Peller on a mission to take wine industry to next level

Mike Balsom
The Local

It’s time for Niagara’s wine industry to move to the next level, and John Peller is leading the charge to get it there.

With the support of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce, Peller gathered a group of movers and shakers from the local wine and tourism industries at Peller Estates Winery to outline his vision to transform Niagara into a premium wine destination.

His mission, he stated to a group that included owners and winemakers from various wineries, owners of other businesses and representatives from NOTL council, is to unite all sectors of the local economy so they can fully grasp how a premium wine economy can have an effect on each of them.

“We need government and policy-makers to unite around this reality, that building a premium wine industry and economy has such incredible benefits, that it needs to be understood, validated and be irrefutable.”

The Officer of the Order of Canada pointed out that France and Italy are number one and two in the world in tourism. In both of those countries, he added, tourism is responsible for at least 15 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In contrast, tourism accounts for only one per cent of Ontario’s GDP.

Also in both of those countries, Peller added, grape growing is held up as the highest end of the chain in agriculture.

“The cost of land is expensive, and so is the cost of farming,” Peller said. “You really need the right agricultural policies to support it, to support next-gen farming. That is where we’ve not done as well. We’ve done well making great wines, but there’s another level we have to get to.”

That level, Peller explained, is the premium wine level. He defined that as primarily reds that sell for at least $50 a bottle. To illustrate such a wine, members of the Peller hospitality staff distributed glasses of the winery’s JDP Signature Series Red, an $80 bottle of wine made by winemaker Katie Dickieson.

“If there’s any doubt whatsoever that we can make wine as good as the very best...”
St. Davids neighbours petition for Tawny Ridge plan changes

Zahraa Hmood Special to The Local

The residents of St. Davids neighbourhood are taking their concerns over a large-scale development being proposed this winter to Niagara-on-the-Lake town officials, calling elements of the project “detrimental to the fabric of the community.”

Countryside Valley Estates residents have brought a petition to the municipality with 96 signatures of those who share concerns about the draft plans of Tawny Ridge Estates, which could add 86 new homes to a block of land at Tanbark Road and Warner Road.

“We are not against growth,” reads the petition, “but we respectfully ask that growth, “ reads the petition, “of Tawny Ridge Estates, which residents have brought a petition of the project “detrimental to the fabric of the community.”

“Mean issues for the neighbourhood’s privacy, noise levels, streetscape and cultural heritage,” they say.

According to the developers’ plans, however, they’ve taken steps to lessen these potential impacts, and argue this plan is part of the province’s directive to provide more housing, both quantity and variety, for people across Ontario.

The town hosted a public meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 14, on an application submitted by property owners Veronica and Mihai Balaj, who want to build an 18-metre-tall, 41-unit residential building at 223 and 227 Mary St.

This is the second time a residential development is being proposed on this property. In 2016, council shot down an application from the previous owner John Perry, requesting Official Plan and zoning by-law amendments to build a four-storey, 76-unit apartment.

The new plan, presented last Tuesday night, were met with poor reception from some residents.

“I am not opposed to development,” said Shaw’s Lane resident Bob Bader. “However, the proposed building's details, such as its height and size in comparison to surrounding homes, will mean issues for the neighbourhood’s privacy, noise levels, streetscape and cultural heritage,” they say.

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“I am not opposed to development,” said Shaw’s Lane resident Bob Bader. “However, the rezoning requests.

The site-specific changes, the petition argues, should either match or not exceed changes to zoning requirements approved for Courtenay Valley in November 2011.

That development included requirements such as a maximum building height of 10.67 metres and two stores, and a maximum lot coverage of 45 per cent for bungalows and 1.5 storey buildings with an enclosed porch and deck, and 38 per cent for two-storey dwellings with a porch and deck, which should be the maximum allowed for Tawny Ridge, the petition said.

This project and others in development this year in Niagara-on-the-Lake come after the Ontario government began allowing taller residential intensification targets for a four-storey apartment.

“The provincial directive right now is that we’re in a housing crisis,” Bader said during the open house, “and we need to provide more housing.”

The petition also highlights what residents see as a traffic concern, noting on-the-Lake route 26 open house on the Mary Street project.

Lim reminded residents of the Provincial Policy Statement and Planning Act which highlight the Ontario government’s goal of increasing development and housing options.

According to Lim and NPG Planning Solutions, the Mary Street project is ideal for accommodating a higher-density development, since it’s close to key regional and arterial roads and commercial activities.

On the condo’s height and bulk, she said the project’s architect has designed it with sloped roofs, the standard front, rear and interior side yard setbacks for the residential zoning they are proposing, and trees to lessen the impact of its size. As well, these features “will enhance privacy for the development” and mitigate noise, Lim said.

Niagara-on-the-Lake’s Official Plan speaks of the municipality’s plan to accommodate a higher-density development and high-rise buildings out of the historical parts of town.

The Town’s Official Plan consists of low-rise structures in a small town setting with a large number of historic buildings, and adjoining Niagara-on-the-Lake’s Official Plan. “Generally, the building height has not exceeded 11 metres,” the plan states, “which would keep the low-rise character should be maintained.”

Lim described the homes surrounding the subject lands as appearing to be “the typical construction of the last 70 years,” and noted Mary Street is not within the heritage conservation district.

It is also not a designated property or adjacent to a designated property,” she added. “So, there are no impacts to cultural heritage from a planning perspective.”

Several residents pointed to the fact that these surrounding homes, while not historical, are considerably smaller than the proposed building.

“We need this kind of housing in our area, we agree to that,” said Gage Street resident Judy McLeod, “but not at the expense of an established residential neighbourhood of primarily bungalows.”

The town next step is to respond to the application and develop the urban design committee for review during its next meeting in March, following which its comments will be sent to the developers and planners for review, giving them a chance to respond or challenge them.

As with all development proposals which come before the municipality, councilors are not allowed to share personal opinions on the development in question until staff come forward with a full report, which will include its recommendations concerning the requested amendments and whether the municipal council should approve the project.
Continued from page 1

in the world,” Peller said, “that will prove we can.”

The University of Western Ontario law graduate went on to outline the value that a premium wine industry brings to all aspects of a local economy, using the transformation of California’s Napa Valley over the last 25 years as an example.

He pointed out the beauty of Niagara’s landscape, including the two lakes and the Niagara River, as well as Niagara College, Brock University and the Shaw Festival Theatre as incredible assets that can be built upon as his vision evolves.

“We need to shuttle people across the lake from Toronto,” he added. “We live on a lake, we’re called Niagara-on-the-Lake, and there’s so much to the lake that we have to explore. And on the hospitality and tourism side, we’re doing a great job, but we need to have the courage to work and grow together.”

Andrew Peller Ltd. bought the Riverbend Inn, situated next to the Peller Estates property, in 2020. Peller explained to the gathering his company’s plans to transform Riverbend into an iconic, Four Seasons winery hotel that would put Niagara on the luxury map across the world.

“We’re working with everyone in the town to get their input and support,” he said about the potential project. “We think this will be a great thing for our town. If we have the ambition of being the best in the world then we need to be competitive at all levels with the best in the world.”

Besides working together, getting Niagara’s economy to that next level will take some advocacy at all levels of government.

“We have challenges with the policies that support the wine and hospitality here (in Ontario),” Peller said.

During a question and answer session hosted by Shaw Festival executive director and CEO Tim Jennings, Peller lamented the economic pressures the wine industry faces due to taxation.

“We are a grossly over-taxed industry,” he said. “Sadly we’ve more managed as an industry by the people who manage sin taxes and lotteries and gaming. It’s a bizarre aspect to our existence here. Normally around the world the wine industry is the flag bearer of the agricultural economy because of its value.”

He also lamented the pushback received by the LCBO when trying to ensure that domestic wines dominate the home market, and the inability of Ontario’s wine industry to distribute its products directly rather than through the provincially-controlled retail organization.

Following the presentation, Jamie Slingerland, director of viticulture at Peller Estates Winery, agreed with Peller on those points.

“When you have one house,” Slingerland said, “there’s an advantage to being an importer selling wine in Ontario. Until the LCBO’s mandate changes from just making money to supporting the domestic industry, nothing will change. Government has been very resistant to that change.”

Slingerland agreed that not all of Niagara’s wineries would be able to step up to producing premium wines, but also agreed that Peller’s proposal would leave room for all levels and tiers of wines.

“When we talk about premium wines, it’s because we want the world to see what we are capable of producing,” he told The Local. “You establish your reputation on the premiums. For example, icewine has led the industry with regards to opening some doors. But if we win multiple international awards for our premium red wines, people will take notice.”

Debi Pratt, who was on the ground floor with Donald Ziraldo in the early days of Inniskillin Wines, applauded Peller’s approach, and said his experience and connections will do him well in moving forward on his vision.

“John made some really good points,” Pratt said during a post-presentation reception. “We’re 40 years in, and nothing’s changed with the taxes. And he’s done the right thing, just like Donald looked 40 years ago at California and Australia, and chose to plant new varietals back then. And John touched on how much our population and our government support our industry.”

“Four Niagara-on-the-Lake wineries were named in Ontario’s top 20 attractions,” Minerva Ward, president and CEO of the NOTL Chamber of Commerce and Tourism NOTL, pointed out. “Konzelman, Reif, Chateau des Charmes and Peller Estates. This speaks to our prominence of our wine industry. The wine industry continues to drive our economic outcomes.”

“It’s really about uniting all the stakeholders in the Niagara Region,” Peller summed up, “to organise and co-ordinate more our views and ambitions. It’s important to be driven by a vision.”

Image of the proposed Four Seasons hotel at Riverbend.
Voice acting runs in musical family of young Kaia Oz

Mike Balsom
The Local

At only 10 years old, Kaia Ozdemir has already played a pony, a construction crane, a mer-pup (cross between a mermaid and a puppy) and a joko-telling aquarium fish. If you have children who watch My Little Pony, PAW Patrol, Thomas & Friends or Lucas the Spider, chances are her voice has rung out through your television speakers at some point in the past few months.

Now, the effervescent and energetic pre-teen, known professionally as Kaia Oz, can be seen playing herself in Gisele's Mashup Adventures, an animated upper preschool series on CBC Gem where each three-episode topic takes inspiration from the creative ideas of children. Kaia is already a four-year veteran of voice acting, having followed her father, Evren, into the field. Evren is a musician, producer, composer and rapper, who has released music under his own name as well as under the name Strangers on a Plane, a duo he created with his wife and Kaia’s mom, singer Courtney Brookes.

The close-knit family of four, including Kaia’s soccer-playing older brother Zeren, moved to Niagara-on-the-Lake in 2020, renting a home off of Lakeshore Road, where they immediately fell in love with the rural lifestyle, raising chickens in their back yard.

A lifelong musician, Evren had rung out through your television speakers at some point in the past few months.

When asked if it bothers her, Kaia emphatically replies, “No, because I know I’ll get more in the future. There will be more opportunities that will come. It’s fine by me.”

“I’m not like, “ she adds, putting her palm on her forehead and dramatically tilting her head back, “Oh no, I’m not going to get it, oh noooooo! I’ve done so many auditions for the same show for so many different characters.”

And she’s said no to scripts in the past as well.

“I sometimes it’s for a character that she doesn’t really feel for, that she doesn’t feel comfortable doing,” says Courtney. “So we give her that space to choose not to do it.”

In conversation with her family about her career, Kaia, who is home-schooled, tosses aside any need for an overall schedule to adhere to. And she’s said no to scripts in the past as well.

In the meantime, there’s still a lot of work to do.

Romano adds that Kaia is a pretty special kid.

“She’s a smart kid, so her reading ability is off the charts,” enthuses the agent. “She grew up in the studio, so she had a really good understanding right from the start about what the business was. And her enthusiasm and ability to take direction, she just naturally got it. She’s got this cute voice that people love, and she has the energy.”

Romano is not at all surprised that Kaia gets callback after callback for her auditions. And the agent’s original nervousness about the youngster being overworked has been allayed.

“I asked her Dad if he thought she should slow down,” Romano laughs. “But he assured me that she loves it. I think the fact that she’s home-schooling, there’s a little less pressure on her as far as having a schedule to adhere to. And Dad is all set up at home. It’s a perfect set-up for a kid like her to blossom.”

As Kaia’s career continues to blossom, she isn’t resting on her laurels. She’s begun taking musical theatre classes through Virgil Faylor Door Theatre Project, working on other aspects of performance. She hopes to win a role in one of the non-profit theatre company’s upcoming onstage productions.

Last year she auditioned for a new animated preschool series called Magnificent, to be produced by Couple Entertainment’s Nefusa, based on Canadian author and illustrator Ashley Spires’ book The Most Magnificent Thing. The 32-episode series has been green-lit and will launch next year with Kaia playing the titular character.

And Dad has been busy building a set in the family’s barn on their rented property for an original children’s show he hopes to write and produce that will see him and Kaia on screen together. He’s planning to involve the entire family in the recording of a children’s album in the very near future.

In the meantime, there’s another magnificent Millie that needs tending to at home, in the form of the new family puppy, Millie Whispaw, currently acclimatizing to life in the Ozdemir/Brookes home. And like the Magnificent Millie whose voice is to be provided by Kaia for 52 episodes, she is very, very animated, albeit in a very different way.

Kaia with older brother Zeren, mom Courtney Brookes, and dad Evren Ozdemir.

Voice actor Kaia Oz records in her dad’s home studio.

Kaia holding a stuffed animal of the character from PAW Patrol, Coral, that she voices. (Photos supplied)
Little opposition to plans for lot next to historic site

A drawing to show the design of the house to be built on a lot severed from the William and Susannah Steward House. (Supplied)

Mike Balsom
The Local

Unlike the outcry against a much larger development at Stoneworth, there was little public opposition at last week’s public meeting to an application to sever a lot at 507 Butler Street.

Owner Bruce Harvey has owned the land since 2009. It is currently part of the William and Susannah Steward Homestead, a historic site and community of former Canadian slaves, Black Loyalists and African American refugees who owned about 10 per cent of the lots in town by the middle of the century. The majority of the Black families lived south of William Street between Regent and Simcoe streets.

The Niagara Foundation purchased the Steward House, which had experienced many changes through the years, to rescue it from development.

The group completed the exterior in 2006, restoring it to its appearance in 1834. The 1.5-storey house was designed under the Ontario Heritage Act in 2003, cov- ering the original facade, structure of the house, and the chimney. In 2006, the Foundation applied for and received a zoning change to institutional, which had experienced many changes through the years, to rescue it from development.

The only other speaker about the project was lawyer Patrick Maloney, on behalf of Tim Moson, who owns the home adjacent to the vacant lot.

"On its face, my client is opposed to any development on the subject lands," said Maloney. "My client has concerns with the location of the potential dwelling and concerns about drainage from the subject lands onto his property."

Maloney went on to say, however, that Moson is taking a cooperative approach with NPG Planning Solutions, who are involved in Harvey’s application, that three archaeological surveys turned up nothing of historical significance, he said he is now able to accept the severance.

Shepherds concern, focused on the possibility of any important historical artifacts potentially being found on the lot, was first raised at the Jan. 30 open house.

However, after getting clarification from NPG Planning Solutions, who are involved in Harvey’s application, that three archaeological surveys turned up nothing of historical significance, he said he is now able to accept the severance.

Paul Shepherd, a former president and current director of the Niagara Foundation, said at the meeting that he was disappointed at the prospect of the severance of the land, given its history.

Shepherd is concerned with the location of the potential dwelling and concerns about drainage from the subject lands onto his property. He also hopes that the trees currently buffering Moxon’s house from the newly severed lot, was first raised at the Jan. 30 open house.

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Maloney also requested that a lot grading and drainage plan be provided to Moson prior to any building project being approved, to ensure no additional drainage will encroach on his property.

As well, Maloney wanted assurances that the trees currently buffering Moson’s house from the lot in question be preserved, and that some additional vegetation be planted to ensure privacy.

Special thanks to:
Your TV - Cable 10, Chuck Lefleur & Angus Gillespie (Parade Announcers), Steve Watson, Ward Simpson, Niagara Regional Police Service and Auxiliary, Niagara Parks Police, Royal Canadian Legion, Sentinel Carriages, Town Staff, Vintage Inns, and Niagara Home Bakery.

Thank you also to the Button Sales team, spearheaded by John Streeker and friends, and to the numerous Parade Marshalls.

These volunteers continued support and assistance during parade day makes it all come together!

An especially grateful thank you to Committee members Darka Jensen, Paul Mace, John Streeker, Pat Tebbitt, Kevin Turcotte, and Erwin Wiens.
The winter that wasn’t — and what it means for spring

One question I frequently get asked is how a perceived early spring will impact our local plants and wildlife. The warm spells followed by sudden cold snaps must be tricky for their survival, right?

Just the other day, on Feb. 15, the Gulf of Mexico delivered a belated Valentine’s warm hug of 17°C to the Niagara Region, breaking the 1970s record of 10°C — a warm hug of 17°C to the Niagara Region, breaking the 1970s record of 10°C.

I see it in our gardens. Some plants began bursting through the soil with their buds and blossoms swelling since early February, which I have never seen before. I wouldn’t be surprised at this rate if we hear the first frog calls in early March, versus the typical end of March. Robins have been singing their morning chorus for a couple of weeks now — about a month earlier than usual. I don’t fear for the forest. However, I hope that farmers don’t have their properties shocked by an early budding and severely cold event to follow.

To me, it goes to show that nature as an entity likes to think in laws of averages, with long-term success deeply embedded in its genetic playbook. See for yourself if you observe any unusual signs of an early spring! I’d love to hear about it.

I've seen garter snakes or the chihuahua will suffer. The honeybee will get back to the hive, slow down a few notches, and fly freely again when the proper spring sun bestows itself upon the tree. I’ve seen garter snakes poke their heads out in March’s first double digit temperatures, only to see a dusting of snow in April or May with puddles briefly icing over. Weren’t they just mating, and weren’t we wearing T-shirts a few days ago? Assured, they will be just fine, even as farmers fear the potential disaster to their evolutionary juvenile plants and trees. This year has been interesting so far, though. Record-breaking winter temperatures. A lack of snow and frozen ground. The silver and red maples in my yard have had their red buds swelling since early February, which I have never seen before. I wouldn’t be surprised at this rate if we hear the first frog calls in early March, versus the typical end of March. Robins have been singing their morning chorus for a couple of weeks now — about a month earlier than usual. I don’t fear for the forest. However, I hope that farmers don’t have their properties shocked by an early budding and severely cold event to follow.

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Development debate not all bad
Ted Mouradian
Special to The Local

Is development good or bad? This question haunts Ni-
agara municipalities on a regu-
lar basis. People move to certain parts of the Region for a rea-
son. Some for a job, some for school, some for the ambiance or a small town
feel.

When the reason that brought them here in the first place is threatened, peo-
ple become disillusioned and we hear comments such as “this isn’t the
town I used to know,” or “I moved here to get away from that sort of thing.”

In Pelham, there was a huge fight over the civic center, plaza and housing development along Hwy 20, which cost many their seat on council. In Port Dal-
housie, there has been a battle over a tower development since 2004. And now Niagara on the Lake has a new hotel
proposal for the old school
housie, there has been a battle
debate.

Particular development projects are hotly debated not all bad

Four-storey buildings in two-storey neighbourhoods unacceptable

I am not against development if the project fits the neighbour-
hood. The Mary Street apartment proposal is massive and towers
over the whole neighbourhood. Imagine putting something like Queeni Landing Hotel on that lot with the entire surrounding neighborhood being two sto-
reys in height, and it is only three sto-
rey high. This newly proposed building is four sto-
rey high.

I know the design is always a matter of opinion, but my
thought is this project is out of place, poorly thought out, and an archi-
tectural mess. This project is a threat to the neighbourhood, and as one recent headline said, the apartment plan for Mary Street is a battle
for vital services that ratepayers need and want. The question then becomes: what is good de-
velopment and what is bad de-
velopment?

Way back in the 1970s, the first townhouses, semi-detached homes and, eventually, a couple of townhouses went up to Naigara. The outcry was loud and clear:
“NOT IN MY BACK-
YARD!” Yet, when we look around at most cities, these types of hous-
opulations like Rome, Paris or London, or the entire surrounding
area.

Secondly, let’s consider commer-
cial development. Years ago you would never have seen a Tim Hortons, Starbucks or McDon-
ald’s in NOTL now we have it all. Here is the lay of the land from the outside of the streetscape.

I firmly believe that the out-
side appearance and the scale of any new development, residential or commercial, should reflect the personality of that particular neighborhood or community.

Thirdly, keep in mind that NOTL is a tourist destination of some significance. It is where it all began in Canada and peo-
ple want to see it and take in its history. I am sure that many of you have traveled to Paris, Rome and London,
and we already have numer-
ous other, though smaller, close-
by accommodations.

I have to repeat… another
development proposal for the old school
housie is a threat to the neigh-
bourhood, a matter of opinion, but my

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February 22, 2023
New St Davids School principal feels at home

Mike Balsom
The Local

It’s not exactly Welcome Back, Kotter, but it’s about as close as it gets.

Carl Glauser wasn’t a sweat hog, and didn’t actually attend St. Davids Public School, but the graduate of Parliament Oak, and Niagara District Secondary School is proud to oversee the 410 students as their principal.

Glauser took over the reins of the close-knit community school in September, after stints as principal of Welland’s Plymouth Public School, Pine Grove Elementary in St. Catharines and Greenfield Public School in Niagara Falls.

Growing up in Niagara-on-the-Lake’s Garrison Village subdivision, Glauser never actually set out to be a teacher. But he does remember a Grade 8 project putting a small kernel of an idea into his head.

“We had a career assignment that year,” Glauser remembers. “Andy Boldt and I went to visit Mr. McCarthy, the physical education teacher at Niagara District, to find out what it took to become a physical educator. That was the first time I ever thought about it.”

Later, while attending NDSS, Glauser and another friend, Andy Williams, began coaching a NOTL Minor Hockey Team. He says today that it was one of the best experiences he had to that point in his life.

After graduating from District, Glauser pursued a business degree at Hamilton’s McMaster University, where, during his third year of studies and after switching his major to geography and environmental studies, he met his wife Karen.

“She was passionate that she wanted to be a teacher,” he says. “She was doing some volunteer work in east Hamilton schools, so I joined her. I realized how awesome that volunteer work was. I knew at that point that teaching was a possibility.”

After earning his degree at McMaster, he attended teacher’s college at Niagara University in Niagara Falls, New York, and was hired by the District School Board of Niagara in 1996 as a supply teacher. While striving to earn a contract position with the DSBN, he continued working as a server at the Prince of Wales Hotel.

His first contract position came a couple of years later, at his alma mater, Parliament Oak.

“I was hired to replace my own Grade 8 teacher, Dean Steele, when he retired,” he laughs. “I loved it, but I was the young guy, and we had declining enrollment. I knew that I may become surplus there at some point, so I was proactive and transferred to Woodland School on Seventh Street.”

The avid golfer loved that the gym is named after. And a wing of the school is named for the former Queenston school.

During his time at Parliament Oak, Glauser helped a senior student with a math problem.

It feels like a family,” he says. “That’s what makes it a joy to come to school every day. We’ve nominated (teacher) Bryce (Hosinger) for a Prime Minister’s Award, for the things he does such as robotics and the heritage fair. He’s a real leader.”

Walking through the halls, Principal Glauser points out his son Taylor’s grad photo.

As his own boys grew up, Glauser volunteered his time coaching youth soccer and hockey to NOTL, so he got to know many families involved in those activities. He says many of the current St. Davids students recognize Glauser from the Dragons.

“Their athletics. “It’s like a true community school,” he says. “In July, the first or second day I came here, a community group came and talked to me about planting a pollinator garden in the front of the school. Right away they got it done. That was really awesome.”

He speaks with pride about the achievements of the students, the parents and the community.

“Lots of our sports teams do exceptionally well,” he almost brags while wearing a purple school polo shirt emblazoned with the team logo, “We’re the Dragons. Basketball carries the legacy of Wynnand Groen, who the gym is named after. And volleyball, soccer, too.”

And he’s really looking forward to the junior-intermediate group presentation of the play Into the Woods in May.

“Staff is hard working,” he adds. “They’re amazing. What makes it a joy to come to school every day. We’ve nominated (teacher) Bryce (Hosinger) for a Prime Minister’s Award, for the things he does such as robotics and the heritage fair. He’s a real leader.”

With the St. Davids community quickly growing, and massive growth slated for the future in the Glendale area, Glauser sees St. Davids Public School as the perfect place for three portals, as an important community asset.

“St. Davids is a growing community,” he says. “It’s always exciting in a school when you’re growing. With it, your staff grows. And it’s here in a much more diverse community, as well. It’s definitely changed the school, even from when my boys were here. He was much smaller then.

“The school has grown from six to 410. I’m excited to see young people succeed, and I always look forward to seeing what the future holds for some of these students, knowing that I had some small contribution to that.”

He feels he has the best job in the world. “When you’re having a bad day,” he laughs, “all you have to do is walk into a kindergarten room. Nothing brings me more joy than seeing four- and five-year-olds at play. They smile and give me high fives. ‘What’s better than that?’”

A wing of the school is named for the former Queenston school.

St. Davids School principal Carl Glauser talks with JK and SK students about their Valentine’s Day crafts. (Photos by Mike Balsom)
Town looking at $2.2 million in debt for capital budget

The Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority is launching a new Trees For All initiative to encourage landowners to plant trees on their property. (Shutterstock)

Local Staff

In a recent news release, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority has announced a program that aims to get local landowners involved in a tree-planting program. The Niagara Peninsula Tree Planting Program (NPTPP) encourages private landowners to join in a collective effort to bring millions of trees to the Niagara Peninsula watershed in support of Canada’s goal to plant two billion trees over 10 years.

The Government of Canada’s 2 Billion Trees Program seeks to partner with governments and organizations to plant two billion trees across Canada, a project that will capture and store carbon from the atmosphere, improve air and water quality, help to restore natural biodiversity, cool urban centres and create and support thousands of green jobs. As such, community groups, environmental agencies, and governmental organizations in the Niagara Peninsula watershed have joined to create the local program with the objective of supporting this initiative at the local level.

The Niagara Peninsula watershed is known as a natural wonder with many environmental assets and unique phenomena and is situated between two Great Lakes. It is the most biodiverse but also threatened in all of Ontario. The landscape currently only contributes an estimated 56 per cent of what science recommends as the minimum ecological objective required for healthy and viable ecosystems.

The goal is simple: landowners are encouraged to express their interest and register their property for potential consideration in future tree planting. This first data-gathering phase solely aims to gauge landowner interest to help shape the future of the Trees For All program.

“Opportunity to engage watershed residents in enhancing our unique forests and urban tree canopy is significant,” says Chandrakarna Sharma, chief administrative officer at NPCA.

As so much of the land is private owned, large-scale reforestation initiatives like the federal 2 Billion Trees program provide local stewardship opportunities and help incentivize landowners to participate in tree-planting programs. The Trees For All initiative will help strengthen and surpass our existing commitments to add 600 hectares of natural cover, plant more than one million native trees across the watershed by 2031 and begin to mitigate the impacts of climate change in the Niagara Peninsula watershed.

Private landowners are asked to visit the Get Involved NPCA portal to learn more and register their property with registration. This portal is home to important documents for interested participants, a project timeline on this exciting initiative, a confidential mapping tool to register interest and pin locations, and great online engagement tools to provide feedback and share stories and ideas.

About the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, visit www.npca.ca. Follow on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for more updates.

Zahraa Hmood Special to The Local

There’s one month left until council passes its annual budget for the year, and so, Niagara-on-the-Lake plans to spend $9.5 million for work on roads, improving streetscapes and other capital expenses. However, as the current budget draft includes plans to take on $2.19 million in debt to finance big-ticket projects, Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa voiced concerns about “significant” challenges going forward for the municipality.

The committee met for its first look at the capital budget on Thursday, Feb. 16, during which director of finance Kyle Freeborn presented the budget created by municipal staff. Freeborn shared what the municipality’s big-ticket projects will likely be for 2023: reconstruction of Line 3 Road; the second phase of a project extending from Four Mile Creek Road to Concession 6 at $2.4 million, replacing the water main on Line 5 at $1.25 million; and replacing a culvert bridge on Simcoe Street, at $538,000.

There are also plans for enhancing the streetscapes of both Niagara Stone Road and Glendale Avenue at York Road, at $860,000 and $400,000 respectively. Freeborn outlined some of the pros and cons of taking on debt as a municipal agency: on the plus side, doing so on a debenture means they can pay for projects in increments every year for a decade or two, instead of giving up a chunk of cash in one go.

“If we do not have the funds up front, then it allows us to spread the funds over 10, 20, 30 years,” he said. “Users in the future will also end up paying for that as opposed to everybodybody paying for it now.”

However, he said, taking on too much debt may impact both the level and the quality of the services the town provides, like water and wastewater management, road access, fire and emergency services, and more.

Of these five projects, which represent over half of the budget at $5.4 million, three of them will be funded with debentures: part of Line 3 reconstruction, part of Niagara Stone Road enhancements, and all of Glendale Avenue’s enhancements.

All together, the budget is allocating $5.7 million for roads, the lion’s share over 60 per cent, at approximately 62.4 per cent.

The next three departments receiving the most funding are water services ($1.6 million), wastewater ($620,000), and fire and emergency services ($568,000).

The committee discussed the state of the municipality’s reserves, pockets of money saved for each department in the capital program, used to pay for capital expenses through out the year.

The town’s contribu- tion to its capital reserves has fluctuated over the last 10 years: from 2018 to 2019, the town transferred $380,000 away from its capital reserve in order to lower its property taxes. While it added $100,000 back in the next year, the reserve has remained at $2.12 million since 2020.

Zalepa called the town’s capital issues “significant,” and said improving its funding situation is going to be difficult, due in part, he said, to the loss of provincial and federal contributions to municipal capital reserves, which have gone from 60 per cent of total reserves for the last several decades to 17 per cent today.

“Municipalities are the most underfunded government level in this country, and we’re heading towards an infrastructure cliff,” he said.

This year, the town plans to transfer $150,000, bringing the capital reserve to $2.27 million. Still, this is $130,000 shy of the town’s last reserve high of the past decade, which was $2.4 million in 2018.

“When we increase it we can do that much more work, and every future year after that if that increase stays it’ll be that much higher,” Freeborn said.

Committee members are meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 22 for another look at plans for capital spending, during which funds may be reallocated. Two reviews of the operating budget will follow on Wednesday, March 1 and Thursday, March 9, which will also involve revisiting this budget.

Council plans to give the 2023 budget its final approval on Thursday, March 23.
Audience loved ‘happy vibe’ at drag queen show

Sharon Burns Special to The Local

Last Friday night, three drag queens from Pride Niagara performed for a full house at Ironwood Cider House in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

High energy dance music, colourful wigs and a sea of sparkling sequins filled the room while spectators enjoyed themselves.

During the 90-minute show, drag queens Rhonda Richards, Macy Manolo and Empress Claudia Silva lip-synced to high energy artists such as Mariah Carey, Madonna and Whitney Houston and during costume changes, interacted with audience members with jokes and stories.

Pride Niagara is a not-for-profit organization that celebrates Niagara’s LGBTQ2S+ community and its supporters,” said board member Enzo De Vitto. “Pride Niagara develops positive and safe spaces across Niagara, providing social connectivity, community gatherings, and information throughout the Niagara Region.”

Known as the Queen Mother of Drag, Rhonda Richards explains, “I am a man who dresses as a woman, and performs as a woman,” said Richards, “and when I take it all off, I’m still a man underneath. That’s a drag queen.”

Frank Roberto, from Niagara Falls, has seen this performance five times because he enjoys the liveliness of the performance, the outfits, the personalities and the general charisma of the event. “He is also friends with drag queen, Macy Manolo and Pride Niagara Ambassador, Macy Manolo. Richards wants her audience members to “just relax and enjoy yourself. Take it in.” Richards, who works in the hotel industry, says “you might be shocked because you don’t know who is under all this. Just be yourself” she advises.

The evening closed with a duet of Abba’s Mama Mia by Manolo and Silva, the audience loud and proud cheering along. Julia Lidgett from Niagara Falls, summed up the evening as “wonderful,” and the vibe was so happy, cheerful and friendly.”

“With International Pride month quickly approaching,” said Divensch, “planning for Pride Niagara’s festival is in full swing.” This year’s Pride festival runs May 27 to June 4, with various events throughout Niagara.

Mike Balsom The Local

The new 5,000-seat OLG Stage entertainment venue at Fallsview Casino Resort is like nothing else in Niagara.

Modeled after the Colosseum at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, its fan-shaped design gives every spectator a view of the front of the stage. And each seat is no more than 150 feet away from it, even in the second balcony.

Officials from OLG (Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation), MGE Niagara Entertainment Inc. (Mohawk) and ARK Architects walked members of the media through the impressive new venue last week. And to give them a feel for the acoustics of Niagara’s newest live music and arts venue, they were treated to an eight-song set by Toronto rock band The Beaches.

Sitting in one of the 1,100 lower orchestra section seats, the sound and the sightlines were perfect. A quick walk around the upper orchestra section, where another 1,900 seats are situated, seemed to bring no change in either sound quality or the ability to see the action on stage.

In a Q&A session following their set, the four members of the all-female Juno Award-winning band gave rave reviews of the venue.

“One thing I noticed is how amazing it sounded onstage,” said drummer Eliza Emman McDaniell. “And it’s a really professional staff who work here. They’ve been super helpful.”

The Niagara Falls facility employs 24 staff daily for operational maintenance and another 15 on show days.

Added lead singer and bassist Jordan Miller. “It’s really cool to be able to play to so many levels as well. You don’t often have that opportunity; it allows for some more fun blocking.”

Miller was referring to the two balcony sections in the venue, similar to the layout of Caesars Colosseum or Massey Hall in Toronto. Both of those facilities, in comparison, have a capacity that is lower than that of the new OLG Stage. The casino’s Avalon Theatre, which is slated to remain open, only holds 1,500.

“Another unique venue,” said Niagara Casinos director of marketing services Jennifer Ferguson. “We’re going to be able to bring larger acts into the property and give more people a better experience. Everything about it is state-of-the-art. It will continue to elevate the concert experience.”

Construction on the $30 million facility began in 2017 and involved 4,000 tonnes of structural steel. Work was completed by June 2020, and country singer Brad Paisley was scheduled to open the venue. But the pandemic pushed any on-stage activity back until live gatherings were permitted.

That gave officials time to tuck the sound system and the acoustics and complete some other finishing touches.

CTV’s Canada’s Got Talent was the first to use the stage, shooting its upcoming season there, beginning last October. Since then, there have been a handful of concerts in the space, but the grand opening performance featuring Billy Joel, which received much attention due to the price of the tickets, is scheduled for Saturday, Feb. 25.

“There’s little doubt that the Piano Man will be happy with the 6,400 square foot stage, flanked on both sides by 18’ high-definition screens. Senior property asset manager Rob Divencha claimed the stage is the largest in the region. And Joel will certainly feel comfortable backstage, in both the large dressing room and bright, spacious green room provided to performers and their entourages.

His crew, as well, will be happy to pull their buses, lino- mos and trucks right inside the building, and to use the tractor-trailer sized freight elevator to unload their gear and bring it stage level.

“We’ve had rave reviews from those who have performed here,” Divensch told the media. “They’re talking about the acoustics, they’re talking about the lighting, they’re talking about the technical support and features, and the performer amenities too.”

As members of the media roved the escalator up to the 400-level balcony, Christophe Gauthier, managing partner at ARK, explained to The Local that the lobby areas were designed to be bright, open spaces visible through floor-to-ceiling glass to onlookers on the street below.

“That way they will see that something is going on here,” he said, “and they will want to be a part of it.”

Gauthier also pointed to the animated and moving lighting that can be fine-tuned for specific purposes in those lobby spaces. And he stressed that accessibility and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) principles were foremost on the architect’s minds throughout the design process.

Walking through the 200,000 square foot building, which took a total of 685,000 onsite person hours to build, with up to 300 workers onsite per day, it’s easy to forget that it was all constructed on top of the existing Hilton Hotel parking garage.

And though the exterior jumps out at passers-by on Stanley Avenue, it is an awe-inspiring experience once inside.

A list of upcoming shows speaks to Ferguson’s promise of attracting bigger acts to the Niagara Region. Following Joel, another Billy, last name Idol, plays the venue on May 5. Rock band Cheap Trick visits May 27, and John Fogerty, fresh off of a recent court decision that finally gives him royalties on the songs he wrote as the leader of Creedence Clearwater Revival, takes to the stage in June.

And September will see Rod Stewart and Kenny Loggins performing there.
Valeria (left) and Vera (centre) were the recipients of two quilts made by Barbara Khan (right) and given with love.

Khan always has a project on the go, and since she started quilting more than 35 years ago, she has given many away, most often to family and friends.

And she is proud to say she has entered her share of competitions, and won a few ribbons. Around Christmas, she says, she read about Ukrainian families in need in The Local, and all that resident Shirley Madsen has been doing to help them.

“When I read that, I thought, ‘I can make a quilt.’ That article spurred me on to do that.’”

“I enjoy making a quilt for someone I know,” she adds, “and I also enjoy making a quilt for someone I don’t know, but I know it will be well-loved and well-used.” And as Madsen can affirm, the two women who were given the quilts were extremely appreciative, leaving no doubt Khan’s quilts will be both well-loved and well-used.
Simmonds soaring to ultimate frisbee championship

Mike Balsom
The Local

A sport that he began playing in Grade 9 at A.N. Myer Secondary School is taking Niagara-on-the-Lake’s Ben Simmonds to the UK to represent his country.

Simmonds, who is attending physical education at a small private school in Ottawa and hoping to attend teacher’s college in the future, has earned a spot as a defender on Canada Under-24 (U24) Ultimate Frisbee mixed team. He will be competing with that squad in July at the World Flying Disc Federation (WFDF) championships in Nottingham.

“I saw a poster and talked to the coach (English teacher John Kent) about it,” Simmonds said. “The 22-year-old Parliament Oak graduate remembers about his start in the sport. “Learning to play was a lot of fun, but when I moved to Carleton (University), I realized I had a lot to learn.”

As a first-year student in media production and design, with a minor in film studies, Simmonds had brought a disc to campus and was spotted tossing it to a friend by members of the Ravens women’s team. They gave the young men a flyer for a clinic they were hosting later that week.

Simmonds attended the clinic, connected with the captains of the school’s men’s team, and made the university’s B squad, “as the worst player,” he says. “I was just there to run and be fast and try to play defence, because coming from Niagara, I only kind of knew just enough about throwing to get by.”

For the uninitiated, ultimate frisbee, or simply ultimate, involves seven players on each team competing on a 100-yard field. The starting team on defence tosses the disc to their opponents, whose objective is to work the disc down the field by throwing it. Unlike football, though, once the disc is caught, the player cannot run with it. The other six players on the team do run, though, in an attempt to get open to catch the disc when it is thrown.

A point is scored when the disc is caught in the opposing team’s end zone. Simmonds played on Carleton’s men’s team, but the U24 national team is a mixed team, combining men and women on the field at the same time.

The former offensively-minded hockey and soccer player relishes his role on defence, and it’s taken him through inter-university play while at Carleton and into the club and professional ultimate circuits. Last summer, Simmonds played with the Ottawa Outlaws of the American Ultimate Disc League (AUDL). He has also played with club teams in both Hamilton and Ottawa, the latter with his younger brother, Nick, who also took up the sport at A.N. Myer.

“When you’re playing defence in ultimate,” he explains, “you can score on defence. To score on defence, it’s called a break. You’re not going to get a block every time, but you’re constantly fighting to make sure that if your guy is getting thrown to, you can get a block, an attempt at a point. For me, it’s far more exciting playing defence.”

Simmonds says each team consists of three types of players: cutters, who play downfield and make smaller throws, handlers who make the bigger throws, and hybrids, who do both.

“I’m a defensive cutter,” he says. “I go onto the defensive line, mark, (guard) your guy is getting thrown to, you can get a block, an attempt at a point. For me, it’s far more exciting playing defence.”

Simmonds says his confidence level really picked up last summer after playing against the best in the sport with the Outlaws, enough so that he felt ready to attempt to make the national team.

“I applied and got accepted,” he says of the tryouts in Burnaby, British Columbia. “I just put it all out there. I had been focusing on it for months, dealing with injuries and training, making sure my body was prepared. It was two days, an amazing experience playing ultimate there in November, with beautiful weather and the mountains in the background.”

He was overwhelmed when he found out he made the cut, even while feeling that he had done all he could to deserve a spot on the team.

“When the week before (the Ottawa Outlaws) announced that they were folding,” remembers Simmonds. “So I was pretty bummed out that I would have to try out for another team.”

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Ben Simmonds in his Ottawa Outlaws jersey. (Photo supplied)
Fundraiser to support national U24 ultimate team

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It was sad and stressful. When one of the coaches called to say I was chosen, it was overwhelming and exciting.”

After earning his spot with the national team, Simmonds decided to cancel a planned trip to Montreal this weekend, forgo pursuing another professional opportunity, and instead concentrate on getting ready for the WFDF championships.

He recently attended the first team training camp and participated in some organized scrimmages in Orlando, Florida. It was his first time together with the rest of the roster, including one of his Outlaws teammates who also made the team and a few players he played club with. One of the national team coaches is also a former teammate.

“We’re also going to an American mixed tournament in Boston in a couple of months,” he adds, “as well as an exhibition tournament in Toronto before we go to England in July. There’s lots of travel.”

To cover the costs of food, travel and uniforms, the team is holding a fundraiser. They are designing warm-up jerseys that will be worn by the team on their trip to the UK that will include the names of up to 350 family members, friends and supporters who donate $25 or more to their quest for the world title. To contribute to the cause, visit tinyurl.com/2hr9zc28.

“They’re trying to make this experience more accessible for everyone on the team,” Simmonds says of the fundraiser. “It’s a fun way to have your name and to take part with us in this in some way.”

Ben Simmonds is among the men and women ultimate frisbee players representing Canada at the U24 World Championships in England in July 2023. (Photo supplied)
Preds to host Ravens in first playoff game Friday

Mike Balsom
The Local

The Niagara Predators completed their regular season schedule with a 6-4 loss to the Stars in Northumberland Saturday night.

They now head into the Greater Metro Junior A Hockey League’s Russell Cup Playoffs as the fourth seed in the South Division. And, after St. George’s 10-4 defeat of Windsor Sunday in their final regular season game, the Preds will host the rival fifth-place Ravens Friday night to begin their first round best-of-three series.

It’s the outcome Niagara head coach Kevin Taylor was hoping for heading into the postseason. The Preds were 2-3-1 head-to-head against the Ravens this year.

But the Ravens bounced back to tie things up with goals by Lomenzo Sullivan and Pavel Smirnov. Then, in the final minute of the period, Preds defenceman Ethan Boyd restored the lead with the team’s third power play goal. Niagara led 3-2 at the end of the first.

The Preds outshot Northumberland 20-10 in the second period but Stars goaltender Alexander Smirnov kept them off the scoresheet for the entire 20 minutes. At the other end of the ice, Thomas Murphy locked it up at 3-3 when he beat Predators goalie Cameron Huff with four minutes remaining.

But Taylor rested some of his starters in the third period in a game that was essentially meaningless to Niagara. That may have had something to do with the Stars jumping to a 6-3 lead on third period goals by Murphy, Kyle Boyd and Kurt Gibbs. Jaroslav Dochnal narrowed the gap for the Preds to 6-4 when he was set up for a goal by Reece Risci and Thomas McGrath, but that’s how the game would end.

The previous night, Niagara finally beat the Streetsville Flyers in Virgil after losing to them three times over the previous two weeks, once in a shoot-out.

Declan Fogarty and Cameron Savoie led the Preds Friday with a goal and three assists each, while Anthony Tropea, who finished the season as Niagara’s leader in goals (27) and points (48), notched two goals and an assist.

Niagara finishes the 42-game regular season with a record of 20-18-4. That’s eight fewer wins than last year’s shortened season, when they skated to a 28-9-1 record and placed third in the division.

“We only had three returning players,” Taylor says, referring to Bisci, Logan Balie and Dawson Walker. A fourth, Max Bredin, was traded at his request at the trade deadline in early February.

“We had an entire new team, all new goaltending, a new coach,” he continues. “It’s a much younger team, and hopefully we’ll be able to retain and bring them back next year. There’s been a lot of growth this year.”

Looking at the team’s final record, he adds, “We were above .500. And, around Christmas, I think our goal differential was almost minus-30. We ended up at plus-six. Yeah, there should have been a couple more wins, but it shows the program is moving in the right direction.”

With the emergence of young players such as Nick Savoie and Nolan Wyers in the second half of the season, and late additions such as Askar Aimanbetov, Timur Mirzaants and Alex Andrews, Taylor feels the Predators have the formula to take two out of three against the Ravens.

“You need those guys who can step up their game,” Taylor says. “You can count on different guys to give you different things. It gives you more of an arsenal, and also more depth. If St. George does shut down some of our guys, we have others that can step into that role.”

Niagara will be without Dochnal, who is returning to the Czech Republic for school. Other than that, the team is healthy heading into the playoffs.

If they get by the Ravens, round two will likely require the Preds to face the first place North York Renegades, who closed the season this weekend with a record of 36-6-0.

“You have to keep things in perspective,” Taylor says. “If you do look past St. George, well be facing North York. We matched up pretty well against them. We had some good games against them (a 5-3 loss and a 6-5 overtime loss; the Preds also lost 9-0 and 10-1 to the Renegades).

But it’s a new series, a new season. As a coach, you have to come up with different plans to shut down their top guys, too.”

Game one against the Ravens starts at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Virgil’s Meridien Credit Union Arena. Though the full schedule hasn’t been posted yet, Taylor expects to play Sunday in St. George, then turn to Virgil for game three on Tuesday evening.

“It’s going to be a good series,” he says enthusiastically, “a fun series for the players and for the fans to watch. It will be some good hockey!”
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