are still listed on the provincial website as wrapping up in Kitchener, Thursday, Jan.18.

Although Zalepa told The Local he hasn’t heard anything about what the province intends to do once the hearings are finished, he suggests “the standing committee will be likely expected to prepare and present a report to the province — that was the purpose of the committee — and there will likely will be some recommendations in it. What happens after that is hard to say.”

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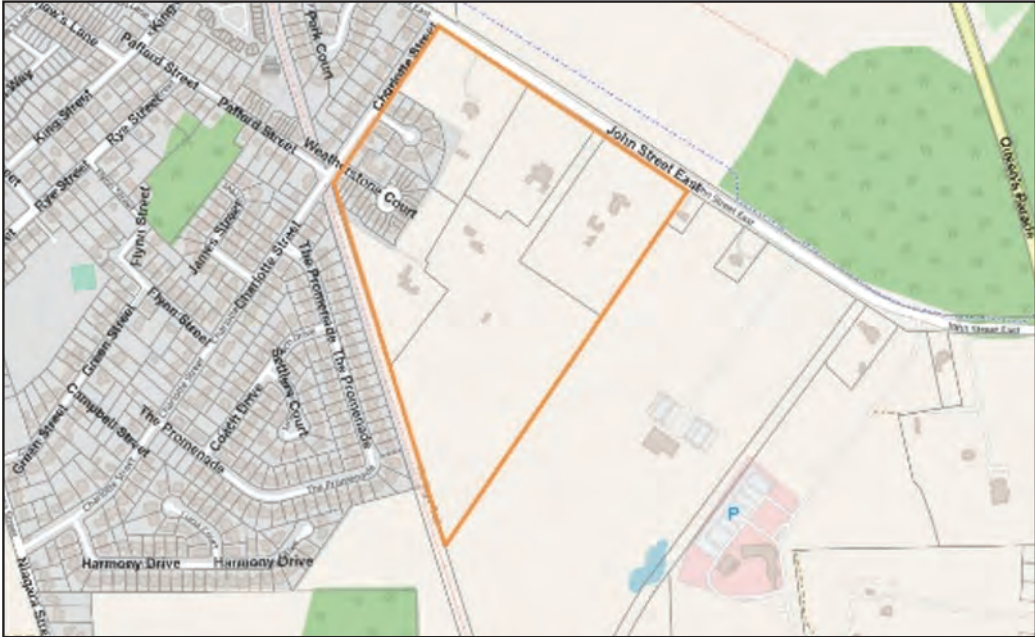


NOTICE OF OPEN HOUSE AND PUBLIC MEETING

- What:** Notice of Open House and Public Meeting for an Official Plan Amendment (under Section 22 of the *Planning Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. P.13, as amended)
- When:** Open House: **Monday, January 29, 2024 at 5:00 pm**
Public Meeting: **Tuesday, February 6, 2024 at 6:00 pm**
- Where:** Open House: Electronically via the directions below
Public Meeting: In-person at Town Hall, Council Chambers, 1593 Four Mile Creek Road, Virgil, or electronically via the directions below
- Regarding:** Character Study for Rand Estate and John Street East (File OPA-01-2024)

- What is this?**
- The purpose of the Character Study for the Rand Estate and John Street East area (the "Study") is to define the character of the area and provide policy to guide future change. The Official Plan Amendment is based on the results of the Study, fundamental principles of good planning and urban design, and follow the following principles:
1. Conserve, integrate and maintain significant cultural heritage features.
 2. Protect, enhance and maintain significant natural features and functions.
 3. Ensure cultural and natural heritage features are visible to the public.
 4. Accommodate active transportation connections through the area as part of a system of connected natural and cultural heritage features.
 5. Maintain compatibility and cohesion between distinct places.
 6. Accommodate a mix of housing types and sizes and compatible commercial uses.
 7. Respect the scale and character of existing development in the area and in adjacent neighbourhoods.

The subject area includes the land bounded by the Heritage Trail, Charlotte Street, John Street East and in proximity to the urban area boundary in Old Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, as shown in the map below.



- Dialogue is encouraged:**
- You are invited to attend the Open House and Public Meeting to gather information and provide input regarding this matter.
- Town Hall is open for the public to attend Committee of the Whole and Council Meetings, including Public Meetings, in-person. Alternatively, the public will continue to have the option to register in advance to participate electronically.
- The Open House will continue to be held electronically at this time.
- If you wish to participate electronically at the Open House or Public Meeting, you must register in advance with the Town Staff noted below. You will receive an email on the date of the meeting with instructions to connect to the Open House and/or Public Meeting on your computer, tablet or telephone.
- **Open House** - Aida Nasr (aida.nasr@notl.com or **905-468-3266**)
(register as soon as possible but prior to 12 noon on Monday, January 29, 2024)
 - **Public Meeting** - Clerks Department (clerks@notl.com or **905-468-3266**)
(register as soon as possible but prior to 12 noon on Monday, February 5, 2024)

If you wish to attend the Public Meeting in-person, registration with the Clerk is appreciated.

If you wish to view the Open House and/or Public Meeting for information purposes, registration is not required. The meetings will be recorded and available for viewing after the meetings on the Town's website at <https://www.notl.com/council-government/mayor-council/meetings-agendas-minutes>

Please Note: Written comments on the application are encouraged and must be submitted to the Town Clerk, at 1593 Four Mile Creek Road, P.O. Box 100, Virgil, ON L0S 1T0 or via email at clerks@notl.com referencing the above file number. Unless indicated otherwise, all submissions, including personal information, will become part of the public record.

- For more information:**
- Information on the Study and the draft Official Plan Amendment may be obtained on the Town's website at <https://www.notl.com/node/3011> or at the Community and Development Services Department within Town Hall.
- The Town also invites you to get in touch at any time if you have any questions or comments about the Study. Please contact Kirsten McCauley, Director of Community and Development Services, by phone at **905-468-3266 ext. 243** or by email at Kirsten.McCauley@notl.com.
- If you wish to be notified of the future decision with respect to the amendment, you must submit a written request to the Town Clerk including your name and the address to which such notice should be sent.
- If a person or public body does not share their views in writing to the Town Clerk or orally at a statutory Public Meeting before a decision is made, the person/public body:
- a) Is not entitled to appeal the decision of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake to the Ontario Land Tribunal; and
 - b) May not be added as a party to the hearing of an appeal before the Ontario Land Tribunal unless, in the opinion of the Tribunal, there are reasonable grounds to do so.
- Dated at the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, January 17, 2024
Grant Bivol, Town Clerk

EDITORIAL

Provincial hearing political theatre at its finest

It's hard to predict what will come of last Wednesday's session of the Ontario government's Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy in St. Catharines.

Back in November 2023, Niagara was one of six regions where public meetings were announced to be held by the committee for the purpose of reviewing regional governance as overseen by the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

It was often referred to as an amalgamation committee, though the province's focus on getting more homes built seemed to have shifted the focus of the meeting to housing.

Chaired by Laurie Scott, the PC MPP from the Haliburton-Kawartha Lake-Brock riding, the committee consists of seven PC MPPs, two from the NDP and one Liberal, though during Wednesday's proceedings Mary-Margaret McMahon, a former Toronto city councillor elected as a Liberal in Beaches-East York, was referred to as an independent member of the committee.

As well, Niagara's four MPPs — Conservative Sam Oosterhoff of Niagara West, and NDP members Jenny Stevens (St. Catharines), Jeff Burch (Niagara Centre) and Niagara Falls MPP Wayne Gates were at the table.

As an observer in the room for a portion of the meeting, it was a rare chance to experience some political theatre right in our backyard.

Local mayors and some representatives from the Niagara Region, as well as some business people who had previously expressed a desire to address the committee, were each given seven minutes to state their cases. For many, that time limit was not enough, as they were cut off when their time was up and had to wait for a question period that came with its own similar time constraints.

Some, such as Regional Chair Jim Bradley and president and CEO of the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce Mishka Balsom, used their time slots to plead for a more streamlined process to speed up the building of houses in the region.

Bradley outlined a five-point request toward this end. He told the committee he would like to see what he referred to as a 'new deal' to get infrastructure upgraded to support thousands of new homes, a provincial approvals facilitator created by the government, a streamlining of the Ontario Land Tribunal process, new incentive programs and a time limit on municipal zoning orders, or MZO's.

Some, such as St. Catharines Mayor Mat Siscoe and his Niagara Falls counterpart Jim Diodati, urged the government to reduce the number of elected representatives in Niagara by abolishing Regional Council and reorganizing Niagara's 12 municipalities into four larger ones.

A few of the presentations from the business community showed up to push for the region to be organized into one governing body with the abolition of the 12 municipal governments. Former St. Catharines Regional Councillor Bruce Timms pushed his longstanding goal to have the regional chair chosen by a gen-

eral election.

The mayors of smaller communities, including Cheryl Gannan from West Lincoln and Niagara-on-the-Lake's Gary Zalepa, made a case largely for the status quo, outlining to the provincial politicians the progress they've made in their own communities to accommodate growth and stressing that they don't want to be swallowed up by the surrounding larger communities.

Zalepa's impassioned lament about NOTL having lost its high school and its hospital, in response to a question posed by Oosterhoff, was a great example of how passionate he is about the town maintaining its current status.

With Niagara Region's population expected to grow to a population of 694,000 from its current 484,840, it's clear, though, that the discussion on housing last week was badly needed and certainly timely.

But what is also clear is that those who are currently making decisions at the regional and municipal levels in Niagara aren't necessarily all on the

same page when it comes to how to get there.

With that kind of growth expected, something has to give, and some form of a unified effort between the 12 has to come to fruition. The age of governmental silos will not work.

The way the different leaders approached their seven-minute time slots kind of muddled what the actual purpose of the committee meeting was. Was it about governance, or was it about getting houses built? Nobody seemed to know for sure, and no one on the committee really stated what the final goal is.

There has been some speculation that the Ford government's December reversal of their decision to dissolve the Peel Region has left the province with less of an appetite to make any governance changes, at least for the remainder of their current term, which comes to an end in June 2026.

Dr. David Siegel, a Brock University professor emeritus from their Political Science faculty, believes the province's September reversal of plans to remove lands

from Greenbelt protection has also contributed to a reluctance for government restructuring.

Early this week Oosterhoff suggested that another visit from the standing committee to another Niagara municipality will take place by spring, but that hasn't been confirmed.

I had a chance to ask Siegel, Bradley and Gates what they think will come of these meetings and when a report or any decisions might be made. None had any clue and it seems Oosterhoff doesn't know either.

So what is the exact purpose of this committee? Is it just a dog and pony show by the government, a way for them to keep a promise they made to listen to local concerns and let people have their say? Or is real change going to come from this process?

One thing is certain, though, the wheels of progress in Niagara continue to move slowly. And this provincial standing committee doesn't seem to be willing to step on the gas pedal any time soon.

Mike Balsom
The Local

Rare sights seen, and others even more elusive



Owen Bjorgan
Special to The Local

Last year felt like the fastest year of my life. It was action-packed with innumerable exciting moments in the field. I have come to humbly accept that I may never see such en-

counters in person again.

For example, take watching a bald eagle have a brief midair dogfight with its arch-nemesis, the golden eagle, while my girlfriend and I sat in a canoe. Also from the canoe, it was a real privilege to paddle over some freshwater gar in Lake Erie — a rare cigar-shaped fish with a crocodile style nose.

Then, there was finally getting my hands on an eastern hognose snake while out filming near Long Point for

my *Hidden Corners: Canada's South Coast* documentary, coming out in 2024. This squat but robust serpent can flatten its head like a cobra to scare predators, but can also flip itself over and play dead with its tongue out. How's that for a party trick?

I saw several moose, a black bear and heaps of my favourite reptiles and amphibians. However, my appetite to see the most elusive animals has only heightened in recent time. I suppose

this drive to find these creatures in the wild is akin to the buzz one gets from owning a rare hotrod car, classic vinyl, or historic sports trading card.

The coolest part about animals though is that you cannot own them, but you can own the moment. To me, sharing time with these animals in the wild is more than just excitement involving odds. It's a signal from the ecosystem that says, "Yes, this still exists here," which implies that the environment is

healthy and substantial enough to still support this animal. The translation leads us to understand more about the world around us when we spot these organisms. A special sighting quickly becomes conversation and conservation.

All these situations live on as perfectly vivid moments in my head. Luckily, some will always live on by means of footage. But I want more.

I would like to briefly list the animals that I have yet to

see in the wild in Ontario or nearby states, but are still out there in the thickets, forests, marshes and sand dunes we share space with.

The American badger: once widespread throughout southern Ontario, this large mustelid (animals including weasels, ferrets and mink) would be an ultimate prize sighting.

With less than 200 estimated to be remaining in the province, the preservation of this animal's habitat has reached a critical stage. It would make my heart sing and my adrenaline spike to see one of these creatures roaming the sandy woodlands of Lake Erie's coastline.

On a similar scale of numbers remaining in the wild in southern Ontario, there is the forever elusive eastern massasauga rattlesnake. This timid

Continued on page 7



View from the couch

Donald Combe
Special to The Local

In *Christmas As Usual* (Netflix 2023), Thea, a Norwegian, takes Jashan, an Indian, home to Norway with her

for Christmas as a celebration of their engagement; traditions clash and there is chaos. Very predictable, very corny however a very charming fairy tale.

Donald Combe is a retired

English teacher who loves to go to the movies. Until he resumes going to theatres, he has graciously agreed to share his opinions, through "short and sweet" exclusives, of online series and movies for The Local.

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Where's Ben?

Eden student Ben Foster continues to discover new locations in NOTL, wondering how familiar others may be with them. If you know where this photo was taken, email penny@notllocal.com. No answers last week — Ben was at the controversial Charlotte Street entrance of the Upper Canada Heritage Trail.

COMMENT

Local LETTERS Value of Rock Steady Boxing

On Dec. 13 The NOTL Local ran an article on Rock Steady Boxing classes offered at White Oaks in Niagara-on-the-Lake for those struggling with Parkinson's disease. It is so good to read about a positive way of dealing with Parkinson's disease. So often we only hear about the negatives of this illness. This is an amazing

program that offers an exercise workout, primarily boxing, as a way to get back some of your strength and control while coping with such a debilitating disease. Rock Steady's methodology is three times a week for one hour a day!

Repetition, boxing drills and cardio seem to be the plan for the needed strength build-

ing to reduce the progression of Parkinson's. These are not exercises we are unfamiliar with — pushups, stretching, balancing are some of what is needed to slow down the progression of Parkinson's, and of course a regimen of systematic boxing. As quickly as just one month and some people feel a difference.

Another part of this unique group that may be overlooked by some is the friendliness and welcoming support when you walk through the doors.

Often with Parkinson's disease the first thing people do is stop interacting with friends and going out. They are walking slower, could be limping, or dragging a leg, and they

stop eating in public due to the shaking.

These classes help with overcoming social anxiety, social isolation, and the general fear of being stared at. The more you participate in these classes the easier it becomes. And soon you are able to go out with friends, dine in a restaurant and enjoy yourself as you

did before you were diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

My suggestion is if you know someone with this disease (as I do) help them to get involved with this class. It will make a huge difference in their day-to-day living!

Jane LaVacca
NOTL

Local LETTERS Trail committee chair says thank you

I was pleasantly surprised by the outpouring of support for the Heritage Trail these past few weeks. Since 2017 the Heritage

Trail Committee, along with many volunteers, has spent a great deal of time and effort securing funding, organizing events, raising

awareness of the trail and seeing the project come to fruition.

So the committee was appalled to find that the

completed trail at Charlotte Street was in danger of being compromised. Thank you to all who have contributed and supported the trail,

and who hopefully will continue to do so. Construction on phase 2 has started, but there is still eight kilometres to go!

Stay tuned for updates about the trail.

Rick Meloen
Chair, Heritage Trail Committee

Local VOICES: Goettler Foundation, Rotary partner on coral reef project

Bill French
Rotary Club of NOTL

The Goettler Foundation and the Rotary Club of Niagara-on-the-Lake have teamed up with the Misool Foundation to fund a \$65,000 coral reef restoration project in the Misool Marine Reserve of Raja Ampat.

Raja Ampat is an archipelago located in the western Pacific Ocean off Indonesia's southwest coast. The Misool Marine Reserve is the largest of its kind in Raja Ampat.

Coral reefs are often referred to as the "rainforest of the sea," and the Misool reefs are the highest priority for conservation.

Dr. Mark Erdmann, marine biologist, coral reef ecologist, and Vice President of Conservation International's Asia-Pacific marine programs says

that "Misool represents one of the most pristine reef systems left on earth — one of only a handful of places in the universe where biodiversity is improving rather than declining."

Raja Ampat is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. Its waters are home to more than 600 species of coral (the entire Caribbean region contains fewer than 60), six of the world's seven marine turtle species and more than 2000 species of reef fish.

The diversity of coral reefs is particularly impressive given that reefs cover less than 0.1 per cent of the ocean's surface area.

Coral reefs benefit an estimated one billion people, either directly or indirectly, from the many ecosystem services they provide. Estimates indicate coral reefs provide up

to \$2.7 trillion per year in services, including providing critical natural infrastructure that protects increasingly vulnerable coastlines from storms and flooding, food security for vulnerable populations, tourism revenue and even raw materials for life-saving medicines.

Despite their importance, coral reefs face numerous threats, including climate change, coral bleaching, overfishing, pollution and habitat destruction.

The United Nations has reported that 70 per cent of the Earth's coral reefs are threatened. Forty-four per cent are already destroyed or at imminent risk of collapse.

Conservation efforts are crucial to protect and sustain these vital ecosystems.

The Misool Foundation is a non-profit organization that

focuses on marine conservation efforts in Raja Ampat.

The Misool Foundation team manages a suite of conservation programs which combine marine law enforcement, waste management, community empowerment, research and marine monitoring and species conservation that consistently deliver measurable conservation results.

A combination of ranger patrols and community outreach ended dynamite fishing and coral mining in 2014. Some of these damaged reefs have not recovered.

Misool Foundation's Reef Restoration Project was developed to re-establish these coral reefs.

Using a technique called coral transplantation, the Misool team of coral farmers including marine scientists, Misool Rangers and university students, create artificial reefs from wire mesh frames on areas of broken coral. Living corals are transplanted onto these frames and cleaned and monitored so that they have the best chance of survival. Over time, these reefs will grow naturally, providing new habitat for fish, corals, and other reef creatures.

The team now manages six reef sites in the Misool Marine Reserve with an impressive survival rate of 82.4 per cent.

The Goettler Foundation/Rotary Club of NOTL Reef Restoration and Environmental Ed-



Coral reefs are often referred to as the 'rainforest of the sea.' (Misool Foundation)

ucation Project scales up Misool's transplantation activities through community engagement, data collection and monitoring.

The project engages high school students through a series of educational and practical activities, designed to empower the local community to become changemakers and guardians.

An Environmental Education Program was developed and delivered in two high schools to 123 students. Pre and post lesson testing showed a 78 per cent increase in environmental knowledge.

In addition to the in-school program, outreach staff repurposed the lessons into games and marine life colouring books for younger children in the surrounding villages.

The project supported the coral farmers team in transplanting more than 1,500 square kilometres of reefs, contributing to Misool's target of

2,500 square kilometres of reef restored by the end of 2023.

The Goettler Foundation and the Rotary Club of NOTL are pleased to support Misool's coral reef restoration efforts but are elated to be engaging Raja Ampat youth in shaping a brighter, sustainable future for their community.

Carol Lipsett, president of the Rotary Club of NOTL, "thanks the Goettler Foundation for their ongoing support of our work and specifically for their support of this critical reef restoration project."

Vaughn Goettler, chair of the Goettler Foundation says, "as the planet reels from the effects of humankind's activities over the years, it is an honour and a privilege to participate in the restoration of our vital coral reefs. They are truly the 'lungs of the planet' and as goes their health, so goes the health of the entire ecosystem that nourishes us all."

Elusive lynx yet to be seen

Continued from page 6

little reptile resides in Wainfleet Bog and the Ojibway Prairie near Windsor, and that is about it for southern Ontario. I have ploughed through shredding thorns and knee-deep water many times in search of this species, which I'm fortunate to have seen half a dozen times up north. It would be extra special to see one on home turf in the south.

I have a hankering to go back

to Pennsylvania's deep rolling mountains to find the eastern massasauga rattlesnake's much larger relative, the timber rattlesnake. Similarly, I want to see the six-foot-long adult black rat snake climbing a tree just south of the border, or perhaps one of the last dozen that apparently inhabit the Niagara Peninsula.

Lastly, there's the elusive lynx. When I embark on a fly-in fishing trip this August, I will once again be heading north of

Lake Superior into its boreal forest home. Last summer, my parents managed to spot a lynx while camping in a roadside parking lot. Hopefully their luck is genetic, and I can finally stare into the eyes of one of the most acrobatic predators on earth, right here in Ontario.

Wish me luck! If you are a reader and would like to share any encounters that you appreciated in 2023, I would love to hear about it. Happy New Year!

Cold as ice



Pillitteri Estates Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake was pleased to have Mother Nature on its side to deliver the frigid bout of winter weather expected Sunday — perfect timing for harvesting icewine grapes. Overseeing the harvesting was Jamie Slingerland, director of viticulture, who said they picked grapes for 15 hours Saturday and going through to Sunday afternoon. This year's crop was above average per vine, he said.

Ricky Raps

Ricky Raps are 10 the steel industry, he continues pastoral ministry here in Niagara's own Rick Mills town. Ricky Raps, he says, are Retired from more than 30 years of management within in and laugh at ourselves.

1. To hope means cooperating patiently where it can sometimes seem hopeless.
2. Do choices mirror hope or fear?
3. We can choose which voices we give volume to.
4. Recently bought myself AirPods.
5. They help with phone calls, podcasts, etc.
6. They don't always help with listening.
7. To what matters most.
8. The heart.
9. Somewhere we live inside*
10. Hope is a discipline.



St. Davids road configuration discussed by residents

Kris Dube
The Local
Local Journalism
Initiative Reporter

How traffic is being proposed to enter and exit a planned subdivision in St. Davids isn't sitting well with residents, along with a few other concerns related to the proposed development.

At Tuesday night's committee-of-the-whole meeting, a report to move ahead with Official Plan and zoning bylaw amendments, as well as a draft plan of a subdivision, were up for consideration.

The Tawny Ridge application is seeking permission for 12 lots of single-family homes with access onto Tanbark Road.

The plan for the second phase is to develop 20 lots for detached dwellings, 24 on-street townhouses and a block of residential units on new streets, that would hold either a maximum of 20 block townhouses, or a maximum of 30 stacked townhouses.

The plan was approved by the committee and will be sent to council in a few weeks for a final vote.

In an email sent to councillors, staff, local me-



Bill Krahn, Coun. Sandra O'Connor, Sharon Taylor, Bruno Laliberte and Konstantine Mandrapilias were at the corner of Tanbark Road and Hickory Avenue last June to talk to town planners, including NOTL senior planner Rick Wilson, about traffic in their neighbourhood. (Penny Coles)

dia and others, resident Bill Krahn says public safety is a major concern with the development, and residents have been expressing their frustration with the plan for some time.

He said critics of the project have "mentioned over and over again in

writing and in person" that the intersection at Hickory Avenue and Tanbark Road is not compliant with town bylaws and provincial guidelines and presents a safety issue beside the driveway at 144 Tanbark Rd.

He claims an error was

made when a realignment of Hickory Avenue was approved in 2008.

It's his opinion that if Street A of the proposed subdivision is not extended to Tanbark Road, then much of the traffic entering and exiting the area would be routed through the "com-

promised" intersection.

"Although the intersection at Hickory Avenue and Tanbark Road is already compromised and obviously there is not much that can be done at this point, it is however still the responsibility of decision-makers to mitigate to their fullest

in preventing an incident from happening, and by limiting as much traffic flow as possible at this intersection would help do just that," wrote Krahn.

Town staff recommended in its report that the

Continued on page 9

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Council to make its decision at next meeting

Continued from page 8

applications be approved by committee-of-the-whole and be sent to council for final approval later this month.

Resident Gienek Ksiazkiewicz prepared a presentation and also sent it to people in the community in response to an email from town planning staff on Jan. 11 that a recommendation report was going to council on Tuesday.

This was done too quickly, says Ksiazkiewicz.

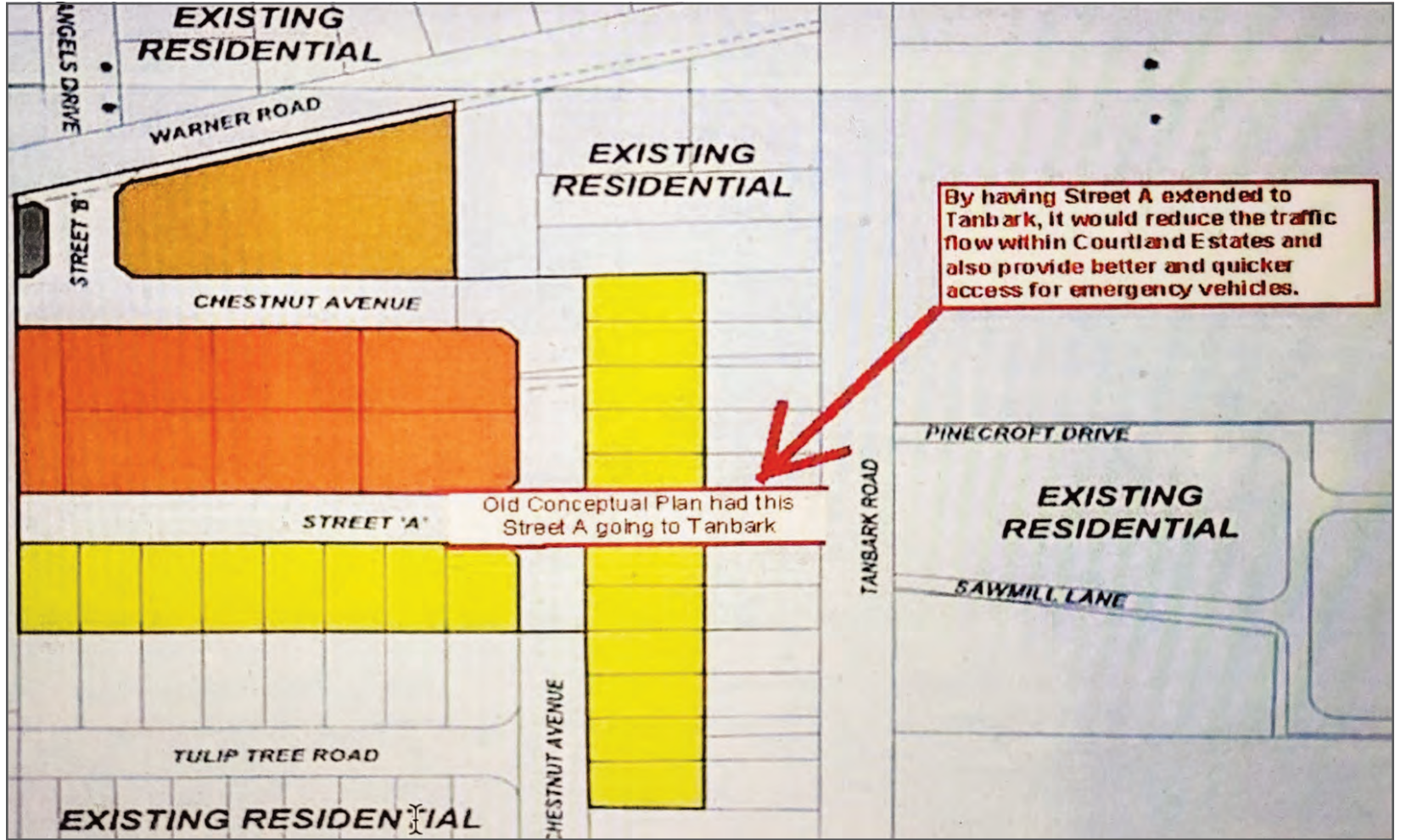
"Residents were given essentially two business days and a weekend to review, digest and assess" a lengthy report, and staff had six months to work on what it contains, according to Ksiazkiewicz.

Concerns with engineering related to sewage, water runoff and pressure were also raised by Ksiazkiewicz. He wants more information about whether studies have taken place to investigate if current infrastructure can handle the proposed build.

"If an engineering study or assessment was not performed to confirm that the existing sewage transportation system is adequate, then the potential for that system to be inadequate exists and presents an infrastructure risk to the town which must be addressed prior to any development being approved," he said, adding that "this could represent a significant financial burden on the town's financial resources," depending on what needed upgrades are determined.

He said an engineering study should confirm that water pressure will remain the same for all residents, and that existing drainage systems will be sufficient to accommodate water runoff and not result in flooding.

He also suggests staff needs to provide more in-



This diagram of Tawny Ridge Estate shows Street 1 ending, with two lots between it and Tanbark Road. St. Davids residents see Street 1 extending to Tanbark as a solution to their traffic problems they expect to get worse when the subdivision is completed. (Supplied)

formation on the developer's plans to replace trees that will become casualties of the new development.

Ksiazkiewicz lays out what he believes should be taking place when it comes to cash in lieu of parkland space, saying that based on the size of the proposed subdivision, a five per cent land allocation would add up to 1.45 lots or almost 401,000 square feet. Translated to cash in lieu, the developer should be paying the town more than \$1 million, considering that one comparable lot in St. Davids sells for about \$800,000.

He said cash in lieu of parkland should be dedicated to capital projects within St. Davids, such as the swimming pool, tennis courts, the establishment of a St. Davids community centre and Sparky's Park.

Ksiazkiewicz was added as a last-minute delegation at Tuesday's meeting after a

vote from the local government to allow him to speak.

"I think you should be very cautious of what you're doing," he told councillors.

Craig Rohe from Upper Canada Consultants, on behalf of the developer, also delivered a presentation at Tuesday night's meeting. Both he and staff said infrastructure in the area is suited to handle the proposed subdivision, and that there could be some encroachments in the area causing flooding, also claiming that recent videos shown to council were "some age old," taken before a storm sewer upgrade was made in the area.

Referring to the intersection of Hickory Avenue and Tanbark Avenue, interim chief administrative officer Bruce Zvaniga said its layout was done on purpose as a traffic-calming measure.

"It's a feature that would encourage drivers to drive

more slowly," he said.

Coun. Adriana Vizzari brought forward amendments, including that a crosswalk be explored. She was told to wait until who would pay for it could

be discussed.

She also suggested cash in lieu of parkland should support the St. Davids pool, which treasurer Kyle Freeborn said would need to be discussed as a separate bud-

get item at a later date.

In addition she asked for an increase to the number of parking spaces for the stacked townhouses, which was supported by council.



Gienek Ksiazkiewicz speaks at Tuesday's committee-of-the-whole meeting. (Screenshot)

Local HOME of the WEEK

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Dementia is not normal aging, expert says

Sharon Burns
The Local

Dementia is not a normal part of aging. This phrase was uttered more than once by Sarah Putman, director of education and quality for the Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region, to a packed house this Saturday at RiverBrink Art Museum in Queenston. Putman provided tips to maintain brain health that may reduce or delay incidences of dementia by 40 per cent, which may include symptoms such as memory loss, changes in language, judgement and personality, or issues with mobility. A series of portraits called The Mom Project, by artist Mark Crofton Bell, was exhibited in the same room where Putman spoke. All the paint-

ings are of Bell's mother, who suffered from the challenges of dementia and were painted during the final years of her life. Before Putman outlined 12 ways in which lifestyle plays a role in staving off dementia, she explained that there are three things that cannot be modified or controlled: age, sex and genetics. That risk increases with age is undeniable, she said, noting that 61 per cent of all those diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease are women, who have a longer lifespan, "which puts them in that risk category." Genetics "is a question I get all the time. If my mother has it, or my father has it, am I going to get dementia," said Putman, who explained that less than five per cent of dementias are genetically passed down from generation to generation. "Genetics do play a small part, but they're



Sarah Putman, director of education and quality for the Alzheimer Society of Niagara Region, talks about preventing and delaying dementia at the RiverBrink Art Museum. (Photos by Sharon Burns)

not a definite piece, to say you're going to develop dementia." "In decades past it was thought that people just got older and their brain started to

fail and it was considered part of normal aging, but dementia is not a normal part of aging," said Putman.

Dementia is an umbrella term which encompasses almost 100 different syndromes and conditions that can cause the symptoms of dementia.

A 2020 study, called the Lancet Report, outlines how to maintain a healthy brain:

Be physically active. "What's good for your heart is good for your brain," said Putman, who advises that jumping into exercise without working up to it, and without doctor input, is not the best way to approach exercise for a sedentary person.

"Start slow. I used to say to my family member, get up and walk around the house during commercials. Some of us are at various entry points, depending on what our life has brought us, whether we have old injuries or just have a sedentary life. Exercise should be sustained and should be regular, but you can vary it up as well."

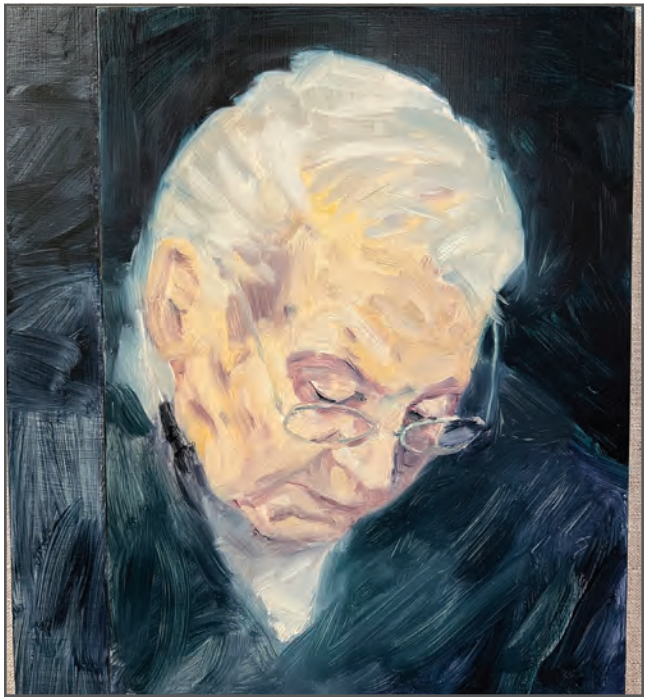
Putman listed yoga, water aerobics or Qigong, which is like Tai chi and is offered at the Alzheimer Society. Niagara Region offers a Healthy, Safe and Strong exercise program "where you can join in and participate in exercise for your brain, for your socialization and for your health."

Protect your heart. Vascular dementia is the second leading cause of dementia and is typically caused by somebody having a stoppage of oxygen to their brain, usually as a result of a stroke or a heart attack. Putman advises having regular checkups for cholesterol, blood pressure and diabetes, and having these conditions treated.

Be socially active. "Social isolation is now considered in the same sort of realm as smoking or having a sedentary lifestyle. We've had a really hard five years when it comes to the idea of social isolation and we saw, throughout the pandemic and post pandemic, people who were in the realm of mild cognitive impairment move into that realm of dementia more quickly."

Socialization can occur through the phone, over the internet with apps like Zoom, or simply by talking with neighbours.

Putman suggested joining



One of artist Mark Crofton Bell's first portraits of his mother in the early stages of dementia. Some of the portraits are on display at the RiverBrink Art Museum.



This is one of the last of a series of paintings called The Mom Project, artist Mark Crofton Bell's portraits of his mother, this one during her later stages of dementia.

programs offered by organizations such as the museum or library "because they have lots of events and they make it easy for us to find socialization."

"Talking to a stranger is actually really good for your brain," said Putman. "It actually encourages your brain to engage in a different way." Also, make the most of daily opportunities to chat with the cashier, cab driver or someone in the elevator.

Manage medical conditions. Putman advised knowing and understanding your medical conditions. Track cholesterol and blood pressure numbers, take medication as prescribed and do not rely on 'Doctor Google'.

Challenge your thinking. "Taking on mental leisure activities that you enjoy is really important," said Putman, whose suggestions included looking at art, completing Sudoku, crosswords and word games, learning a new language, and involving yourself in games that also require socialization, such as Scrabble or chess.

Try something new as well," said Putman. Making new neural pathways are really important for stimulating the brain. Music, for example, is an important source of brain stimulation, especially when new genres are given a listen.

Get a good night's sleep. Strive for six to eight hours of quality sleep every night. General tips for sleeping better include sleeping on a quality mattress and pillow, keeping the temperature at what is the most comfortable for you, and avoiding electronics an hour before sleep.

Have depression treated. "Depression is really more than just feeling down and, as we get older, depression can look different. Sometimes it's a lack of appetite and some sleep issues, or not wanting to be engaged in normal activities," Putman added that mood and personality changes can be a symptom of a dementia.

Avoid excessive alcohol intake. "For low risk of harm, we want to stick to consuming less than two standard drinks a week." However, noted Putman, an appropriate five-ounce glass of red wine has a lot of antioxidants.

Maintain your hearing. "This is a big one," said Putman, who explained that many people have a resistance to managing their hearing. Hearing loss has been linked to an increased risk of dementia and leads to social isolation and a loss of independence.

Continued on page 11

Countdown is on — just four more days for seniors' survey

Local Staff
A survey on seniors' needs and options for housing, created by local experts Steve Ferley and Michael Ennamorato with input from Niagara College, is coming to a close Jan. 21. The last week or so has brought the total of responses up to about 500, and another

100 over the next few days would be good, says Ennamorato. "We'd love to be able to close at 600," he says. If there are people in town, 55 years old or more who would like to participate, "this is their chance." He's looking forward to working with Niagara College to interpret the results, which he says should be

available in April. For those who would like to fill out the survey, scan the QR code in the Senior Survey poster below with a phone camera, or link to the survey at forms.office.com/r/fqxeb7fJv. Those without internet who want to respond can call Cindy Grant at 905-458-7498, but do it soon. The countdown is on — just four more days until it closes.





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<https://forms.office.com/r/fqxeb7fJv>

Option 3: Respondents without the internet, please call
905-468-7498

Prevent or delay onset of dementia with these tips

Continued from page 10

Find meaning in life. Your purpose for getting out of bed can be as simple as having a pet to care for. “Come at life from a place of gratitude, find joy and purpose, and incorporate that into a daily routine,” she suggested.

Avoid all types of head injury. “Seems obvious,” said Putman. Wear a seatbelt, put on a helmet while riding a bike or scooter, and reduce trip hazards that might cause a fall. Wear the right shoes and maintain your health. If it’s suggested that

you use a mobility aid such as a walker or cane, make sure you’re using one that is the right height, size and weight for you, and that you’re using it properly and you use it as prescribed.

Adopt healthy behaviours. Follow the Canadian Food Guide, which has been updated and is no longer a pyramid but a plate, with vegetables and fruits taking up half of the plate, whole grains a quarter, and proteins the other quarter. “Hydration is really important. By the time you’re 40, by the time you feel thirsty, you’re

actually already starting to be dehydrated.”

Reduce avoidable stress and quit or reduce smoking are two other healthy behaviours that can be adopted to maintain a healthy brain.

“If we all knew what our avoidable stress was we would avoid it,” acknowledged Putman. She was not referring to short-term or acute stress, “where you feel that fight or flight situation,” and when anxiety helps your body to release adrenaline in dangerous situations or stressful situa-

tions. Long-term stress, which is when we’re not able to relax, releases cortisol, which doesn’t subside and is actually damaging to our brain.” Putman said that it is really important to talk about stress and to be open to treatment options.

Finishing her presentation by opening the floor to questions, she was asked about cannabis use and dementia, and said the scientific data isn’t there, yet.

When asked how Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) works for those with demen-

tia, Putman first noted that “the Alzheimer Society doesn’t have an opinion either way on MAID,” before adding that “if you are diagnosed with dementia in the early stages and still have the ability to make decisions and are considered capable, you can choose MAID.”

“You have to sign the forms and set your date. If you are not capable at the time of the administration of MAID, you are able to still receive it without giving consent. At that moment, however, your family can withdraw consent.” For more

information, she added, contact the Alzheimer Society and ask for the MAID practitioner.

The mother from Bell’s Mom Project is seen in many portraits around the room. The exhibition includes only a portion of nearly 400 finished projects Bell completed over four years, arranged in chronological order, beginning with the earliest and ending in “uncertainty,” according to the abstract posted alongside the portraits. The Mom Project can be viewed until Jan. 27.



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Love Where You Live: SUPPORT *Local*

Community gathers to focus on hostages

Penny Coles
The Local

Deputy Lord Mayor Erwin Wiens was one of several speakers at an event at the Canada Games Park in Thorold Sunday, held to recognize the 100 days since Hamas terrorists killed innocent people and took hundreds of others hostage. Organized by locals, including Rose Campbell and Alana Hurov and others from the Niagara Jewish

community, the day was really about freeing hostages, says Wiens, “and everyone can get behind that.” “It was a huge success,” says Hurov, who was ill and unable to attend, “with almost 100 people in attendance.” The Sunday march, which took place around the games park, was organized “in support of the 136 hostages being from the tortured and held in underground cages in Gaza,” she explained. Campbell read a beautiful poem written by a mother, Rachel Goldberg, about her son, who was taken hostage after attending a music festival on Oct. 6 last year, the evening the attacks began, and who also spoke to the United Nations on the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December. Wiens says he heard about the event being organized by the Jewish community, and decided to attend. “I

wanted to show my support for the hostages. My message when I spoke was one of support, for the hostages and also for all minorities.” He says he’s mindful of the fact that there were shortcomings in Canadian legislation about how Jews were treated right up to the 1950s, and anti-Semitism still exists. The event reminded him of a quote he has heard from a Jewish friend, ‘If not us, who? If not now, when? It is often attributed to John F. Kennedy, who made it famous, but was originally said by a Jewish Rabbi. Wiens says it speaks to him when applied to the current situation in Israel and the captive hostages who need people to stand up for them, but also to many modern situations, including some issues of diversity in NOTL. “I’m tired,” he told The Local, “weary tired, of the loud and vocal people. Measured and informed decisions are what gets things done. I feel we’re at a crossroads, and I want everyone to feel included, to be able to stand up and be proud of their heritage and culture.” What the Hamas terrorists want is “total annihilation of Jewish people. I don’t support Hamas or Hezbollah,” Wiens says, although he adds that he did not get “political” at Sunday’s event. “That was all about supporting the release of the hostages.”



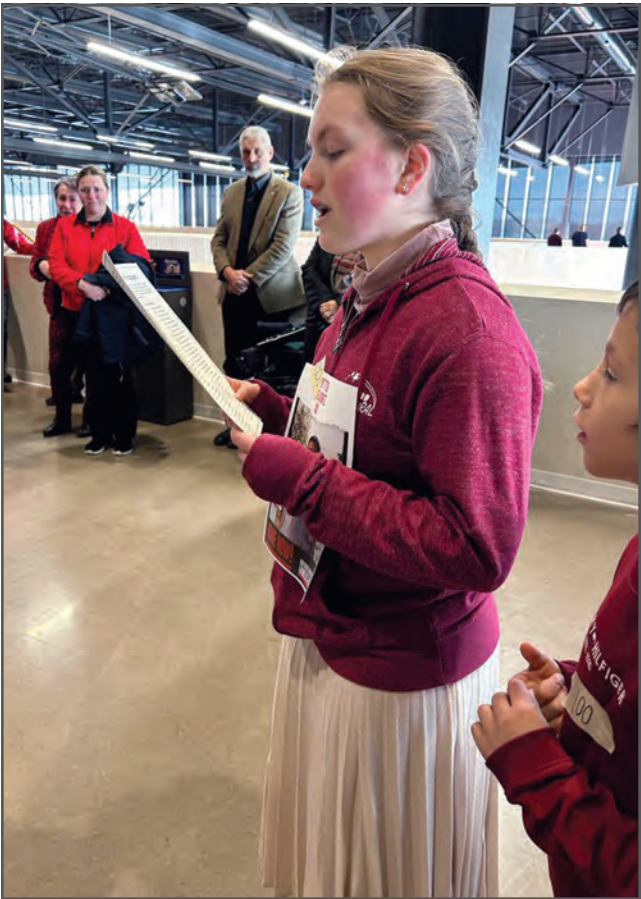
About 100 people attended Sunday’s march. (Photos supplied)



Dorothy Soo-Wiens and Deputy Lord Mayor Erwin Wiens attended Sunday’s event to support the Niagara Jewish community and Israeli hostages.



The track at the Canada Games Park became a venue for a march in support of hostages.



Sarah Ephrat reads the names of every one of the 138 hostages — in tears.



Rabbi Shneur Zalman from Chabad Lubavitch Niagara with Deputy Lord Mayor Erwin Wiens.

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Tickets available for Icebreakers comedy shows

Mike Balsom
The Local

There are tickets still available for three Icebreakers shows coming up next week.

Thursday's Icebreakers Comedy Festival opening night at Oast House Brewers is sold out, but tickets remain available for two shows Friday night, Jan. 26, at Corks Winebar and Eatery and the CBC LOL Gala Saturday, Jan. 27, at the Court House Theatre.

Organizer Jeff Paul, who grew up in Niagara-on-the-Lake and graduated from St. Michael Catholic Elementary and Niagara District Secondary Schools, says that the first show sold out in about a week. He attributes that to the fact that NOTL's own Joe Pillitteri will be the MC that evening, setting the stage for Tamara Shevon and the headliner, Darrin Rose, who played Bill on the CBC sitcom *Mr. D* and has a recurring role on *Letterkenny*.

It's the 10th anniversary for Icebreakers, something that ranks among Paul's favourite accomplishments.

"It's a lot of work to put this together," he says of the festival, which he and his wife, Kyra Williams, a comedy agent and producer, present. "We've got a great team. At the end of the day, I'm the one calling all the shots. It's stressful, but once the show starts it's a lot of fun."

Between the four shows next week a total of 18 comedians will take to the stage at three different venues. Being immersed in the Toronto comedy scene throughout the year, Paul and Williams easily form connections and bonds with some of the best stand-up comics in Canada.

"I run a weekly show with Kyra," he says. "We're always looking for talent, and we tag people for this festival and another one that we do in Parry Sound. This lineup is full of people I've worked with throughout the past year, people that have really impressed me."

Friday's Festival Favourites show at Corks, though, features four comics who have all played Icebreakers shows in the past. Two-time Canadian Comedy Awards winner Sandra Battagli-

ni hosts with Ian Gordon, Trinidadian-born, Canadian-raised Jean Paul (no relation) and Jeff's close friend Rob Bebenek are all featured that night.

"Rob and I are best friends," says Paul. "In fact, Rob and my dad text each other, that's how close we are. We refer to Rob as the son my dad always wanted. He has three sons, but he prefers Rob. The guy's a monster on stage, he's one of the best we have. He's a joy to watch."

For Bebenek, he's sure it's his fifth time at the Icebreaker's Comedy Festival. He loves making the trip to NOTL and is always happy to do a show with Paul. And knowing that it's his friend's hometown, he loves to take a few pot shots at him.

"He kind of just asks for it," Bebenek laughs. "Almost our entire relationship is built on that. I'm on the road a lot, but we met through other comics in Toronto many years ago. Then we did a few shows together and I kind of just got stuck with him."

The Kitchener native has been on the stand-up scene for about 16 years. He has appeared on MTV and opened concerts for Bob Saget, Burt Kreischer, Steve-O of *Jackass* fame and Gerry Dee. Bebenek says he is really impressed with the quality of this year's Icebreakers lineup.

"It's an anniversary year, so obviously Jeff has loaded it up a little bit more," says Bebenek. "Matt Wright from Newfoundland is at the Saturday Gala. He's really one to watch. He has an effortless charm."

Wright played the Weatherman on the CBC's *Son of a Critch* and has written for six seasons of *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, earning a nomination for a Canadian Screen Award. He opened for Jerry Seinfeld at the 2023 Great Outdoors Comedy Festival.

"Allie Pearce is also on that CBC Gala," says Bebenek. "I do a lot of roadshows with Allie. She's super funny and great to watch."

Like Bebenek, Pearce is excited to return to NOTL for the festival next week just a year after her last Niagara performance.

"I just love that Jeff sees the community there, and

sees that they will appreciate this type of event," says Pearce. "He and Kyra are such a dream team. They work so hard, they are wonderful producers, and Jeff is such a great comic. And I can't believe it's been ten years now."

The Montreal native, who currently writes for television shows *Letterkenny* and *Shoresy*, actually moved to Toronto 15 years ago, hoping to break into theatre. Once there, though, she started working in hospitality and event planning instead. But her desire to perform never left her, leading Pearce to take a class at Toronto's Second City.

"I really enjoyed it," she remembers. "It was a great way to be pushed to write and perform for the first time in front of an audience. But it took me three or four years after that before I really gave it a shot and started going to open mic nights."

She says it was a weekly standup show that she was producing in Toronto featuring mostly female comics that got her noticed by Jared Keeso and Jacob Tierney, producers of both *Letterkenny* and *Shoresy*, leading to her becoming a regular writer on those shows. The demands of that along with her standup work led to her recently leaving her day job to concentrate on comedy full time.

Pearce and Wright are just two of seven comics appearing on the final night of the festival in a show that will be recorded for CBC Radio's *Laugh Out Loud* program.

Paul adds that there is a second show Friday at Corks as well. He will be the MC for that one, billed as The Meltdown, performing with Rebecca Reeds, Nick Reynoldson and Hunter Collins.

"They are my favourite filthy people," Paul laughs. "We encourage the filth from them. Some people don't like that comedy, but a lot of people do. If you know what you're coming for and can just open your mind and not be offended by everything, it's a great show to watch."

Tickets for the Friday and Saturday night shows are available at icebreaker-comedy.com/shows.



Comic Rob Bebenek will perform at Corks Wine Bar and Eatery for the Icebreakers Comedy Festival next weekend. (Photos supplied)



Jeff Paul, organizer of the Icebreakers Comedy Festival, is the MC at the Corks show.



Allie Pearce is one of the comics performing for the CBC Gala Saturday, Jan. 27.

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Ukrainian families making a new life in Canada

Penny Coles
The Local

Since Russia launched its most recent war against Ukraine early in 2022, about 200,000 Ukrainians have made their way to safety in Canada.

By early 2023 there were several families putting down roots in Niagara-on-the-Lake, with Shirley Madsen, a local woman of Ukrainian heritage, doing all she could to help them.

She has been referred to as an angel by some of them, a miracle by others, and has continued to help out when called upon, although not to the extent she was — families who have settled are making their way and creating new lives in their new homes.

“It’s been overwhelming,” she says of the past year. Some of those she met “have almost become part of my own family. They are always positive, no matter the hardships they’ve gone through, and continue to, with jobs or housing or cars, no matter the challenges they face. They are always joyful, and thankful for all the help they receive from others, not just me.”

Last year, The Local spoke to some of those families about their experiences

once the bombing started in Ukraine, how they left the homes they loved, their jobs and other family members and made their way to Canada and to NOTL, and about their lives once they found homes and jobs.

The Local recently met with three families to find out how they are managing a year later, and it was a heartwarming experience to hear how well they have done carving out their new life despite the uncertainty and challenges they have faced.

Liudmyla (Luda) Babina and her husband Vasyl Babin arrived in St. Davids about a year and a half ago, with their two youngsters, Daniel and Valeria.

Luda told The Local recently that when they left home with just four small suitcases, they had no idea where they were going, and could never have imagined where they have ended up. Vasyl explains it wasn’t about making one decision — there were many decisions and many small steps along their journey, the last one in response to a phone call from his brother in Ukraine, who knew of someone in this place called St. Davids who would give him a job.

Luda says when they

left Ukraine and arrived in Romania they thought they would be there for a month or two before they could go home. Now, she can’t imagine it being safe to return to visit — that seems years in the future, and they have settled into making a safe life for their children here in Niagara.

They recently had to find a new home to rent — the house they lived in when they first arrived was only intended to be temporary. It was on a large property slated for development and they knew the owner had plans to tear it down eventually. Despite fearing they would never anything else affordable in the area, where they hoped to stay, they were fortunate to find a lovely home on York Road, nearer to Queenston, that they are now renting.

“This is a miracle,” says Vasyl, gesturing around the warm, welcoming kitchen of their new home. “We feel like we have so much here. God has helped us with everything.”

From the time they left Ukraine, he says, with his new-found English skills, “there has been so much prayer,” each step “another blessing.”

He first worked in construction, but was a certi-



Vitaly Saksina, Vitalina, 12, who goes to St. Michael Catholic Elementary School, Valeriia, and Viktoriia, a Laura Secord Secondary School student. (Supplied)

fied mechanic in Ukraine, and now works at Covelli’s on Four Mile Creek Road. “My job is perfect,” he says. It is regular hours and allows him to be home in the evenings with their children when Luda is working.

She has a full-time day job with the Welland Heritage Council and Multicultural Centre, where she helps refugees who arrive in Niagara Falls. She also works part-time for Ravine Vineyard Estate Winery evenings and weekends as a server in the event centre, but that is on hold until April.

She explains that when Ukrainians came to Canada through a recent immigration program to help those fleeing the war, they were not considered refugees. They were given \$3,000 each, health insurance and work permits. They, like other recent arrivals, have applied for permanent resi-

dent status, but it takes time, she says. Refugees are eligible for social assistance, but those who arrived under that immigration program are not. “We came, and we worked hard. We didn’t have any choice. From the beginning, we have supported ourselves.”

Vasyl adds church is very important to them — there is a multicultural church in Niagara Falls where they have met other Ukrainians in similar situations, and their children go to “Sunday School” together, says Luda, although she laughs when she explains it’s actually held on Friday evenings.

The kids love to go to church to be with friends, and also to school — they both happily get on the bus to St. Michael Catholic Elementary School. Their English is perfect — they have lost their accents, Luda says proudly, and now speak to each other in English. They

went to summer camp at the Community Church on York Road, and they are taking piano lessons. They have found a community.

The Babins are fearful for family at home, but Luda says her parents encouraged them to come to Canada, and when they talk, her mother says “I’m so happy I don’t have to call you to see if you are still alive.”

Vasyl speaks of the continuing attacks on Ukraine, and says “Russians don’t have short wars. Their wars are never over.”

“We pray for it to be over,” adds Luda, “but it could be 10 years or more. Nobody knows.”

And they are happy to be where they are, “sleeping peacefully,” she says. “At night we hear coyotes, not rockets.”

At home “we would have no work to go to, no

Continued on page 15



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Vasyl Babin and Liudmyla (Luda) Babina, with their children Daniel and Valeria, in their York Road home. (Penny Coles)

They left good lives behind, but are here to stay



Maryna Yermeni and her daughters Iryna Izovita and Myra Yermeni. (Supplied)



Tetiana Kulchystska with her granddaughter Myra Yermeni. (Supplied)

Continued from page 14

education for our children because schools are closed, and no life. Here we're making connections, getting involved in the community. We hope to one day be able to sell our home in Ukraine," Luda continues, explaining the money they would make would be a downpayment on a house in Canada.

"We have a future here," adds Vasyl. "It's our home, and we want to be great Canadians."

Another Ukrainian family Madsen has helped from their arrival in Niagara, Maryna Yermeni and her two daughters, Myra Yermeni, 10, and Iryna Izovita, 21, have found a home to rent in a nice neighbourhood in the Port Weller area. Both women work in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Maryna and Iryna initially found work in the housekeeping department of a local hotel, just four days after they arrived in Niagara, but Madsen has since helped Maryna set up her own cleaning business, with most of her clients in NOTL. Her mother Tetiana Kulchystska has since come from Ukraine to live with them, and helps out with the cleaning business. Iryna has now found a job as a server with 124 on Queen.

"Shirley (Madsen) helped us to find very good people," Iryna says of her mother's clients and the people she works for at the boutique Queen Street hotel.

"We came here to feel safe," she translates for her mother, saying her main purpose in leaving Ukraine

was for her children to be safe. "She wanted to live in a country where there was no war, and where there was a good future for her kids."

They too are waiting for permanent resident status.

She explains that when they left Odessa, they were living on the 14th floor of an apartment building, "and when the bombing started, it would shake," she says.

Maryna is an accountant by profession, and worked in management for an energy company where electricity was produced, which was a target for bombing. For a time Maryna was working in the basement of the building, but she feared more attacks.

For her daughters, there was no school, and no university — Iryna studied for her bachelor's degree in international relations, and when they left, she was continuing at university, learning English and Chinese, as well as working in a kindergarten. She had hoped for an international job as a translator.

Myra is the only one of the family who admits to wishing she could go home — she left her best friend when they came to Canada, and she still misses her.

"Before the war, I never thought about moving abroad," says Maryna. But once she realized they had to leave, Iryna talked her into coming to Canada, where her English would be helpful.

Maryna laughs and says "I knew no English. Zero." Although she is picking up some English from her clients, she is too exhausted at

the end of the day to go to classes.

And Tetiana, also laughing, repeats the words she knows: "Hello. Excuse me. Sorry." But the two sisters speak perfect English, helping out when needed.

Maryna says she loves her work, her clients and even their pets — she knows all their names, feeds them and loves that they are there when she cleans.

She misses her sister, who lives far from the bombing in Ukraine and feels safe there, "but I talk to her every day."

She tells The Local she has three dreams: "One is no war in Ukraine. Two, I want to buy a house, and have a garden and a dog. And three, I want a husband."

Iryna laughs at her and tells her to hush, but Maryna is honest — she hopes for a husband to share her future.

She loves her job, and "I put my soul into it. I work hard and I want to be the best I can be." She could use more clients, both homes and businesses, she says, and would like to be able to provide work for others who are recent arrivals in Canada.

Iryna explains when she went to university "my mother told me work with your brains, not your hands. But when we came to Canada she understood she would have to start from the beginning and work hard and that's what she has done. We are grateful to be here. The most important thing is we are all alive."

Living on Four Mile

Creek are Valeriia and Vitaly Saksina, and their daughters Vitalina, 12, who goes to St. Michael, and Viktoriia, 15, a student at Laura Secord.

In a recent meeting with The Local, Viktoriia does most of the translating for her parents. Their English has improved — they both go to classes in the evening — but they are happy to have Viktoriia, whose English is perfect, speak for them.

Vitaly works at Oliv, doing whatever needs to be done, from production to deliveries, and Valeriia has been baking at Bubble Tea on Queen Street. They both speak very highly of their employers, and feel fortunate to work for "really good people, lovely people," says Valeriia, but her hours have been cut back for the season, and she stresses she really needs to find more work, which is a struggle.

Vitalina is happy at school, has made friends, and loves "recess and gym," she says. Viktoriia is part of the concert choir and jazz choir at Laura Secord — she has performed in three concerts at the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre, and that has meant a lot to her.

They left a good life behind in Ukraine, she says. At home, Vitaly was an able seaman, often away, and Valeriia had a small retail stationary business. They lived in an apartment September to May, and had a seven-bedroom home on the sea where they lived from May to September, her mother looking after guests, running what is similar to

the bed and breakfasts in NOTL.

As much as they miss that life, "we love Canada," she says. When the bombing started very suddenly, her dad was far away, and nobody knew what was happening or what to do. Valeriia was on her own trying to keep her family safe. Coming to Canada was the right move. "It's a nice place to live. The people here are very welcoming and make us feel at home. My parents understand there are opportunities here, and they are grateful."

Her father still feels "a pull to go home," she translates for him, "but my parents are definitely here to give their children a safe place to live. Living with the alarms and sirens was emotionally difficult. Our schools are still open but if there is a siren we would have to go to the basement. It's stressful for teachers because they have to protect their kids' lives. And it's stressful for parents because they don't know what's happening, if their kids are alive. Our school was close to a military station, not the safest place to be."

Their home was a small town called Bilhorod-Dnistrovshki, a port just south of Odessa on the Black Sea, with a lot of history. Viktoriia proudly shows photos of the tourist town, with visitors coming to see the vineyards, where many residents make their own wine, the museum and a fort that has activities she describes as very much like the re-enactments at Fort George. The difference, she

says, is that their town's history goes back many more years — the fort was built in the 13th century.

Talk of their homeland and showing photos of it is nostalgic for them, but Valeriia brings the discussion back to the present, asking her daughter to pass on her message that "Canadian people have been so welcoming. Shirley (Madsen) has been helping us since we first got here. It was good to have someone to explain how things work here, someone who speaks Ukrainian and can help us understand. She helps us anytime we had a problem."

Valeriia adds "a huge thank you to Canada, to its government for providing the opportunity to come here, to live in a safe place, and to have a fresh start in life."

Madsen too had a message for The Local to pass on: St. John Ukrainian Catholic Church in St. Catharines, which began offering assistance to Ukrainians as they arrived in Niagara, is still collecting medical supplies to send to Ukraine. It has also been raising money to buy drones to send home and would welcome cash donations. For more information visit stjohnnuc.com.

Madsen began flying a Ukrainian flag outside her home when the war began, and now hopes to have it signed by locals. The flag will be at The Local office on Four Mile Creek Road, opposite the town hall, Friday, Jan. 19, and Friday, Jan. 26 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. for anyone who wants to stop by.

Lifelong music lover builds community of Ukesters

Mike Balsom
The Local

For Alan Ash, the Niagara-on-the-Lake Ukesters is a total labour of love.

Since he and his Village neighbour Doug Widdicombe started the group in July 2012, Ash has watched it grow in size, with almost 470 current members today. But more importantly he's seen the joy on the members' faces as they gather at the NOTL community centre for weekly sessions.

He's also seen the transformation of a number of his fellow Ukesters, many of whom

had never considered their own musical potential prior to joining. As well, he's proud of their efforts in fundraising, to the tune of more than \$40,000 over the past 10 years that the group has donated to local causes.

Music has been a part of Ash's life since his days growing up in Washington, D.C.

A young Ash first learned to play the piano. When he was 14 years old, the bass player in his older brother Richard's band quit, and he asked Alan if he was interested in taking his place. He picked up the four-stringed

instrument and his career as a gigging musician began.

"I played in cover bands all over the Maryland, D.C. and Virginia areas," the 73-year-old says. "My love affair with the bass started at that point."

Following high school, Ash attended American University in Washington then went on to earn an MBA in finance while working as a computer systems analyst and playing gigs sometimes six nights a week.

He met and married his wife, Diana, and around 1980 the couple moved to Gainesville, Florida, where

he worked in the auditor's department at the city. Before they moved to Florida, however, he had to find out if he would be able to find an opportunity to play his bass.

"I went there and auditioned with a band at the Holiday Inn," he recalls with a laugh. "I got a gig with them, and I went back home and told Diana that we were moving there. We had two kids by then, and my wife's parents and her two sisters were there. We were moving to be closer to them."

Slowly, Ash's musical tastes shifted from soul, funk

and rock to jazz. He switched from the electric bass to an upright bass and played in a jazz combo for many years in Gainesville as he climbed that city's corporate ladder.

In 2004 a job offer came from the City of Toronto auditor general's office. The adventurous couple pulled up their American roots and moved to Canada.

"Moving from Florida, people were telling us we were going the wrong way," laughs Ash. "It's the best decision we've ever made, though. I think I'm a way better fit for Canada."

In 2010 they bought their house in NOTL, but kept a place in Toronto as Alan continued to work for the city while also playing in a Toronto jazz trio until his retirement in 2015. Along the way, the couple took the step to become dual citizens of both Canada and the U.S. in 2013.

The idea for the NOTL Ukesters grew out of a visit by Ash to a Toronto restaurant where a group of about 75 ukulele players were performing. His group started small, with about seven to 20 people coming out for early sessions.

As more and more people began to catch on, Ash found himself putting more work into organizing things. He books the community centre room, administers a website where he posts ukulele tablatures and audio clips, chooses the set list, collects the \$15 monthly from active members (about 80 of them) and makes quarterly donations to local organizations such as Red Roof Retreat, Hospice Niagara, NOTL Palliative Care and Crossroads Elementary School.

"It seems as it's grown it's become a bit like a part-time job," he says. "We play at the Best Western in St. Catharines once a month, too. Before that we used to play at the Sandtrap and for a while we were playing at Monty's GastroPub in St. Catharines."

Besides those gigs and the Sunday afternoon sessions, Ash also runs smaller open mic sessions and willingly and eagerly steps up to teach newbies how to play the uke in eight-week Zoom or in-person sessions. One can imagine that his gentle manner and his enthusiasm for the instrument and music in general make him easy to learn from.

"It's like the bass in that it has four strings," he says, "but it's very different. As far as legitimate instruments go, though, you can basically learn four chords and play hundreds, if not thousands of tunes if you learn the basics of strumming. That gives most people a lot of inertia to keep learning."

Alan Mills bought a ukulele about five years ago. The isolation of COVID prompted him to finally pick it up and learn to play, gathering

with three friends in outdoor sessions. When the other three stopped playing, he decided to join the Ukesters.

"I took Alan's lessons in the fall," says the 78-year-old from St. Catharines. "I'm getting better, more confident. I love playing for my 19-month-old granddaughter Cecile. She seems to love my playing."

New NOTL resident Dave Senior was at the community centre one day and stumbled onto the Ukesters. Intrigued, he picked up his long-neglected ukulele and started coming out to the Sunday sessions.

"I used to play just a couple of chords on the guitar," he says. "I caught on fairly quickly, especially compared with guitar. The nylon strings are easier on your hands, too. The planning that Alan does, with the setlists and the song sheets; he makes it so easy. The social thing is a real draw for me."

Ash says the popularity of the group is due to three components.

First is the music itself, and the camaraderie that it inspires, the social interaction that comes with playing together being a key element. For some members who live on their own it's an important regular chance to gather with friends.

Next is the encouragement the Ukesters gives to many to step outside their comfort zone by leading the group for a song and taking the microphone in smaller open mic sessions. The third component is the feel-good aspect of giving back to the community through those quarterly donations.

Ash looks back on his days playing in bands with fondness. He was much younger then, having a lot of fun playing and getting paid for it.

"I did love that at a different level," he says. "I do this, though, for nothing. I would never want to get paid for this. I get so much more out of this. Some of the joy in this is that great feeling you get from giving. Tangible compensation would ruin that."

The soft-spoken father of two and grandfather of four has recently been teaching his 15-year-old grandson how to play the uke.

"I've been teaching him guitar, bass and singing, too," he says. "It's great. It's so much fun."

And that's the thing about the ukulele. It's such an uplifting, positive-sounding instrument. Ash says it's hard not to smile when he looks out at the 45 to 75 members who show up to the community centre every Sunday.

And he promises that he gets as much out of his efforts as he puts into them.

"I'm nothing without this group," Ash insists. "But the credit really goes to the people that come out every week. Without them, none of it happens."



Alan Ash playing his banjolele at a recent NOTL Ukesters session at the community centre. (Photos by Mike Balsom)



Dave Senior and Alan Mills are both fairly new Ukesters and are learning to play the ukulele.



More than 40 Ukesters showed up for a recent Sunday session at the community centre.



Alan Ash (second from right) leads a large group of ukulele players in a pre-Christmas session.

What's for dinner?



Susan Kelly's tribute to her late husband, Ernie Kister, comes to life at the NOTL Public Library, where a new play kitchen delights toddlers Miles Bowie, 25 months old, and Hartley Goertzen, 14 months. Kelly's generous gift fosters cooperation and creativity among the community's youngest members, says community engagement coordinator Debbie Krause. (Supplied)

Warm up at Pumphouse, surrounded by vibrant colours

Maria H. Klassen
The Local

With temperatures dropping this week, and a hint of snow in the air, we are feeling winter in Niagara. If you are unable to go south to warm up, come into the Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre in Niagara-on-the-Lake. The warm and vibrant colours of the current exhibit will warm your heart, with the artwork of the members of the NOTL Arts Collective Group is featured in the Joyner room of the gallery until March 24, 2024.

"This show has become a reflection of the vibrant artistic pulse thriving within

Niagara-on-the-Lake," says Pumphouse director Rima Boles. "It not only highlights the growing recognition of visual arts in the community but also stands as a testament to the rich talents of the growing NOTL Arts Collective."

A variety of subjects can be found in the masterpieces featured by these local, professional artists. Lorraine Kelly's acrylic *With Age Comes Beauty* reminds us that spring follows winter. One can smell the flowers in Karola Steinbrecher's acrylic work entitled *Roses*, and in Sherron Moorhead's oil on canvas *Hydrangeas on Quartz*.

Old Wool Mill, Patricia Haftar's acrylic piece, takes us to the many hiking trails in Niagara, and the beautiful views as found in the soft pastel creation *Beauty Day* by Catherine Cullis.

With the proximity to water here in Niagara, we can identify with Rick Cullis' oil on canvas *Niagara Mist* and Tim Sullivan's acrylic *Waterfalls at Short Hills*. Memories of lazy summer afternoons spent on the water can be felt in *Sailboat Sunday*, mixed media by Julie Forrester Clark or Darren Cranford's oil on canvas artistic creation entitled *Flowerpot Island*. Peace and tranquility can be sensed in Marilyn Co-

chrane's acrylic *Study #2 for Ancient Echoes*, and in Ron Clavier's oil on canvas, *Seine Sunrise*.

Clark is participating in the exhibition for the first time. "I'm so happy and grateful to showcase my artwork alongside these very talented, high calibre artists in my town," she says.

Can't you just taste the flavourful peach in Lynne Weiner's acrylic *Peach Juice*?

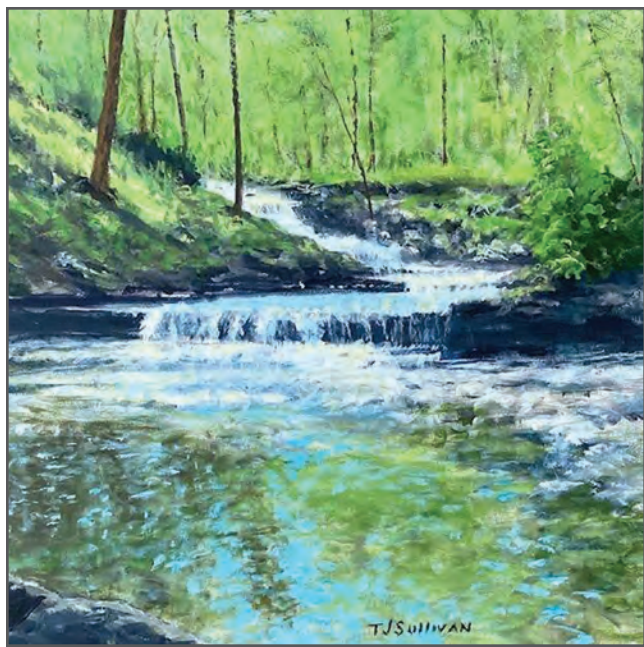
And let's not forget the creatures so artistically painted for us by Debbie Whitehouse in her watercolour picture *Chippy*, and Gord Rosewarne's acrylic piece *I See You*.

Susan Holly's stained

glass *Back to Earth*, and Julia Kane's fused glass work *Muskoka* add to the variety of medium used in this exhibit.

City of Poets mixed media by Lynn Gaetz is a rose-coloured dreamscape, and *Tables Two* a mixed media collage by Ron Boaks is a play of adding a still life to a still life.

Come out of the cold to this amazing exhibit, see what you can see in these works of art, and let them warm your heart. Be impressed by the amazing artistic talent found here in Niagara. The exhibit is free, and the gallery is open Tuesday to Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.



Pumphouse Waterfalls at Short Hills by Tim Sullivan



Flowerpot Island by Darren Cranford



Roses by Karola Steinbrecher



Old Wool Mill by Patricia Haftar

Learn about selfies, portraits and sinister plots

Local Staff
The Local

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum is ready to begin its next Virtual Lecture Series, bringing together a unique offering of specialists, storytellers, hobbyists and lovers of history. The lectures are offered weekly, via Zoom, on Wednesday mornings at 11 a.m., beginning Jan. 24 and running until Feb. 28.

The first of the series, on Jan. 24, is *The Art of Portraiture*, presented by Dr. Debra

Antonicic, director and curator for RiverBrink Art Museum. An art historian, Antonicic will illustrate how the impulse to capture a likeness of an individual has a long history, one that dates back thousands of years. Portraits, however, conveyed much more than just a likeness. "Your portrait told the world all about you," says Antonicic. "It showed your status, wealth, personality and a host of other details." This presentation, says a museum news release, "is a perfect comple-

ment to the NOTL Museum's current exhibition, *Strike a Pose*, which looks at how we have recorded our likeness for centuries."

Next, *Our Best Face Forward: The Selfie in Visual Culture*, on Jan 31, is another complement to the museum's exhibit, the news release says. Sonia de Lazzer, professor in art history, visual culture and curatorial studies at Brock University, will look at the selfie obsession in contemporary culture, and the intersections of technology, psychology

and society, from capturing our image on earth-orbiting spacewalks, to the massive self-documentation on social media.

The North Star: Canada and the Civil War Plots Against Lincoln, on Feb. 7, introduces Julian Sher to the NOTL Museum. An award-winning journalist and author, Sher has created a sweeping novel that tells the story of the Canadians and a handful of Confederate agents who played a much darker role in supporting the enslaved South than our history books tell us, and their participation in the formation of plots against Lincoln. As an investigative reporter, Sher worked for the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, and was a senior producer for CBC's *The Fifth Estate*.

Stay tuned for more information on the final three of the Virtual Lecture Series: *Ordnance Boundary Stones: Updates and Restoration* (Feb 14); *The Borderland: Black Agency and Resistance Between Two Nations* (Feb 21); and *Historically Hysterical* (Feb 28).

Registration is required to receive a Zoom link to attend the virtual series. Visit notlmuseum.ca or call 905-468-3912 for more information.



Portraits such as this one of John Crooks provide more than a likeness. (Photos supplied)



Julian Sher provides a different look at Canadians and their role in the American civil war.



Sarah Kaufman and Shawna Butts display the art of the selfie.

Predators take two wins from the Stars

Mike Balsom
The Local

With eight games left to play in the season, the Niagara Predators are in good position to make a run for fourth place in the South Division after sweeping Northumberland in a home-and-home series last weekend.

A complete game effort by the Preds resulted in an 8-2 victory over the Stars Friday night. They followed that up with a 4-3 nail-biter over the same team at the Keeler Centre in Colborne, Ont., Saturday.

Nolan Wyers opened the scoring 11:44 into the first period Friday, knocking the puck past Stars' goaltender Kaleb Ethier off a rebound. It only took 13 seconds more for the Preds to go up by two when Cameron Savoie got the puck

off the faceoff, skated over the Northumberland blueline and snapped a wrist shot into the upper right corner of the net. Later, during a penalty kill, Nicholas Nicoletti made it 3-0 when his backhand shot beat Ethier on a breakaway.

Luca Fernandez scored on a power play early in the second, and Savoie picked up his second of the night when his shot caromed off Stars defender Marrek Hennessy and into the net for a 5-0 lead.

Northumberland's Ross Maycock finally broke Niagara goalie Zane Clausen's shutout bid early in the third period, but Wyers responded with his second of the night off a pass from Reese Bisci. Shane Kaplan and Georgy Kholmovsky also added goals in the third as the Preds cruised to the 8-2 victory. "They played well," coach

Kevin Taylor said after the game. "There were a couple of small breakdowns, and it would have been nice to have gotten the shutout for Zane. But there was a lot of back-checking, and they did a lot of the little things tonight that they needed to do to make them successful."

On Saturday, an unassisted goal by Isaac Locker in the first and one on the powerplay from his linemate Fernandez in the second staked the Preds to a 2-0 lead after 40 minutes of play.

Northumberland's Logan Willis had a power play goal of his own at 7:41 of the third to close the gap, but Guy Manco and Declan Fogarty responded to put the Preds up 4-1. Late markers from the Stars' Maycock and Bode Dunford put the pressure on Niagara, but Clausen's strong play in net gave the Predators their second win in a row.

"We got two huge points this weekend," Taylor said Monday, "though we did make it more difficult than we should have Saturday. But we're going in the right direction right now. The boys were excited for the wins. In the dressing room, it's a positive thing for everyone right now."

The weekend's results moved the Preds up in the South Division standings into a tie for fifth place with the Tottenham Railers, who visit Virgil's Meridian Credit Union Arena this Friday night. Niagara has gone 3-3 against the Railers this season, winning their most recent meeting 5-4 on Jan. 5. Tottenham is currently on a three-game losing streak.

Only five points separate Niagara from the fourth place St. George Ravens. Looking to the end of the season, the Preds play Tottenham and the last place Toronto Flyers twice each, St. George three times and will wind down the schedule with a game against the first place North York Renegades Feb. 16.

"The schedule was heavy on the stronger teams the first part of the season," Taylor reflected. "It's the way it worked based on who had ice available. It's nice to be getting a bit of a break from playing against the top teams. We'll be battling against teams we should beat."

Taylor added that he feels the Predators have under-achieved thus far because of that schedule anomaly.

"It took a little while for the guys to gel as a team," he admits. "If we had won more games at the start of the season, those close games that we have been giving up, we probably wouldn't have given them up because they would have known how to win."

With the league's trade deadline having just passed Monday, the Predators' roster is set for the stretch and beyond into the playoffs.



Cameron Savoie had two goals and one assist in the 8-2 win Friday night against the Northumberland Stars. (Photos by Mike Balsom)



Nicholas Nicoletti scored with this backhand shot on Stars goalie Kaleb Ethier to put the Preds up 3-0 in the first period.




Reese Bisci attempts to score on Stars goalie Lukas Novy.

They've picked up two new players recently. Logan Pegg, a 15-year-old forward from Grimsby played in both of last weekend's games, and Niagara Falls native Tyler DeCoff, a 21-year-old defenceman with former stints with the Greater Ontario Junior B Hockey

League's Fort Erie Meteors and Pelham Panthers as well as with the Sioux Lookout Bombers of the Superior International Junior A Hockey League, is expected to be available this Friday. "Heading into Friday, we'll have our new guys in the lineup, and we'll make a few po-

sitional changes," Taylor said. "We'll do a little fine-tuning of everything to get all the cogs moving smoothly. From this point it's a matter of getting everyone to buy into what we want them to do." Game time Friday night is 7:30 p.m.

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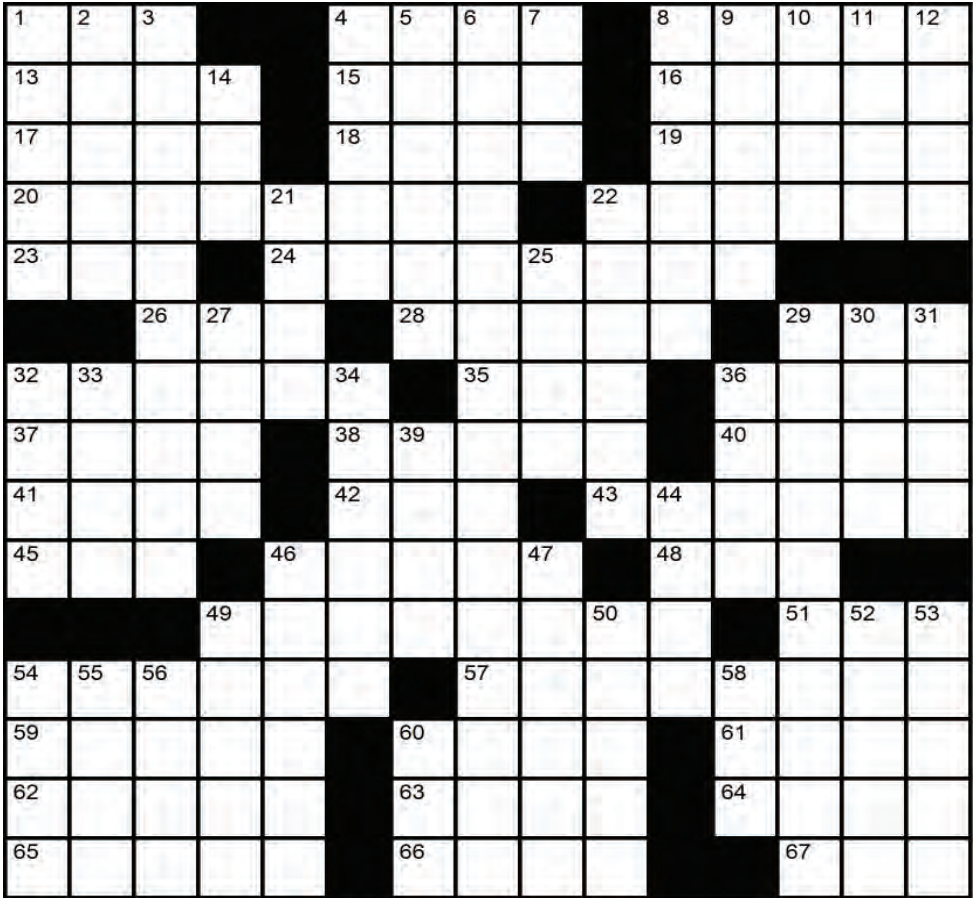
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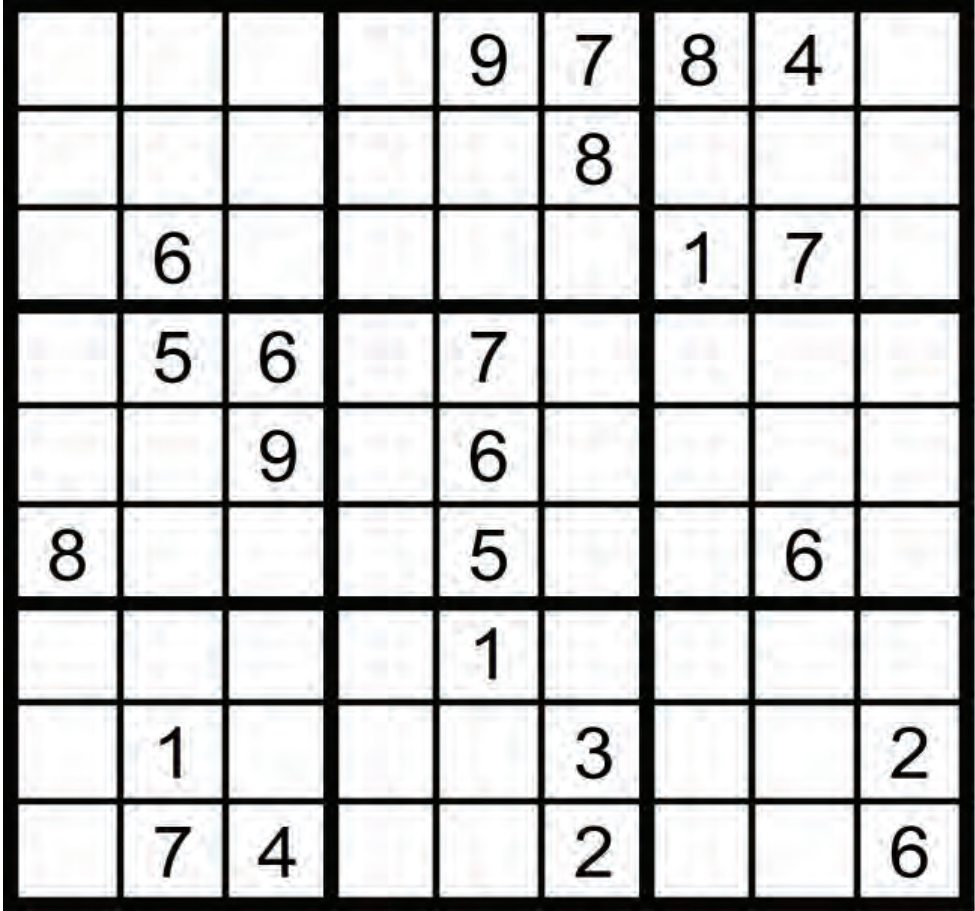
CROSSWORD AND SUDOKU



- Across:**

 - 1 School org.
 - 4 Emit
 - 8 Tenet
 - 13 In case
 - 15 Tennis ace --- Sampras
 - 16 Fault
 - 17 A law --- himself
 - 18 Behavioral and learning problem
 - 19 Refractor
 - 20 Resident of Rabat, perhaps
 - 22 Fragile
 - 23 Sis sib.
 - 24 Faith
 - 26 E.g. United Way
 - 28 Frightening
 - 29 1/1000 inches
 - 32 News exclusives
 - 35 Alliance of some former Soviet countries
 - 36 Buffalo Bill
 - 37 Where we all started
 - 38 Consequence of driving over a nail
 - 40 Baking chamber
 - 41 Copies
 - 42 Female deer
 - 43 Resident of Damascus, e.g.
- Down:**

 - 1 Exactly vertical
 - 2 E.g. Pavarotti
 - 3 Stargazer
 - 4 Room
 - 5 Foot controls
 - 6 Type of war crime
 - 7 Espouse
 - 8 Arrange in battle formation
 - 9 Utah senator --- Hatch
 - 10 Dismal
 - 11 Rolling stones lack it, but the Rolling Stones don't
- 45 For each
 - 46 Boring
 - 48 Lyric poem
 - 49 Foliage
 - 51 Navigational aid
 - 54 Wanness
 - 57 Gunfight
 - 59 Elite group
 - 60 Turkish currency
 - 61 Software test version
 - 62 Below
 - 63 Arthurian lady
 - 64 Bohemian
 - 65 Jottings
 - 66 They hatch
 - 67 Distress message
 - 12 Ground forces
 - 14 Also
 - 21 Trim
 - 22 Groundbreakers
 - 25 Earth goddess
 - 27 Sailors
 - 29 Cinema buffs
 - 30 Notion
 - 31 Coal Miner's Daughter, Loretta ---
 - 32 Exchange
 - 33 Manage
 - 34 More morose
 - 36 Volume of wood
 - 39 Golfer's shout
 - 44 Up-and-down toy
 - 46 Inviting smells
 - 47 Lou ---, baseballer who gave his name to a disease
 - 49 Angry stare
 - 50 Highways
 - 52 Renaissance cherub
 - 53 Remains
 - 54 Annoying person
 - 55 Periodic Table abbr.
 - 56 Departed
 - 58 Details not yet set (Abbr.)
 - 60 Sheltered side



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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Sudoku solution from January 10, 2024

7	5	1	6	3	8	9	2	4
2	6	8	5	9	4	7	3	1
9	3	4	1	2	7	6	5	8
3	2	9	8	7	6	4	1	5
5	4	6	9	1	2	8	7	3
1	8	7	3	4	5	2	6	9
6	1	2	4	5	9	3	8	7
8	9	3	7	6	1	5	4	2
4	7	5	2	8	3	1	9	6

Across: 1 P T A, 4 Spew, 8 Dogma, 13 Left, 15 Pete, 16 Error, 17 Unto, 18 A D H D, 19 Prism, 20 Moroccan, 22 Filmy, 23 Bro, 24 Religion, 26 N-G O, 28 Scary, 29 Mill, 32 Scoops, 35 C I S, 36 Cody, 37 Womb, 38 A flat, 40 Over, 41 Apes, 42 Doe, 43 Syrian, 45 Per, 46 A drag, 48 Ode, 49 Greenery, 51 G P S, 54 Pallor, 57 Shoot-out, 59 A-team, 60 Lira, 61 Beta, 62 Intra, 63 Enid, 64 Arty, 65 Notes, 66 Eggs, 67 S O S.
Down: 1 Plumb, 2 Tenor, 3 Astronomer, 4 Space, 5 Pedals, 6 Ethnic cleansing, 7 Wed, 8 Deploy, 9 Orn, 10 Grim, 11 Moss, 12 Army, 14 Too, 21 Crop, 22 Firsts, 25 Gala, 27 Gobs, 29 Moviegoers, 30 Idea, 31 Lynn, 32 Swap, 33 Cope, 34 Sadder, 36 Cord, 39 Fore, 44 Yo-yo, 46 Aromas, 47 Gehng, 49 Glare, 50 Roads, 52 Putto, 53 Stays, 54 Pain, 55 At No, 56 Left, 58 T B A, 60 Lee.

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The Niagara-on-the-Lake *Local* The Trusted Voice of Our Community

Icewine Festival events ramp up this weekend

Penny Coles
The Local

The quick change from balmy temperatures to blistering winter conditions on the weekend couldn't have made for a more appropriate time to celebrate icewine. This year, for the first time, the Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce and Tourism NOTL decided to offer three weekends of icewine events, beginning with a small icewine village at the Outlet Collection of Niag-

ara last weekend. Jessica Taylor, the chamber's manager of events, says despite the high winds, blowing snow and temporary closure of the QEW Saturday, the turnout at the outdoor mall, under a tent with fire pits for warmth, was good. Sunday was starting out with a steady stream of visitors as well. Eighteen wineries participated, and the popular local DJ Marinko added to the sense of celebration. "It's definitely something we plan to do again

next year. This was an introduction — it will be an expanded event next year," Taylor said. The annual centrepiece of the festival is the Icewine Village on Queen

Street, scheduled for Jan. 20 to 21 and 27 to 28, where the focus will be on culinary offerings paired with the region's renowned icewines, says a chamber news release. The Sparkle and Ice Cel-

ebration, a combination of a gala and the Icewine Cocktail Competition, will be hosted on Jan. 26 at the historic Court House on Queen Street, with a fireworks display to complete

the evening. For more information about the festival, details on the Sparkle & Ice event, and VIP access to the Icewine Village, visit niagaraonthelake.com.



DJ Marinko, well-known locally for his talent spinning tunes, adds some warmth to the Icewine Festival.



Blair Lowndes from Chateau des Charmes Winery and Tyler Laws from Niagara College offer to pour their icewines. (Photos by Penny Coles)



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