



The Irish Harp is celebrating today, indoors and out, with the patio open as well as the dining room. St. Patrick's Day meals, including the traditional corned beef and cabbage, can be eat-in or takeout. Owner Jovie Joki is also offering a St. Patrick's Day giveaway of prizes. Staff members are waiting to celebrate with you — no reservations, first-come first-served. *(David Gilchrist)*

Penny Coles

The Local

Bob Gale doesn't back down from a fight when he believes he's in the right.

He has decided he wants to fight for his corner of Niagara at the provincial level, as a Conservative MPP.

Currently serving his second term as regional councillor for Niagara Falls, Gale has been handed the nomination from the Niagara Falls riding, which includes Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie, to represent the Tories in the next provincial election.

The nomination meeting to officially select a representative is being held this Thursday, but as the only candidate, Gale will be acclaimed.

In the next provincial election, which must be held on or before June 2, he will be facing off against incumbent NDP MPP Wayne Gates, a former Niagara Falls city

councillor, who won the riding in a byelection in 2014. Gates replaced Kim Craitor, the Liberal MPP for the riding from 2003 to 2013, who had resigned that fall.

Gale knows he will have a run for his money against Gates, but says he has never shied away from competition. "I was in business for a long time, sat on many high profile boards, and now have a term and a half of experience with regional council. I have thick skin, and I understand that this will be a challenging election. The fact is that Niagara needs a strong Conservative voice in a strong Conservative government to make sure that our unique needs are taken care of. I am ready to take that task head on."

With his wife Vera, the
Niagara businessman who
has owned Gale's Gas Bars

Continued on page 11

Niagara Regional Native Centre hosts clinic for Indigenous people

Penny Coles

The Local

Niagara-on-the-Lake's first vaccination clinic took place Monday, at the Niagara Regional Native Centre.

Just under 500 Indigenous people, aged 55 and older, received their first doses from the Public

Health staff.

The clinic followed two days of vaccinations at the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre last week, which was so overwhelmed with requests for what was intended to be a day-long clinic, it was extended to a second day with extended hours, allowing more than 1,100

people to receive their vaccinations.

With urban Indigenous people considered a vulnerable population and a priority for vaccinations, in Ontario and across Canada, Karl Dockstader, Niagara Regional Native Centre executive director, was happy to offer the facility to host

a clinic. Native centre staff made appointments for about 500 people, based on the amount of vaccine they expected to receive. Not wanting to waste a single dose, and accounting for those who might not show up, the goal was to get as many people vaccinated as possible, says Dockstader.

Members of the Indigenous community are not on a level playing field when it comes to combatting the impact of the pandemic,

especially in the 55-plus age group, where there is a high rate of underlying medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and other health problems. Indigenous people are over-represented when it comes to medical problems, and underrepresented in terms of jobs and income, he says.

Dockstader refers to society seeing medical disparities as something Indigenous people have brought on themselves, but points

to their colonization history, including children being removed from their families for residential schools or adoption, as the deeply-rooted cause of several factors, including job and food insecurity, that lead to the increased risk of disease among their population.

While vaccination clinics are not something the native centre has experience

Continued on page 3

Residents asked to act like we're in lockdown

Penny Coles
The Local

With health experts predicting a third wave of COVID-19 is inevitable — some saying it is already here — and as the provincial booking system for vaccinations is open and Niagara clinics are set to open, Dr. Mustafa Hirji is suggesting we act like we're in a lockdown.

The number of variant cases is increasing rapidly, and there is little time “to turn this trajectory around,” said Niagara’s acting medical officer of health.

“I really do think we all need to continue to have the mindset that we had back a year ago when we had the first lockdown,” when we were all moti-

vated to stay home and flatten the curve, he said. That’s the best way to control COVID cases without again closing down businesses, and might only be necessary for a couple more months, he added.

The concern across Ontario is the impact of rising variant cases on the hospital system. An increased need for hospital beds and reduced capacity in intensive care units would be cause of a third wave and force the province into a third lockdown.

At his weekly Monday press briefing, Hirji said there have been 118 variant cases in Niagara, nearly 40 per cent of the region’s 265 active COVID cases, a sharp increase from March 1, when he reported 17 cases of variants.

He said the provincial vaccination portal, which opened Monday morning to those in the 80-plus age, was working successfully. At least it hadn’t crashed, as some municipal booking systems had, although residents were reporting long waits online and on the phone, and there were news reports of glitches that were quickly fixed.

Those born in 1941 or earlier can register either online at Ontario.ca/book-vaccine, or by phone at 1-888-999-6488.

Residents of Ontario may register for any clinic in Niagara, Hirji said, or across the province, as long as they fall into the correct age group and have a health card.

Lord Mayor Betty Disero said she took her mother to the Seymour Hanna vaccination clinic last week, after being offered an appointment by her doctor, and discovered it was like “old home week.” She had to wait outside in her car, and saw several other residents from Niagara-on-the-Lake as they were leaving after being vaccinated.

Dave Hunter, his wife Dena Broeders and their neighbour Joan Wilkes,

94, were all at the clinic thanks to Dr. Karen Berti, who had called to say she could get them a spot.

Hunter said he isn’t overly concerned about COVID, but his wife was “extremely happy” to have the opportunity to be vaccinated.

“This was a real weight off her shoulders,” he said.

Their bubble has been small, but this may allow them to safely, when permitted, travel to see their grandson’s new home in Barrie, which they are anxious to do.

They were given an appointment for a second dose in three weeks’ time, he said.

He wasn’t sure why they were offered a vaccination at the Niagara Health clinic at this time, but were happy to take it, and found it to be very organized, and overall “a pleasant experience.”

Public health clinics across Niagara begin Thursday, with 11 vaccination sites across the region. Hirji explained that the larger urban areas have several consecutive days of clinics, which are more efficient than moving around, while those in smaller municipalities may have one or two.

Niagara-on-the-Lake has clinics at the community centre March 31, April 1 and April 9. The schedule in each munic-



Dr. Mustafa Hirji

ipality was based on the size of the population to be vaccinated, and the space available, he said.

As more staff becomes trained, more clinics could be scheduled, he added.

Although he didn’t have a date to release, he said as more vaccine becomes available, pharmacies and primary health care clinics will also be able to offer vaccinations.

Hirji explained that by numbers, Niagara is doing well in its vaccination program, which was late getting off the ground compared to other health units

in Ontario, due to a lack of vaccine.

There are about 28,000 people in Niagara aged 80 and over, 20,000 of those not in long-term care, one of the largest per capita senior populations in the province. More than half, about 15,000, have already received their vaccination or are booked for one, Hirji said.

“We’re making great progress. We’re a third of the way already done” as far as people either vaccinated or waiting for an appointment that had been made by noon Monday.

Vaccination clinic schedule

Local Staff

Niagara Public Health’s schedule for community clinic vaccinations to protect against COVID-19 has been released.

The first community clinic to vaccinate people aged 80 and older will be held in Niagara Falls on March 18.

Niagara-on-the-Lake’s first clinics at the community centre are sched-

uled for two days, March 31 and April 1, and then again on April 9, from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The schedule for the 11 Niagara community vaccination sites for the 80-plus age group was announced Friday, and goes from March 18 to April 10.

Clinics will operate on a rotating basis, and are expected to increase in frequency over the next few weeks. Once there is enough supply of vaccine available, clinics will be offered to local pharmacies and family doctors. Vaccinations are by appointment only, and seniors in the 80-plus age group can register online or by telephone through the provincial registration portal.

To book a vaccination, visit <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/ontarios-covid-19-vaccination-plan> or call 1-888-999-6488.

For a complete schedule of Niagara clinics from March 18 until April 10, visit <https://www.niagararegion.ca/health/covid-19/clinic-schedule.aspx>.

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Clinic ran smoothly, with 500 people vaccinated

Continued from page 1

organizing, they recognize the significance of having their members vaccinated, and they have the space, and with most programs shut down, staff available to help organize it, he says.

With the exception of a computer glitch that delayed the start of the vaccinations Monday by about 15 minutes, the clinic ran smoothly, with a short wait for those lined up for their shots.

Most of the public health staff who came to NOTL for Monday's vaccinations had also been at the Fort Erie clinics last week, and "were able to work some of the kinks out" in the two days at the Friendship Centre, says Dockstader, allowing the day in NOTL to go smoothly, finishing on time, right around 6 p.m. "We got lucky. The staff worked it all out in Fort Erie, and it was smooth sailing for us."

He said the mood at the centre was very positive.

"Staff was definitely energized," he says. "I was a little worried. We have our team and our culture, and public health has their team and their culture. I was worried about bringing the two worlds together. But they have a great work culture. They were very professional and courteous. When we had our mini hiccup at the beginning, they didn't flinch."

He had a conversation with one of the public health staff, he says, who has been on the front line of health care for the last 12 months, but showed no signs of fatigue.

Instead, the feeling at the clinic was one of hope, that "this vaccine is the new hope we've been waiting for."

There was just enough vaccine left at the end of the day for some of the native centre staff, including Dockstader, to be vaccinated, he says.

The clinics were the natural next step following a year of staying connected to the Indigenous community through the pandemic, with so many programs cancelled, including providing meals at the centre. Instead, says Dockstader, the money that would have been spent on those events was directed to making sure people in need received food. There were also wellness checks made by phone, and many, especially the seniors, appreciated that native centre staff making the calls had the time to chat with them.

Although he was concerned about "vaccination hesitancy," Dockstader says the Fort Erie clinics were also helpful in that respect, with a positive message reaching many in the community. That helped increase the uptake in registration for the NOTL site, and by the end of the day Monday 1,600 community members were vaccinated,

still just a fraction of about 8,000 Indigenous people in Niagara.

Helen Sheppard, the financial manager for the Niagara Regional Native Centre, turns 85 in a few weeks. She was the first in line to get her vaccination Monday morning, and couldn't wait.

She lives with her daughter and family, and has a busy life — in addition to the time she spends at the native centre, where she has worked for 32 years, she

runs a dance studio in Niagara Falls with her daughter.

She couldn't wait to get her vaccination, she says. "I just want to get it done and over with. I want to feel safe again."

She was expecting to be given an appointment for her second dose around her birthday, but Rosemary Bagnulo, from public health, explained that she would be contacted about a date, and that a recent change in policy based on current re-

search meant she'd be called in about four months.

The native centre would be more than willing to hold a second clinic, if more vaccine is offered, says Dockstader, who would also like to see the space used for a clinic to vaccinate offshore farm workers.

"I see migrant workers getting vaccinated as a priority, and I'd be willing to host a clinic here for them. That's something I'd like to see happen," he says.

Little blue buggy creating quite a stir around town

Penny Coles
The Local

The little blue buggy you may have seen as it boogies its way through the streets of the Old Town is getting a lot of attention these days.

It belongs to Grace Tomlinson, who lives in the townhouses at the corner of Mary and Naussau Streets, and works at the Oban Inn.

She told her husband she doesn't need a car, but wanted something to get her back and forth to work, to do her grocery shopping and to pick up mail at the post office, she says.

Last November, he presented her with the perfect birthday gift, which she calls a Boogie Boomerbuggy.

Made by a Toronto company called Daymak, it is powered by a solar panel that continuously charges a lithium ion battery.

It is really a covered scooter — it is considered a scooter as far as rules of the road — but with the luxury of a built-in air conditioner and heater.

And yes, says Tomlinson, "it even has a radio."

Her seat has a seatbelt, and there is enough room behind her for another person, she says, although it's advertised as cargo space.

Those who have seen it will know it has a large sign on the front saying Oban Inn, which is where she's usually headed when she leaves home. Asked what she does at the Oban, she answers, "almost everything."

She says she has many people stop to chat about her Boomerbuggy, the perfect little vehicle for buzzing around close to home. It goes 32 kilometres an hour, just fast enough, "as long as you get off the road so drivers behind you don't get angry," she says.

"Everybody asks about

it. Everybody wants to know about it."

It's garnered so much positive attention her husband is thinking of starting up a little business and selling them, she says, opening up the possibility of many more Boomerbuggies making their way through the streets of the Old Town.



Grace Tomlinson says she is always being asked about her covered scooter, called a Boomerbuggy, which she drives to get around the Old Town. (Photo supplied)

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Helen Sheppard receives the first vaccination of the day at the Niagara Regional Native Centre from Rosemary Bagnulo of Public Health. (Penny Coles)



Chris Kagesheongai welcomes people, including Richard, to the Niagara Regional Native Centre with smudging as they wait for their vaccination.



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Misinformation about coyotes lead to incorrect labels



Owen Bjorgan
Special to The Local

Lately, I've noticed some back and forth communications about coyotes online. This is a species that can't stick up for itself or voice its own thoughts, so that's what I am here to do from both an ecological and cultural point of view. Unfortunately, misinformation can lead to unfair labels with serious consequences. This is a lesson of life, but also for our local coyotes. Just nights ago, I was sleeping in my tent at -8 on top of the Niagara Escarpment. I relished the opportunity to sleep

in nature and not set an alarm. However, the "coyote alarm" went off about five times that night. With clockwork consistency, a nearby coyote would below into the night a series of gentle, prolonged howls, almost mistakable for a lone backyard dog. Ten seconds later, others would join in. The familiar NOTL chorus of yipping, yapping, barking, presumably arguing, and singing ensues. It is a soundtrack to my sweet escape, my childhood, and a hint of wildness that these canids bring to our growing human community. The song comes to an abrupt end, and the silence of the winter night takes over again. I lie in the tent, and briefly find myself contemplating the comments I have seen online about these coyotes.

They are just online comments, but they are real thoughts of real people. And thoughts can be contagious, too. Coyotes deserve a role in the ecosystem as the new "top regulator" in town, not as a villain or pest. Look at this obvious cascade through history. Over 200 years ago, coyotes were controlled in both population and territory by the likes of wolves, bears, and even cougars. With the sharp removal or dispersal of these top predators over time, coyotes began to reproduce and find greater geographical success. As southern Ontario, NOTL included, continued to chop into our remaining habitat coverage, we saw coyotes successfully adapting to farms and more urban environments. These are intelligent, social canids, remember. When our hometown has less than 10% tree coverage remaining, combined with increased human habitation and an animal who has no more natural predators, we might have to get used to seeing it more. In the time I wrote this and then got it to The Local, we had Four Mile Creek rerouted in a part



During a recent winter campout location, Owen Bjorgan says he was harmlessly serenaded to sleep by coyotes. (Owen Bjorgan)

of St. Davids with tree loss, and additionally, a quick logging session has occurred at three spots around the Glendale/York Road area. And some of us wonder why we see more coyotes. In February 2020, there was a disturbing surprise to our town when we learned that several coyote carcasses had been dumped over the bank of the Niagara River. Exterminated by means of poison, hunting, or perhaps both, it was clearly a human intention to rid a local population. We may never know the reasons or the culprit behind this senseless act, but we know it comes from a place of misunderstanding. Were they concerned about coyotes creeping up on farm animals? It's really quite rare, and with adequate fencing (which most farm animals should have), coyotes should almost never make a visit. Were they perhaps nervous about letting their small dog out into a big backyard? Life in the country means you are a part of nature. It's this very nature — it's coyotes, bees, blossoms, and worms that make the very soil we love so much work. Besides, it's normally in coyotes' nature to seek out eastern cottontails, moles, voles, and field mice. Oh, and your delicious garbage, should it be left out in a place where a forest once stood years ago. What caught my attention the most in this divided comment section was the labelling of coyotes as a public safety issue, which is a gross exaggeration in consideration of these crazy times. I look at the thousands of cumulative hours I have spent in Niagara's outdoors. How many negative coyote encounters have I experienced? Zero. And I've seen dozens upon dozens. How many domestic dogs have I had negative, physical encounters with on our local trails and backroads? I can probably count on two hands. These statistics would likely apply to many others I'm sure, too. Yet, I still love dogs. I wrote this to combat misinformation about our local canids, the coyotes. Our town hockey team shows a wolf head, valiant

and strong like the creature itself. Over time, we have reduced the playing field to suit the coyotes' interests. They should be appreciated and celebrated, as a last resort for the regulation of rats, rabbits, groundhogs, muskrats, and whoever is next on the food chain from running amok. And, for the record, I have nothing against hunting. I know professional and for-hire hunters who are contracted to legally come and help property owners with various issues. A couple of my hunting friends over the year have taught my biology brain a great deal about the secrets and movements of local fauna. Sometimes, hunters understand the ecology and population balances of the local animals - but only if they choose to understand them, and engage accordingly. I'd say our local coyotes deserve a more positive image in their dwindling landscape — a landscape that serves us as a community. I hope the day when we don't hear coyotes never comes, as then, it would feel like NOTL had lost its last touch of wildness.

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Hollow trees are a safe spot for coyote pups to call home. (Photo supplied)

Pandemic 'will have a shadow on our future'

Mike Balsom
Special to The Local

St. Davids resident Dr. Robin Williams is the 2021 recipient of an award bestowed by the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce's Women in Niagara (WIN) council on March 8. Receiving the honour via a virtual event on International Women's Day held special meaning for the pediatrician and former medical officer of health for the region.

"It does give you a few weeks to reflect on how you got here, who were all the supporters along the way, the strength of the women around you, and all the opportunities you've had," she tells The Local. "It was a lovely time to reflect on women's place in the world."

"For the first time ever, we are in sync as women across the world, with the worries we're facing," she continues, referring to the pandemic. "No matter where you are, we have the same anxieties and worries about our kids, our families, our society and our future. It's really a moment of pause and thoughtfulness, so I'm really appreciative of WIN and all they do for women in Niagara, and beyond. It's very special."

In the past year, many studies have shown that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on women. The closure of schools and daycares meant the burden of childcare most often fell on the shoulders of mothers, many of whom had to leave their jobs behind to do so.

"Trying to juggle your job, your work, your profession," Williams explains, "let alone the demand on families, parents and illnesses. Then you look at the kind of work that women do, front-facing to the population, whether it's in health care, or other jobs, so yes, this past year has been very tough on women."

Dr. Williams continues to sit as chair of the Canadian Paediatric Society's Early Years Task Force, and acted as an advisor at the provincial level right from the early days of COVID-19, working on case and contact management. Her sixteen years as Niagara's medical officer of health give her a unique perspective on how the region, and its current official in that role, have been dealing with challenging times.

"It's an incredibly difficult role to be anywhere in the public sector," she empathizes. "Mustafa (Hirji) is a strong, thoughtful, caring gentleman who is trying to make the best decisions for Niagara. I have no patience for folks who don't give our leaders space to make the best decisions they can. I think Dr. Hirji is one of many who has had extreme-

ly difficult challenges. Hats off to him and his leadership, as well as his team."

Recently, she was named a special advisor to the region's COVID-19 vaccine distribution task force. Developments on this front over the past few weeks have left her feeling very positive.

back then, but the rapid spread of COVID around the world makes this current pandemic a much more serious dilemma.

"It will have a shadow on our future, on our economy, our relationships, our families," laments Williams. "There will be great

"No matter where you are, we have the same anxieties and worries about our kids, our families, our friends, our society and our future."

Dr. Robin Williams

"One of the biggest challenges has been the evolving science," Williams says. "It has required shifts and changes in decisions. For example, this recent delaying of the second dose is a very good news story. This means we can get to twice as many Ontarians by delaying the second dose, which should get us back to a little more of a normal life."

"The whole vaccine story is a very good news story," she continues. "We have a strong Niagara Health System, especially with the vaccine rollout. There's so many good things about the opportunities here in Niagara. There is now a very good line of sight on the vaccine supply. It will get to us. Will there be little blips? I'm sure there will, but look at where we were three months ago."

It's not Williams' first time dealing with a rapidly spreading virus. She was Niagara's medical officer of health back in 2003, when SARS became a reality.

"There were a few nights of late night calls with folks at the ministry, where we were very concerned that it may have broken out into the community," she remembers. "But it remained basically hospital-based, and it was containable."

The SARS outbreak was over in about three to four months, but Williams remembers it as being a scary time. Lessons were learned

opportunities as we face the transformation coming out of this, new ways we will work, universities will look different. Lots of things are on the horizon for us to face, the environment, the poverty gap, diversity. We have an opportunity, if we just start getting together to problem-solve for what we face in the future."

The WIN award is just the latest in a long line of honours for Williams. In 2010 she earned a Hope Award from Niagara's Child and Youth Services Foundation. At the 2017 Niagara Business Achievement Awards, she was honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award for her work in public health and her advocacy for children. And in 2013 she was named to the Order of Canada.

"It's a very special thing, and I do wear it with pride," she says of her Order of Canada pin. "I'm very proud to be a Canadian."

Another source of pride is her family dedication to health care. Her father was a physician, and her husband, Kevin Foster, is also a doctor. She and Foster have three sons, one of whom is a third generation physician. One is involved in the long-term care sector, while the other was able to use his information technology sector experience to provide her with valuable advice while she was working on the



Dr. Robin Williams (Photo supplied)

province's contact management and provincial booking procedures.

Williams also takes pride in her work in instituting Niagara's ban of smoking in public places and workplaces, but her work on the Ontario Early Years Centres is her biggest career highlight.

She's a strong believer in neuroscience that shows children get wired for life very early via the love, care and social and emotional connections with caring parents. She was instrumental in working with governments and the Canadian Paediatric Society to promote and introduce public policies to ensure the littlest Canadians got the best shot possible. It's one of the main

reasons she received the WIN council award.

When asked if she would consider actually retiring one day (back in 2011 she "retired" as Niagara's medical officer of health, only to sign up for a year as Ontario's associate chief MOH, a stint that ended up lasting six years), she seems to have a difficult time grasping the concept.

"I certainly question whether I would have signed up for the intensity of what I'm currently finding myself in, had I known," she laughs. "However, I do feel it's our moral duty to do what we can as best we fit in. I am curious about a bunch of things, and that sometimes leads to pressing on

the early learning and child care stuff."

Williams is also the current chair of the Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation's medical advisory group. Her dedication to helping effect policies and supports for children's early learning and health is something she promises to continue.

But she looks forward to the end of the pandemic, when she may be able to find more free time to enjoy her weekly outings on the golf course. "I'll be okay to step back, once we get the vaccine out and rolling and getting life back to normal," she admits. "I'll be happy to step back from public health when that time comes."

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EDITORIAL

Details have changed, but emotions have not

It's interesting to read about our thoughts and fears of this time last year, and realize how much the details have changed, while the emotions have not.

We were listening to the early conversations about COVID-19, those who were doubters versus those who were predicting doom and gloom.

We were getting mixed messages then, although there was one constant from the beginning: wash our hands. Social distancing was a new phrase, as was "unprecedented."

Being asked to avoid crowds and refrain from travel was making it all seem too real.

We've learned so much about the science of the disease, but we still get mixed messages from various professionals, and from different provinces across the country.

A year ago, we were learning about flattening the curve. Now we're talking in waves,

first, second and the dreaded third wave, which is here, despite our efforts to stop it.

And we are still hearing so much negativity, way too much criticism aimed at the decision-makers who are doing the best they can to protect us.

The talk has turned to vaccinations and how they are rolling out, what is safe and what isn't, types of vaccine, age groups, who gets what when. How many people have already received theirs, and when we will get ours, which is pretty amazing in just a year.

We hear of more people being given the opportunity, but it seems always in other areas, not ours. Other people are being protected, but not us.

Yet Dr. Mustafa Hirji, our acting medical officer of health, assures us Niagara is doing well with its vaccination numbers.

It's the confusion, the mixed messages that seem to be breeding dissatisfaction

and the feeling that everyone else in the country is further ahead with their vaccination program than we are.

Slightly different approaches across the country, across the province and even across the region, different age groups, different locations and different vaccinations make it all so difficult to track.

Some people are frustrated about having to wait, but our turns are all coming. Before we know it, the sun will be shining, we'll be outside enjoying time with friends and family, and we'll all have had at least one shot, if we want it.

It's really good to see those who need protection the most receiving their vaccinations, or at least their appointments, even if it's only the beginning of what's to come.

It was great to feel the excitement, the enthusiasm at the vaccination clinic in NOTL, organized by Public Health and the Niagara Re-

gional Native Centre, and we'll be experiencing the same at the community centre soon.

Local drugstores are ready to go with vaccinations, and primary health care clinics will also soon be vaccinating patients, if they wish to participate. They are waiting to get their vaccine, as is the region, so clinics can be ramped up. It should happen soon.

And in the meantime, we're being asked by Dr. Hirji to act like we're still in lockdown. That's the tradeoff for having stores, restaurants and other businesses open, the way

to avoid actually being in lockdown, instead of pretending.

Just another couple of months, Dr. Hirji says. For kids who don't get to play with their friends at school, for teens whose communication with their peers is limited to social media, for parents who need a day off or a night out and grandparents who just want to hug their grandchildren, a couple of months seems like a long time. And even more so for those living alone, those feeling lonely and isolated, those dealing with mental health issues and not

getting the help they need.

But if we're good, if this pretend lockdown works at least until we have more people vaccinated, it will be over. And if we think it's too hard, too much, the alternative is worse. So let's do it, let's practise our Oscar-winning performances, and hope for a different message soon, one that tells us we can see our friends and family, enjoy a meal out without guilt, and witness our businesses on the road to recovery.

Penny Coles
The Local

Year in review and light at the end of the tunnel



Wayne Gates, MPP
Niagara Falls riding
Special to The Local

When I look back at the last year, I look back with a heavy heart. It's been so hard on so many residents of Niagara-on-the-Lake, and especially those families who are grieving the loss of their loved ones. I know I speak on behalf of our entire community when I say that we grieve with you. Whether you are in Virgil, Queenston, Glendale, St. Davids or the Old Town itself, everyone's life has been affected by this virus.

This year, 2021, began with even more frustrations as we found out our life-saving Moderna vaccines were diverted away from Niagara and sent elsewhere in the province. To those who emailed, called or flagged me down, I want to say this: I heard your concerns loud and clear, and am doing everything to elevate them to the highest levels. Given Niagara has the third highest population of seniors in Canada, it was unacceptable to us that even one dose of our vaccines were diverted. I took your concerns to Premier Doug Ford and ultimately to General Rick Hillier directly. It is with some relief we found out that as Phase 2 of the vaccination process begins this week, Niagara will be receiving additional dosages to ensure that we do not become a hot spot for further spread. As we work closely with Niagara Region Public Health to set up vaccination clinics at the community centre, and hopefully soon through our local pharmacies, we can say the end of this pandemic is in sight. I am proud that we were able to expand the cri-

teria of Phase 2 to include so many essential workers once our vulnerable seniors are safe.

But it is not over yet. We are still encouraging residents to wear their masks, to distance and to stay home when possible for just a little while longer. If we act responsibly as we administer vaccinations then I expect I'll be able to see all of you at the Lion's Club and the Legion in no time.

Of course as many of you know, despite this good news, I still vehemently believe the overall speed of this vaccine rollout is not going fast enough and the actions by our Premier to address the economic crisis have fallen short. I remain committed to raising my voice every single day to say that Ontario should not fall behind any single other province when it comes to vaccine distribution – especially for our seniors. It is unacceptable that other provinces are getting vaccines to residents faster than Ontario, given how many months Ford has had to prepare for this. If there are vaccines available in this province they should not sit in a fridge and should be sent to local health teams immediately. Those clinics should be run for as many hours as necessary to get those shots into arms. Once this crisis is over, I believe we must reinvest in our local vaccine production capabilities to head off any future pandemic and ensure we are never at the whim of foreign private companies again when it comes to prioritization of these life-saving dosages.

Beyond that, evidence is overwhelmingly showing us that a major cause of community spread is workers who are going to work sick. Too many workers are being forced to face the agonizing decision of keeping food on their tables or possibly going to work with symptoms. Now

more than ever, we believe Ontario must implement paid sick days so that workers who are sick can focus on getting better and staying home. We believe that financial supports and grants must be expanded and made more widely available so our great small businesses can avoid foreclosure and debt. After a year of this mess, it is clear these measures would have avoided so much of the suffering our community has endured.

Let me close by saying thank you to all of our essential workers across this wonderful community. Whether you are working in our grocery stores, convenience stores or in any workplace that could not work remotely — we know how exhausting this effort has been. We see what you're doing to keep our communities safe and we say thank you.

To those workers in healthcare, we pledge to not forget your heroic efforts and to join with you to get the supports and benefits you're entitled to. To our teachers and parents who are undertaking the herculean task of juggling online learning and in-class learning, we see you and we know what you're doing to make sure our kids don't fall behind.

For so many of us, this year-long ordeal has been a nightmare, but we have also seen the very best our community has to offer. Neighbours checking on neighbours, loved ones caring for seniors, parents ensuring their fellow parents' children have access to educational resources. Niagara-on-the-Lake, like so many times before in this town's long history, was challenged and will come out victorious. The light is brighter at the end of the tunnel, and very soon we'll be able to get back to enjoying the things we love most about our great community.

View from the couch

Donald Combe
Special to The Local

Ladies in Black (Prime, 2018), the ladies are shop assistants at Goode's department store in Sydney, Australia at Christmas 1959. This

film stresses the positiveness of change, immigration and integration as the viewer becomes engrossed with the lives and struggles of ordinary women with ordinary problems. A hopeful look at life.

Donald Combe is a re-

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

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kidshelpphone.ca

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St. Mark's Parish Hall
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or find a meeting
905-682-2140

ASSAULTED WOMEN'S HELPLINE
Mobile calls to:
#SAFE (#7233)
1-866-863-0511
(Toll Free)

CRIME STOPPERS
1-800-222-8477 (TIPS)
niagaratips.com
Text 274637 (CRIMES), keyword: Niagara, then your tip

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

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COMMENT

Wellness committee provides vaccination update



Community Health and Wellness Committee

In a continuing effort to provide timely and relevant information to Niagara-on-the-Lake residents, below is a summary of the most recent information currently available about the distribution of vaccines in Niagara-on-the-Lake and throughout the Niagara Region. These updates are also published on the town's website (notl.com/COVID-19). Niagara Region Public Health is leading the vaccination planning and distribution process.

Posters providing contact information regarding COVID-19 vaccinations have been posted in the local post offices and other frequently visited locations throughout the community.

As of Monday, March 15, all residents 80 years of

age and older (born in 1941 or earlier) have been able to book their own vaccination appointment through the provincial appointment booking system available online Ontario.ca/book-vaccine or over the phone (1-888-999-6488). To book an appointment, individuals need to have a green photo health (OHIP) card as both numbers on the front and back of the card are required. Expired cards will be accepted. Individuals who still have a red and white health card, or who require assistance with booking, can call the Provincial Vaccine Information Line number at 1-888-999-6488. Residents are able to book an appointment at any clinic across Niagara and can bring an essential caregiver with them to their appointment. It is important to note that wait times are expected for the provincial appointment system, both online and by phone. The phone line may be busy. If residents experience a busy signal, they should be encouraged to try again.

Now that the provincial

booking system is operational, all persons in the 80+ age group must use it to make their appointments. If you know a NOTL resident who is eligible for their vaccination and may require help in booking their appointment, please reach out to them to offer your assistance. Note that Niagara Health System and other designated organizations are continuing to arrange for vaccinations for other Phase 1 high priority groups.

The first clinics in Niagara-on-the-Lake are scheduled for Wednesday, March 31, Thursday, April 1 and Friday, April 9 at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Community Centre located at 14 Anderson Lane from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day. Niagara Public Health has stated that "clinics will operate on a rotating basis and will increase in frequency over the next few weeks. The clinics will be offered in addition to local pharmacies and family doctors who may also provide the vaccine once supply is made available." For more detailed information, please

visit niagararegion.ca/news/.

When the vaccinations are completed for the Phase 1 high priority groups, residents in the Phase 2 groups will be able to schedule and receive their vaccinations. These groups include older adults, beginning with those 79 years of age and decreasing in five-year increments, and other priority groups.

In early March, Niagara Public Health announced that they were looking for a wide range of volunteers to work in the vaccination clinics. Due to an overwhelming response, the process for applications was closed on March 10. This is gratifying news, indicating the willingness of community members throughout the region to help in this critical effort.

As of March 12, over 37,000 doses of vaccine have been administered to residents throughout the region. To get the most up-to-date statistics on the progress of vaccination delivery in our Region, please visit both the Niagara Region website, as noted above, and the Niagara Health System website

at www.niagarahealth.on.ca/site/vaccination-clinic. The Niagara Health System website reports the vaccination progress for patients 80-plus years old in one of their hospitals, complex care patients in hospital and those at home who are supported by Home and Community Care providers and other essential health care workers.

As we've reached the first anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic and we move closer to a return to normalcy, it is important for everyone to remain calm and patient. It is the intention that every Niagara-on-the-Lake resident who wishes to receive a COVID-19 vaccination will not be forgotten or left behind. The goal of the town and the Community Wellness Committee is to deliver timely information about COVID-19 vaccines in Niagara-on-the-Lake to everyone as soon as possible.

What you can do now:

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues and until vaccines are completed, we must all continue to

follow public health measures to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

Remember to:

- Stay home whenever possible.
- Practise physical distancing – Maintain two metres from anyone who is not from your household.
- Practise frequent hand washing.
- Wear a mask or face covering in indoor spaces and when two metres physical distancing isn't possible.
- Take a self-assessment if you are feeling unwell. <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/self-assessment/>
- Stay up to date with the latest information about COVID-19 in Ontario. Visit covid19.ontario.ca for the most up-to-date information from the provincial government, niagararegion.ca for information from the Niagara Region, and notl.com/COVID-19 for information regarding impacts to Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Local LETTERS

Council lauded for standing up for residents' rights

In the article entitled Councillors discuss planning appeals and legal costs to town (The Local, March 10), Penny Coles shines a light on two different perspectives among town councillors when it comes to decisions which may lead to an appeal to the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT) and ensuing legal costs.

There have been many situations where the town has had to defend itself at the LPAT, but I will speak to the case involving 963 Queenston Rd. that Councillor Erwin Wiens refers to in this article.

Our town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is very unique in that we have many smaller agricultural properties interspersed with residential properties. The proliferation of secondary uses on farm properties has led to more conflicts with neighbouring residents. As a

neighbour of 963 Queenston Rd., I have been involved with the situation from the beginning, and also observed the resulting LPAT hearing. At these hearings there are rules and plans regulating development from every level of government that are taken into account. What I have discovered is that if you are a resident in the rural agricultural areas of our town, there are rules to protect the farmland, rules to protect natural heritage features, woodlots and even drainage ditches. There is nothing in place to protect residents in these areas so we have to rely on council! Did you know that if the residents were afforded the same setback protection as a nearby woodlot, the driveway at 963 Queenston Rd. could not even exist? The town allowed residents to build their homes, happily receives their property

tax money year after year, and the owners deserve equal protection.

So what do we do? After putting in all the time and effort to work through the town's bylaw amendment process, do we bail out at the last minute because someone threatens to go to the LPAT? Do we hand over the keys and walk away because somebody forgot to close a loophole? No! The town needs to stand up for its residents by providing a strong, effective team to represent us at these hearings. There is something wrong with a system that does not allow the substantial efforts by a local council to carry any weight — a local council that knows its community better than any other level of government. I understand Councillor Wiens' frustration. Believe me, I am even more frustrat-

ed, but we were not wrong to pursue this and I agree with Councillor Gary Burroughs' view that "we should never make a decision because we are afraid of losing."

Of course we would rather not have legal bills, but this is on the developers as well who are constantly pushing the envelope. It is sad that the tribunal system doesn't respect council's efforts or a resident's right to the peaceful enjoyment of their own property. We need improvements to the framework surrounding new development in our rural areas so not just agriculture is protected, but our residents as well.

Thank you to all of the councillors that gave fair consideration to our concerns and didn't back down.

Marion Hassebroek
NOTL

Local LETTERS

Plant trees — they perform miracles

Trees have been in the local news recently. The shade, habitat and beauty appeal to us, and we forget the necessity of trees.

They are essential weapons in the war against climate change.

Climate change is caused by human activity, with the continuous release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Government and citizens work to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide; we slow down the accumulation, but can we decrease the present load of carbon dioxide?

We can call on the crazy scientist, the dedicated scientist, the creative inventor and we wait for their solutions. They may come, but in the meantime we overlook a simple fact: green plants in daylight use carbon dioxide,

water and sunlight to build tissue. Oxygen is a side product, usually a non-toxic side product. Plants, while living, perform this miracle. Carbon is incorporated into plant tissue. Only when they die, do they give off the accumulated carbon as gas.

Fields of grass will absorb carbon, so too will trees. The latter are bigger, so more effective, and live longer.

It appears therefore that we, ordinary people, can do something. We do not need to feel hopeless, useless. We can plant trees.

Spring is here! There are nooks and crannies as well as parks and roadsides. We have spades. Can we get to work?

Cynthia Rand
NOTL



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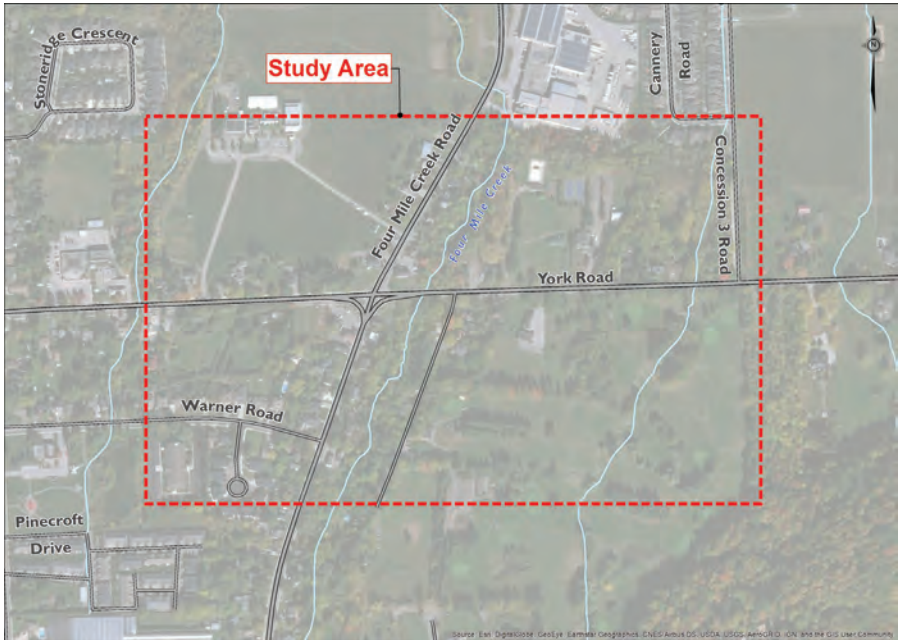
We are hiring for the May to October season (three and five day a week positions available). If you are customer-service oriented, enthusiastic about wine and enjoy working in a fast-paced environment, email your resume to:



PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice of Virtual Public Information Centre #1
Municipal Class Environmental Assessment
for York Road and Four Mile Creek Road
Intersection Improvements, St. Davids, Ontario

Niagara Region is undertaking a Municipal Class Environmental Assessment (EA) to address and improve conditions for all modes of transportation at the intersection of Regional Road 81 (York Road) and Regional Road 100 (Four Mile Creek Road), St. Davids. The MCEA schedule will be determined when the study team confirms the potential cost and environmental impact of the alternative solutions.



The first Public Information Centre will be held in an online format. As part of this event, the Study Team will deliver an online presentation followed by a Q&A on **March 25, 2021 from 6 - 8 p.m.** Information about the Online Public Information Centre #1 will be available on the project webpage starting **March 25, 2021**, and comments will be welcomed through one of the project managers below, until **April 8, 2021: niagararegion.ca/projects/regional-road-100**

If you would like to receive future notices via email, or if you have any questions or comments, please contact one of the project managers identified below:

Maged Elmadhoon, M.Eng., P.Eng. Manager, Transportation Planning Niagara Region 905-980-6000, ext. 3583 Maged.EIMadhoon@niagararegion.ca	Phil Weber, M.Eng., P.Eng. Senior Project Manager CIMA+ 905-695-1005, ext. 6732 Phil.Weber@cima.ca
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Personal information collected or submitted in writing at public meetings will be collected, used and disclosed by members of Regional Council and Regional staff in accordance with the **Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA)**. The written submissions including names, contact information and reports of the public meeting will be made available. Questions should be referred to the Privacy Office at 905-980-6000, ext. 3779 or **FOI@niagararegion.ca**.

If you require any accommodations for a disability in order to attend and participate in meetings or events, please let us know in advance so that arrangements can be made in a timely manner. Please contact the **Accessibility Advisory Coordinator** at 905-980-6000 ext. 3252 or **accessibility@niagararegion.ca**.

This notice was first issued on March 10, 2021

Row your boat!



Former Olympic swimmer, medal winner and author Elaine Tanner, anxious to get back on a rowing machine, was relieved to hear the community centre fitness centre is now open. It can accommodate 10 people at a time, with one-hour reservation time blocks available. Reservations can be made one day in advance, and only by phone at this time at 289-696-1894. The track has been moved down to the auditorium, and will be unavailable on days the vaccination clinic opens, at this point, March 31, April 1 and April 9. The community centre hours are Monday to Friday, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. *(Photo supplied)*

PUBLIC NOTICE

Have your say on Regional incentive programs

Did you know that Niagara Region offers incentive programs to help businesses create jobs, build affordable housing, protect our environment and improve our communities?

These programs are an important part of growing Niagara's economy, but we need to make sure they're hitting the mark. We're reviewing these programs right now, and we want your input. Visit **niagararegion.ca** and search "incentive review" to give us your feedback through a brief online survey, and register to attend a short virtual information session.

Virtual Information Session
Wednesday, March 24 – 6:30 p.m.
Pre-registration online is required

The session will be hosted using Zoom and can be accessed through your smartphone, tablet, computer, or by phone through teleconference. Register online at **niagararegion.ca**

If you are unable to attend, you can also contact the project team by calling 905-980-6000 ext. 3357.

If you require any accommodations for a disability in order to attend and participate in meetings or events, contact the **Niagara Region's Accessibility Coordinator** at 905-685-4225 ext. 3252 or **accessibility@niagararegion.ca**

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MP reflects on important women in his life



**MP Tony Baldinelli
Niagara Falls Riding
Special to The Local**

Monday, March 8 was International Women's Day. First celebrated in 1911, International Women's Day was an opportunity for us to not only reflect on the tremendous accomplishments the women before us have achieved, but to also reflect upon the continued work that remains to be done in promoting equality of opportunity throughout our society.

I have been very fortunate to be inspired by so many strong and hard-working women in my life, and in my professional career.

For example, in our Conservative caucus in Ottawa, we have strong leadership being displayed every week by our Deputy Leader, Can-

dice Bergen.

As well, throughout this pandemic, those policy portfolios that have been greatly impacted – health, public safety and emergency preparedness, and transport – are led by strong and competent leaders in Michelle Rempel Garner, Shannon Stubbs, and Stephanie Kusie.

Our Conservative Opposition has been well served by these women, and many others who work relentlessly every day to hold this federal government to account for their faulty policy decisions, poor judgment, and mismanagement.

Despite disguising himself as a feminist prime minister, Justin Trudeau has failed miserably to stand up for and support women throughout this pandemic.

For instance, in Canada's travel and tourism industry, which is a major industry for our local economy in Niagara-on-the-Lake, the impacts of COVID-19 have devastated segments of this sector, which are primarily led by

female entrepreneurs and workers.

Independent travel advisers and travel agencies are one such example. In this sector, 85 per cent of all travel advisors in Canada are women.

The revenue travel advisors generate is 100 per cent commission-based, and takes on average 139 to 317 days from when a customer books their trip, until when these advisors receive the commission (payment) for their work.

On day one of the pandemic, one year ago, this sector was immediately shuttered when the federal government closed our borders and halted all forms of international and domestic travel.

Regardless, independent travel advisors were still extremely busy, working to cancel booked trips, and re-booking them in the future, despite great uncertainty about when life would return back to normal.

Although they were working to support their cli-

ents, these advisors were not being paid for their efforts.

In addition, as airlines began to refund passengers, travel advisors were forced to return their commissions, despite the fact they completed their work and had already been paid.

This has meant some travel advisors have actually lost money, which they had earned from trips previously booked, including some commissions being clawed back from as early as 2019. These advisors had even claimed and paid income tax on some of this income.

Can you imagine being paid your income, and then having to pay it all back months later, without any notice?

Consequently, many travel advisors have had no income for over a year now, and there is still no end in sight nor firm decision on whether or not more of their commission will be required to be repaid — despite the work they have already completed.

If the government wanted to help these workers, they would have provided immediate financial aid to our Canadian airline sector at the start of this pandemic, with consideration and supports given to travel advisors to ensure their commissions would not be clawed back, as part of any airline refund program for passengers.

Hard-working women deserve better treatment from this government, and our Conservative caucus is demanding just that.

Last week, despite Liberal opposition, Conservatives secured the support of the House of Commons and passed a motion that calls on the federal government to provide more support to those who have been hardest hit, including those in hospitality, travel and tourism, charities, and small and medium-sized businesses.

While airline support programs and funding have been established in Europe and the U.S., Canadian airlines continue to wait. The

longer the uncertainty, the greater the concern for those who not only work in the airlines sector directly, but for those independent travel advisors, travel agencies and tour companies, who support this once-thriving travel and tourism sector.

As I reflect on the significance of International Women's Day, I also wanted to provide my thanks for the tremendous support I receive each and every day from the hard-working women in my offices in both Niagara and in Ottawa.

Thank you for all you do, April, Anna, Jennifer, and Sandra.

Above all, I am so fortunate to have the love, caring and committed support of my wife, Carol, who has been working hard for us all on the front lines of this pandemic as a nurse with Niagara Region Public Health.

Thank you to all the women who contribute and sacrifice so much in their lives, to make our world a better place.

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Museum offers virtual Queenston Quarry history lecture

Local Staff

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum's virtual lecture on the Queenston Quarry, given by Frank Racioppo, co-owner of the quarry reclamation project, promises to "unlock the secrets of this magnificent site overlooking the Niagara Peninsula, where ancient geological forces and retreating glaciers gave rise to the extraordinary biosphere of the



Frank Racioppo, the co-owner of the Queenston Quarry Reclamation Project, will talk about the past and future plans of the quarry. (Photo supplied)

Niagara Escarpment," says Barbara Worthy.

Worthy, who looks after visitor and member services for the museum, explains the rehabilitation of the quarry provides a "unique parallel into the history and evolution of Upper Canada."

The lands fell under the auspices of the 1764 Treaty of Niagara, which reserved land along the Niagara River for military use, "but an influx of Loyalists gradually saw the growth of early settlements, and eventually an agricultural plan was established, which included the quarry site," she says.

The Queenston Quarry is home to natural, geologic, and cultural resources that provide a rich historical significance to the land. Racioppo will present an in-depth look at this diversity and productivity, as well as its Indigenous and settler history, says Worthy.

From the day in 1837 when stonemason John Brown removed the first large cut stones from the quarry, and railroads criss-crossed



This photo shows the distinct bedding layers of the prized Queenston limestone, says Frank Racioppo, who will give next week's lecture. He explains the distinct horizontal lines are natural seams in the limestone rock where they split apart to separate the blocks off the wall. The wood hut is a steam engine that operates the derrick crane to lift the blocks off the wall and onto a horse and carriage trailer, or onto rail cars. (Courtesy of the NOTL Museum)

the Niagara Escarpment, this site has symbolized growth, productivity, and industrial development. Queenston stone has been prized by masons, builders and architects for some of Canada's most important and monumen-

tal buildings across Canada, Worthy explains, and Racioppo will highlight the journey of this historic limestone.

"The quarry's next era is designed to capture and embrace its natural and cultural richness," said Racioppo, a

real estate lawyer and founder of the Queenston Quarry Reclamation project. "We are creating a sense of place that is a totally unique residential and recreational experience, and will always honour its history, and its beauty."

Part of a series of virtual lectures, the Queenston Quarry talk will be online March 24 at 11 a.m.

Registration is required at www.nhsm.ca/events. For more information email aklassen@nhsm.ca.

Golden Years Guide

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'Spectacular team' preparing for election campaign

Continued from page 1

since 1980 raised his family in Niagara-on-the-Lake. He now lives in St. Catharines, and owns several properties in Niagara Falls. His daughter Jessica, who lives in St. Davids, has taken over control of the company.

Gale says he wants to represent the riding at the provincial level to ensure Niagara isn't left behind during the economic recovery from the pandemic, which has crippled small businesses and the tourism industry.

"I want to be there to help make business decisions on costs and services to the people. Niagara deserves someone who is a strong advocate for the region, and can bring their concerns directly to the Premier," he says.

"I think Doug Ford has done a great job during this pandemic, and I like that he talks like the everyday person. He is relatable, and is working tirelessly to keep us safe."

Economic recovery will be tough, and tourism is the industry hardest hit, says Gale.

"We need a representative at Queen's Park that has tourism experience, and I believe my tenure on the board of the Niagara Parks Commission and what I was able to accomplish there speaks to my experience."

He says he is also running for his children and grandchildren, and what the future holds for them. "I want to make sure that I do everything I can to make Niagara a better place for not only them, but everyone's grandchildren."

Gale says he has spent his life working for Niagara, first in public service as a police officer, then as an entrepreneur for 35 years, with businesses covering NOTL, Niagara Falls and Fort Erie, and most recently as a regional councillor.

"I have ownership in many properties throughout our riding, and I truly care that our taxes are controlled. I should, because I pay a lot of them."

Niagara has the best people in the world, he adds, "and I care very deeply about what happens here."

Gale lived in Niagara-on-the-Lake for 38 years, "and I have a ton of respect for everyone there. It is a beautiful, quaint town with some of the best hospitality in the world. I have both family and friends living in all three areas, NOTL, Niagara Falls, and Fort Erie. I care about what happens to them, and all the people of these areas," he says.

"I want to make sure that the hospitality, wine, construction and small business sectors are heard and supported by the province.

When we are able to open up again, there is going to be a heavy lift to get people back to work, and I want to be part of the team ensuring Niagara-on-the-Lake is on the right path."

Asked about whether he expects an early election, Gale says the focus of the Conservative government at the moment is getting people vaccinated. But whenever the election is called, he says, he will be prepared.

"I have a spectacular team assisting me, and we are preparing for every possibility. There is no doubt that campaigning during a pandemic would pose difficulties, but I hope that by the time an election is called most people will have had the chance to receive vaccines."

There are so many other ways to connect with people these days, he adds, "whether it's over Zoom or old-fashioned phone calls. I want to hear everyone's concerns and priorities."

His priorities, he says, are Niagara's priorities: making sure the region is ready for a strong economic recovery. Working in politics at the local level, "I am well aware of the anger and fear people are experiencing. I want Niagara to have certainty, support and the path forward."

His daughter Jessica has a mantra that drives her, he says, and that suits him perfectly as well. "When I leave this earth, I want to ensure that it's a better place because I was here."

He wants to make a positive difference to the people of Niagara, he adds, "and I believe that serving as MPP would be the most effective way of doing this."

He also wants to be "part of the conversation" to ensure Niagara's aging population gets the quality of care it deserves.

"The situation in long-term care was tragic. COVID exposed the systemic issues that existed after decades of neglect. The Liberals, propped up every step of the way by the NDP, built 611 net new beds over their entire time in power. Under Doug Ford, there are over 22,000 beds being built, and just this week I heard that Niagara College has a waitlist for the free Personal Support Worker programs."

Gale says he believes he has shown he's not afraid to fight for what he believes is right. He digs for facts, and when the facts are on his side, he doesn't back down, he says, pointing to his time on the Niagara Parks Commission board, when he brought to light the board's procurement policies, which, more than a decade ago, included a long history of renewing the lease of the Maid of the Mist without considering competing proposals. The atten-

tion on the issue forced the commission to call for bids for the ferry service in the Niagara River, which led to Hornblower Canada replacing the Maid of the Mist as the boat-tour operator on the Canadian side of the river, saving provincial taxpayers up to \$300 million, says Gale.

He's also faced some battles when the facts didn't support his position, he says, and when that happens, "I move on. But I've been right more often than not."

Over the years he has been a baseball and hockey coach, a Big Brother, and spearheaded the Gale family's involvement in many volunteer and philanthropic endeavours to benefit the community, including the Gale Centre in Niagara Falls.

He formed and funded the Bob Gale Recreation Fund, organized Ten Men in a Tent in 2009 and 2010 to benefit Project SHARE, and was president of the Boys and Girls Club, where he was made an honorary board member.



Regional Coun. Bob Gale will represent the Conservatives in the next provincial election. (Photo supplied)



Auchterlonie on Astrology

Bill Auchterlonie Special to The Local

The full week of Auchterlonie on Astrology can be found on the Facebook page for The NOTL Local, and on the website www.auchterlonieonastronomy.ca.

Saturday, March 20: Happy birthday to all Aries. And Happy New Year to everyone. On March 20, 2020, Sun entered Aries, which meant that we have the official start of a new astrological year. If 2021 had a birth chart, it would be cast for March 20. Last year the March equinox chart had Sun conjunct Chiron, and a

tense Capricorn stellium. This astrological year, the Sun is closely conjunct Venus and has a much more optimistic vibe. Yes, there is still healing work to be done, but at least now we have an ally. Life doesn't have to be that hard. Today number 4 celebrates number 73. Bobby Orr, the greatest defenceman to play in the NHL was born March 20, 1948, in Parry Sound.

Sunday, March 21: Venus enters Aries, hand in hand with the Sun, getting

ready for a total rebirth of the heart. There is a beauty and innocence to Venus in the first sign of the zodiac. Her heart is pure, and she instinctively knows what she wants. It was March 21, 1973, that Frank Mahovlich became the fifth player in NHL history to score 500 goals. He was playing for the Montreal Canadiens.

Tuesday, March 23: Mercury (at 11 degrees Pisces) is square Mars (at 11 degrees Gemini). Mercury-Mars squares have a

reputation of being confrontational, however Gemini and Pisces are mutable, and rather compromising signs. If anything, Mercury square Mars is about "let's sort things out" rather than having arguments for the sake of having arguments. Today, former Buffalo Sabre and Leaf goaltender, Daren Puppa, celebrates birthday number 56.

Next time, a couple of rare events make things better.

Until then, shine on!

We are thrilled to welcome Jane Elltoft to our Niagara-on-the-Lake Realty family!

Born and raised in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Jane is now part of the Elltoft team – a 3 member seasoned team serving clients through strong market knowledge and a combined 50 years of experience. Jane returned to Niagara in 2005 to raise her children Madison & Ben MacLean after spending 16 years living in the heart of downtown Toronto. She brings with her a Bachelor of Commerce Degree, an extensive career as Director of Publicity/Promotions BVPD Canada - The Walt Disney Co., as well as 15 years of sales and business entrepreneurial experience. Jane's background ensures she has the experience, confidence, and necessary negotiating and problem-solving skills to successfully represent you. Her love and knowledge of the Niagara Region, along with her care and patience, will ensure that you are represented by someone who will help you find exactly what you are looking for.




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NOTL woman represents riding at Daughters of the Vote

Mike Balsom
Special to The Local

Representing the Niagara Falls riding at the third annual Daughters of the Vote conference last week has left Niagara-on-the-Lake resident Carrie Robinson inspired and energized.

The four-day event wrapped up on International Women's Day last Monday, appropriate for a virtual gathering of 338 young women and gender-diverse youth representing each of the federal ridings across the country. From her student apartment in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Robinson was able to participate and work with politically-minded colleagues from across Canada.

In her third year at Bishop's University, Robinson is taking a double major in international studies and political science, with a minor in world religion. As the communications director of the university's Policy and International Studies Association (PISA), Robinson saw Daughters of the Vote as a perfect opportunity for her to learn more about the political process and to network with women who are making change.

It's the third year Equal Voice, a multi-partisan organization dedicated to electing more women to political office, has run the program. The objective is to expose participants to Canada's political institutions and the women and men serving in them. The hope is to inspire young women to participate in the political sphere, and take action in their local communities in the years and decades to come.

Robinson, like all the other delegates, had to apply to represent her local riding. In her application, she focused on two issues she felt were not only front and centre locally but also impacted her personally.

"The first was the recovery of the tourism industry," she says. "Our town of Niagara-on-the-Lake was especially affected by it this year. My family's business (Oh Canada Eh?) was affected by it, and I didn't find employment last summer because the whole tourism sector was shut down."

Backlash against the visitors who did actually come to NOTL in 2020 fueled her second focus.

"Niagara Falls has become so increasingly diverse," she begins. "This summer, with all the people from the GTA coming down instead of American and international tourists, I was distraught at how they were treated, and how people looked at them. I really wanted to discuss with other delegates about being allies to Muslim women and



Carrie Robinson, a student at Bishop's University in Sherbrooke, Que., is "inspired and energized" after a four-day conference on women in politics. (Photo supplied)

others."

"What I study is the way politics and religion intersect," Robinson continues. "I was really hoping to talk to other delegates to get their insight on multiculturalism, and the fact that when people are educated about other religions, they not only tolerate it but can see how beautiful all these cultures and religions are."

Both issues fit in well with her studies at Bishop's. Robinson expresses interest in pursuing one of two future career possibilities upon graduation. One would involve her working in cultural preservation internationally for a non-governmental agency (NGO), such as UNESCO. The other option would see her being involved in domestic politics, running a campaign or perhaps putting her name forward as a candidate herself.

Daughters of the Vote featured a number of sessions that linked strongly to Carrie's educational focus. Workshops on provincial, territorial and municipal politics were featured. Panels focused on topics such as Canada's feminist foreign policy, reconciliation, employment in politics, inclusiveness, the realities of rural politics and engagement from the LGBTQI2S perspective. Each day ended with a chance for the delegates to discuss and reflect upon their experiences, and the final day wrapped up with a virtual House of Commons session.

Panelists and speakers included Maryam Monsef,

Canada's Minister for Women and Gender Equality, Green Party of Canada Parliamentary Leader Elizabeth May, Marilyn Gladu, Chair of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

the strength and resilience she has to have to have run and won as an independent," says Robinson. "She spoke about how partisan politics, as important as it is, forces you to believe in x, y

and z, while as an independent, she can really speak on what she believes."

Jean Augustine was the other guest who made a mark on Robinson. In 1993, Augustine, an immigrant from Grenada, became the first African-Canadian woman to be elected to parliament. She won four consecutive elections in the riding of Etobicoke-Lake-

shore before leaving politics in 2006.

"I had never heard of her before," Robinson admits. "Her energy was amazing, the way she presented her story, in a more casual tone, but very energetic. She spoke about how the structures of government were not set up for women. When she first got to the House of Commons there were no female washrooms. The microphones weren't adjustable to her height."

Robinson continues, "as the only black woman she had such a unique perspective, and she felt an obligation to speak for so many people. She didn't go to school for political science, she was a teacher and a principal. She spoke about how politics is for everyone, you just have to be the right person, be driven and want to do it."

Being driven and interested in politics seem to have come naturally to her. She speaks fondly of

the many political conversations she has had over the years with her parents, Anne and Ross Robinson, as well as her former step-father, Art Frank and her brother Scott. She suggests that it's just the way she's wired.

Looking to the future, Carrie hopes to get involved in local politics this summer when she is back home from Sherbrooke. As well, if a federal election is called, she has plans to be very involved, though she can't give specifics yet.

In the meantime, she will continue to be a key member of the PISA group at Bishop's, and she will be working for a professor on an alumni involvement project. As well, Robinson will represent the school as part of their model United Nations delegation at a virtual simulation in New York City. All experiences that could result in a deeper commitment to her town, province and country in the future.

“What I study is the way politics and religion interact.”

Carrie Robinson

and Geneviève Guilbault, Deputy Premier of Quebec. Messages from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the leaders of all the other political parties were part of the House of Commons session as well.

When asked which sessions stood out to her, Robinson points to two speakers in particular.

Jody Wilson-Raybould is the MP for the BC riding of Vancouver Granville. A member of the Indigenous We Wai Kai Nation, she is the former Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Wilson-Raybould resigned from Trudeau's cabinet in February, 2019 in the wake of the SNC-Lavalin affair, during which it was alleged that the Prime Minister attempted to influence her in an ongoing prosecution against the Quebec-based company. Wilson-Raybould subsequently ran in the federal election that year as an independent, and won.

"I was really inspired by

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Patios could use some sunshine and warm weather

Penny Coles
The Local

It's patio season — almost — and local restaurant owners are keeping their fingers crossed for some warm weather this weekend.

The town gave those who received patio permits last year permission to open last weekend, although the decision won't be officially approved by council until next week.

The weather was looking like it might be okay, and with sunshine expected, it seemed a good opportunity to extend dining restrictions from the 10 people allowed inside to an extra 25 outdoors.

Jovie Joki, owner of the Irish Harp on King Street, said there were some hardy people enjoying the sunshine on the restaurant patio last weekend, for which she obtained a permit last year.

Even if it's cool, "some people feel safer outside," she said.

She was hoping the weather would make it an attractive option for St. Patrick's Day, with the restaurant a popular choice for locals to celebrate the occasion.

Maria Mavridis was also

relieved to be able to open her Corks Wine Bar and Eatery and Firehall Flame patios on Queen Street last weekend.

The patio at Corks is pretty much closed in, while the Firehall Flame is more open, but has four heaters to keep diners toasty.

Even though the region is in red, with restaurants able to open to in-person dining, she wouldn't have made the decision to reopen without the use of the patios, Mavridis said. With just 10 people allowed inside at a time, taking about an hour to eat, it just wouldn't have been worth it.

But she's glad she did reopen. "I'm happy to have the staff back, and they're happy to be back. It's important for mental health reasons."

She under-ordered food supplies, and was surprised to run out. It's difficult to know what to do, when the weather is such a big factor, she says. "It's supposed to be a sunny weekend, but that could change."

She said she's constantly wondering how to figure out operating during a pandemic, when rules can change quickly, and this week is just praying for good weather on

the weekend.

When council discussed allowing the patios to remain over the winter, there was talk about how much locals enjoyed them, and Mavridis says she has seen locals sitting in the patios already. "It gives them another reason to get out."

Kim Gauld, owner of Sunset Grill on Queen Street, would like to see the patios remain permanently.

Although sales were significantly lower last year for downtown Niagara-on-the-Lake restaurants, Gauld says she couldn't imagine what the season would have been without the outdoor tables.

Last September she wrote to Lord Mayor Betty Disero and councillors "to open the conversation" about the potential for patios this season. "It is very possible that we will still be feeling the effects of the pandemic next summer. There is a possibility of a second wave, and even in the best-case scenario we will still be recovering from the losses this year," she said then.

She wasn't imagining the worst-case scenario, a second wave, another lockdown, further restrictions for restaura-

rants, the arrival of variants of concern, and now the potential — or the arrival, depending on who you ask — of a third wave, just as this tourist season is approaching.

She says now she's looking ahead at the tourist season in 2022 as the time for recovery from the pandemic. People may be vaccinated and moving around more freely this fall, but it will be too late for this season.

She hasn't opened her patio yet, and while she's grateful the town is allowing them to open early, she isn't sure why restaurant owners have to go through the permit process again.

The Sunset Grill patio is more exposed to the elements, and the weather is still too cold. She also doesn't want to take a

chance on ordering too much food for two or three days. But she is conflicted about making the right decision, and says she could change her mind.

Sunset Grill's pop-out patio endured the winter and the snow plows without incident, which was a concern to town staff, and if she does change her mind, it just needs a bit of cleaning to be ready for customers, she said.

Lord Mayor Betty Disero spoke this week of making patios a permanent fixture on Queen Street, but only with input from the municipal heritage committee to make sure they are compatible with the Old Town.

For now, patio approvals are still working their way through the approval process,

and a staff report is expected.

But Disero's vision is for widened sidewalks to eventually allow for permanent patios that don't have to pop out onto the street.

About a year ago, she presented a plan for the makeover of Queen Street, which she says is a little tired-looking, with aging infrastructure that needs to be replaced. Her plan showed narrowed streets, with no loss of parking spaces, and wider sidewalks, which would allow patios to be closer to the restaurants with room for people to walk around them.

"It's an investment for the future, for NOTL as a mature destination," she said, "something we could include as we recreate NOTL for the next 10 to 20 years."



The Irish Harp on King Street (top), and Firehall Flame (centre) on Queen Street, have patios that are open, and could use some warm weather. Sunset Grill's patio was popular last summer, but the restaurant owners are not ready to open it yet for the season. (Photos by David Gilchrist)

Signs of spring



Snowdrops coming up on the lawn are one of the first very welcome signs that better weather is ahead of us. (David Gilchrist)

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More buyers competing for fewer homes driving market

Penny Coles
The Local

There is no doubt the Niagara housing market is hot, and even more so in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

How hot is it? Very, say local real estate agents, indicating 2020, expected to be a difficult year during a pandemic, turned out to be a spectacular year for selling houses.

And 2021 is looking even better, as a growing number of potential buyers, many from the GTA, want to move out of crowded urban areas to the small-town environment and slower lifestyle Niagara-on-the-Lake has to offer.

The local market could get even hotter, if possible, thanks to a recent online report listing NOTL as one of the best places in Canada for those wanting to escape a busy urban environment. One in five homebuyers, it says have moved or plan to move from a major city hub to a small town/rural area.

The reasons vary, from those close to retirement considering making a move, pushed by the pandemic to accelerate their schedule, to those looking for a safer, smaller community to raise a family.

To assess why real estate sales have taken off during a time when it was predicted there would be a slump, The Local talked to several sales representatives with their fingers on the pulse of the local market.

Kim Schwenker of McGarr Realty says looking back to the November and December of 2019, and January 2020, before the pandemic hit, sales were “significantly under” the average year for the same time period.

In the last 90-plus days of 2020 and early 2021, new listings were down about 25 per cent over the same time period of the year before, but the number of sales was up 88 per cent, the average sale price

was up almost 19 per cent, and the average number of days it took to sell a house was considerably less, says Schwenker.

Low inventory of houses for sale has been driving up prices, and also reducing the length of time a house is on the market, she says. “Prices are going crazy” across the region, she explains, although the percentage increase isn’t as high in NOTL as in other municipalities, simply because the prices are so high to begin with.

Sales people have been dealing with multiple offers in the \$1.5 million and up range recently, “something that Niagara hasn’t seen much, if at all, in the past.”

Schwenker says in the past four months she has been involved in four situations with houses in the \$1.65 million price range receiving multiple offers, an unusual situation for real estate priced that high.

The fact that more houses are going for more than \$1 million in the region is important for NOTL, she adds. “It tells us more people who are coming to Niagara can buy houses in that price range,” she explains, when in the past, the number of people who could spend \$1 to \$2 million on a house was limited. “Now we’re seeing more of them, and a huge number of sales in a shorter amount of time. The high-end sales are becoming more common, and that is really significant. It will make a change in the face of the region.”

However, she sees this March showing something a little different, with more houses coming on the market. “If the pace for new listings continues this month, we will have a record number of new listings over any March for the last 10 years. We will see what effect this has on sales and prices as the month moves forward, but this may bring a bit of a relief,” she says, “a glimmer

of hope” for buyers.

Spring is typically when more houses go up for sale, as people begin to move outdoors, after hunkering down during a long winter. They also start to think about a new house to enjoy the summer, and moving before kids go back to school.

Having more inventory will also make it easier for agents, who have been finding it difficult to adjust to the new pricing. “It’s hard to keep up with pricing in a hot market,” she says, “when the only real determining factor is how much it sells for.”

Despite having the lowest number of listings in a long time, and a pandemic, “2020 turned out to be a great year. The real estate market is totally dependant on human behaviour, and this hot market was unpredictable, based on the number of people deciding to get out of Toronto, finding the city was congested and discovering they could work just as easily from home.”

They saw it as an opportunity to get out of town, decrease their mortgage, and change their lifestyle, says Schwenker.

“This pandemic is changing how we look at our lives. We’ve been running ourselves ragged, and the ability to work from home has made us realize we can change the way we live. We can live, work and play in the same place in Niagara. We’ve all had a shift of priorities, an awakening during these lockdowns. Our lives are changing, and that change is not going to go away. Nobody wants to be watching life pass us by on the highway. What’s happening is the universe forcing humans to smarten up and realize what is possible,” says Schwenker.

“The newcomers to Niagara are excited about their new lives, their new relationships. They want to engage with other people, and enjoy the new

life they’re committing to. They want to be part of a community.”

Andrew Perrie of Revel Realty plans to open his own real estate office in NOTL April 1, with partners Jessie and Evan MacDonald, on Four Mile Creek Road. He is seeing the boom in sales across the region, and says many of his clients thinking about moving from the GTA have decided on Niagara, but not necessarily NOTL. He asks them what they’re looking for in a lifestyle, and although they don’t always know it when they come to Niagara, what they describe is better suited to the small town, rather than Niagara Falls or St. Catharines. Many are people who have decided to retire a little sooner than planned, due to COVID, and others are young couples living in a condo and wanting to start a family, he says. They like the fact that there are good public schools, and they’re not even thinking about a high school at this point — they’re just looking for a safe neighbourhood to raise their family.

NOTL is always a hot spot, he says, because of the lifestyle it offers. People come here, maybe having heard about it from friends or family, “they check it out, experience it, and want to live it.”

It helps if they have a local realtor, who can give them advice on the best place to live to find the lifestyle they’re looking for, he added. Some of them have already decided, but “a lot don’t know about it. I can explain it, and show it to them.”

During the pandemic, he says, it’s important to have a realtor who knows the community, who lives and works in NOTL. “You have to be able to explain the community, without being able to show them the lifestyle.”

Toronto clients may see their money going a lot further in Niagara. How-



Doug Rempel, Bosley Real Estate Ltd. (Photos supplied)

ever, with more houses in the \$1 million price range or higher, they may also see themselves staying in Toronto — until they experience the different lifestyle Niagara has to offer, especially if they plan to work from home, or are retiring, and they find an area with “a little more breathing space,” says Perrie.

Locals who are selling may have lost a spouse, and are alone, or are downsizing as a couple. They might not have planned to sell right away, or during a pandemic, but they see what houses are going for and decide to maximize the sale price, he says.

And he doesn’t see that changing any time soon.

“I don’t see the bubble bursting,” says Perrie. “It might cool for a few months, as we see more listings on the market slowing competition, but I don’t think we’ll see it going down, especially not in NOTL. This town has so much to offer.”

One year ago this week, for many families and businesses, the world came to a screeching halt, says Doug Rempel of Bosley Real Estate Ltd.

“We were asked to learn new social disciplines and accept that things were going to be different, although just how different we had no way of knowing.”

Real estate was privileged to be deemed an essential service, he says, “and as we moved farther away from the March 10 pandemic declaration, the pace of business increased dramatically. In its year-end review, the Niagara Association of Realtors reported that Niagara region saw an increase in the number of sales, a decrease in the number of listings, a decrease in the average number of days it took for a property to sell, and a 14.8 per cent increase in the average selling price.”

By comparison, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, says Rempel, “there was an al-

most staggering 53.3 per cent increase in the number of sales, a 2.2 per cent decrease in the number of listings, an 8.7 per cent reduction of the number of days it took for a home to sell, and a 10 per cent increase in the average selling price, to \$808,700. The strength of last year’s market has carried over to the start of 2021. Niagara-on-the-Lake’s February statistics report 46 new listings, 49 sales, and an average selling price of \$967,300.”

Certainly one of the COVID lessons is that we don’t have to live within a short commute of the office, says Rempel. “In-home offices and schooling are redefining lifestyles. There is a newfound freedom, which has opened new horizons for residents in the 416 and 905 halo, and the resulting increase in demand, combined with a chronic shortage of housing options, has caused prices to rise month after month.”

Like all businesses, realtors have adapted to the COVID protocols, he says. Access to offices and client visits have been restricted, contact tracing and health disclosures implemented, public open houses cancelled and in-person showings curtailed. Best practices required the use of personal protection equipment for realtors and their clients, and limited access to homes, with before and after-viewing sanitizing.

Today, says Rempel, more than 95 per cent of home buyers start their search electronically. Online searches need to include a robust photo gallery, floor plans, and three-dimensional imaging; virtual tours, video or Facetime presentations are common; property and community information needs to be more comprehensive, “and where would we be without Zoom?”

Continued on page 15



Kim Schwenker, McGarr Realty



Andrew Perrie, Revel Realty

Pandemic lifestyle changes affect real estate market

Continued from page 14

E-communication and electronic signatures enable remote negotiations, he explains, the completion of contracts, and even the transfer of funds.

"COVID has not introduced these tools and business practices, but has accelerated their implementation, and they are continuing to evolve and are becoming more sophisticated."

For most, the sale or purchase of the family home involves their single largest asset, and it is one of the top-three emotional and stressful dynamics, says Rempel.

"As realtors, it is our privilege to be facilitators. We get to know our clients and their needs and wants; so much of what we do relies on building a strong, understanding, and empathetic relationship, which can be very challenging without a one-on-one, face-to-face interaction. While technology can provide a significant amount of information, neighbourhood and property visits with our clients is a critical part of the selling and buying process. We miss the interaction, and are impatiently waiting for the day, hopefully not too far in the distance, when we can return to the new norms."

Doug Widdicombe of Sotheby's International Realty points to the pandemic as the cause behind the lack of the housing inventory for sale, the driving factor of today's market.

Typically there would be about 200 listings across Niagara-on-the-Lake. Right now, the number is in the 60s, he says, including some mobile homes in St. Davids and on Mewburn Road, and two homes priced at more than \$5 million.

The shortage of houses for sale, especially those priced under \$1 million, "is scary," he says.

The good news is the spring market is beginning across the Niagara Region, with multiple offers, houses selling quickly, and at high prices that are being supported by banks, accepting the prices as the "new norm."

One house in the Chautauqua neighbourhood recently sold for \$165,000 over asking price, he says.

Those who are willing to sell during a pandemic are excited to see the money they will get, but they have to be careful.

"It can be tricky. A lot of people are afraid to put their home on the market, afraid they won't have anywhere to go. They are still dealing with the same small number of listings."

Widdicombe jokes about the phone calls home owners receive from time to time, from realtors asking if they want to sell. "They say, 'I've got someone interested in your home.' Now when they say it, it's real."

He says he's hoping the spring market and more inventory coming up will take some of the pressure off the rising prices, making it easier for everyone. "I'm really hoping it will calm down a bit."

But with the number of people in Toronto wanting to get out, especially those in condos living 20 to 30 storeys up who have to line up to wait for elevators, with only two people allowed in them at a time, the market will continue to be strong. "They've had enough of waiting. They want to move out," says Widdicombe.

In real estate, there is a time for buying and a time for selling, and realtors talk a lot about what advice to give about the future, Widdicombe says. His personal opinion at this point on pricing is "fifty-fifty. They could move up or down."

What is surprising him, with the number of houses priced in the millions getting multiple offers, "is the amount of money out there."



Ryan Johnstone, Royal LePage

Ryan Johnstone of Royal LePage says the local real estate market is thriving, and continues to be a sellers' market. "If we go back to February 2020, we had a balanced, gradually improving market with seven months of inventory, \$765,000 average sale price, and eight properties which sold over \$1 million in January and February," he says.

"The pandemic hits, we go into lockdown, and for the most part, everyone's lifestyle, and day-to-day work routine, changes. As we recovered from the first lockdown, we quickly realized that people started making changes in terms of housing. The exodus from urban to rural areas started."

Fast forward to February 2021, says Johnstone, "and here in NOTL much has changed over the past year. We have 1.6 months of inventory, average sale price year-to-date is \$1,148,000, and 33 homes at \$1 million-plus have sold already this year. Local sellers are now capitalizing on this strong appreciation in the market, and might consider downsizing, but may find it difficult to find a house with the limited inventory across the region."

Last year was historic for everyone, says Nancy Bailey of Engel & Volkers.

"It has been a time to expect the unexpected, and to learn and adapt to new and ever-changing needs of our clients. The housing market has entered 2021 blazing hot, with the off-the-charts demand, and an extreme shortage of homes for sales. Home sales and prices are expected to keep rising in 2021 as coronavirus vaccines become available. Inventory will continue to rule."

Several economists are predicting a storm year for home sales in 2021, says Bailey, even stronger than 2020.

Clients are looking for lifestyle, not just a home, she adds. "Location ... location ... lifestyle."

Adapting to the consumer means it's time to add a fourth "L" to the guiding real estate fundamental as a reminder to invoke the lifestyle elements a home possesses, she says.

"For example, potential homeowners can imagine themselves exploring European cooking classes in the open kitchen plan, stargazing with their children in the outdoor living room, hitting the bike trails after work, or strolling the downtown galleries. NOTL offers all of this and more."

In this environment, pricing a home to be "in the market," and not just



Tom Elltoft, Niagara-on-the-Lake Realty

"on the market," is critical, she says. Statistics show that if the house is overpriced, the buyer will net less money, and it will expose them during the pandemic to people coming through their homes but won't purchase them.

Also, the pandemic has encouraged realtors to improve their qualifying skills to avoid putting themselves and others at risk by showing homes to people who are not financially in a position to make a purchase, says Bailey.

Tom Elltoft of Niagara-on-the-Lake Realty says he believes the pandemic "accelerated" something that would have happened eventually. He's seeing clients who, thanks to the proliferation of telecommunications, are working from home, and others who were taking their time thinking about retiring now moving up their schedule.

He's finding younger couples with a family wanting to move from the GTA, and older couples, grandparents, looking for homes with multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, a pool and a big backyard to create "a safe haven" for their families to visit.

As well as seeing rising prices, he says, houses in the high end of the market that might have sat for a year are now moving quickly.

Although bidding with a fixed date to look at offers is popular in some places during hot markets, it's not seen that often in NOTL he says — certainly not like Toronto.

When people have driven an hour or so — and 90 per cent of his clients are from Toronto — they want to see multiple listings, and real estate agents fear they will miss the buyer that may make the trip the next weekend.

The locals who decide to sell are people who would have sold anyway, although in the current market, some are nervous.

They may be afraid to move during a pandemic, fearing they won't be able to get a moving company — "you absolutely can," says Elltoft — or they might be anxious that with houses selling so quickly, they won't be able to find what they're looking for.

"I would love to have another 20 listings," he says. "Usually we average about 50 to 60 listings. Now we're down to 10, and they sell quickly, so we don't get to build up an inventory."

In many ways it has become easier to see a house during the pandemic, because people spend more time online, where the virtual tours are more extensive.

"People are doing their homework before they get here," he says. "They might have already decided where they want to be."

Whether they have decided on the Old Town or one of the other communities, "we very rarely go back and forth," he says. "And it is easier if they work with a local realtor who knows the areas."

Buyers are also coming to town pre-qualified, he says, so sales happen quickly.

"A lot of times, people from Toronto discuss things in the driveway of a house or a parking lot, and make up their minds," he says.

The market for rentals is also high, with people looking for an extended vacation, says Elltoft.

"We're the furthest south without being able to cross the border," he says, "and there's space to walk around and feel safe."

It's not just the buyers who are changing their lifestyle, choosing to work from home, says Elltoft.

The NOTL Realty office has been closed since March 2020, "and yet this has been the best year in real estate yet," with staff working safely from home. "We don't need to work in the office," he says.



Doug Widdicombe, Sotheby's International Realty



Nancy Bailey, Engel & Volkers

SCHOOLS

CROSSROADS PUBLIC SCHOOL

Crossroads Coyotes celebrate a week of staycation days

Submitted by
Crossroads Public School

This week at Crossroads Public School — the week traditionally when March Break is held — students celebrated with the Great Coyote Staycation, an entire week of school-wide, collaboratively built, curriculum-based activities

that coincide with a different theme each day. They dressed up and held activities for Beach Day Monday, Staycation Day Tuesday, with Rainbow Day, Kindness Day and Coyote Spirit Day to fill the rest of the week, each day with special snacks and contests, costumes, music . . . the works, says principal Kate Fish. The week will end with the school's first-ever on-line Trivia Night for the school community, with prizes donated by local businesses. "We have 80 families registered so far for the trivia night," Fish says. "It's going to be an awesome week."



Felix Vollmer, Eliana McManus, Addison Driedger, Camryn Wiens, Aoibhin Davidson, Ella Edgecombe, Levi Bayne, Brooke Whyte, Max Ruller, Alivia Nickason and Eva Zhakova enjoy a day of staycation at Crossroads. (Photos submitted)



Harrison Pohorly builds a sandcastle on the beach at Crossroads, as do Hope Gretzinger, Taylor Jonah and Kayla Thwaites.

Charlie Squire, in Kindergarten, is about to board a cruise to Fiji!

Time to update for Spring 2021!

Advertise your business in our *Spring* HOME Improvement Section



Grade 2 students Emilia Wiens, Hannah Allison and Madelyn Josiak enjoy a day of staycation.



Addison Driedger, Brooke Whyte and Megan Dyck, in Grade 5/6, are having a lazy day on their staycation.

Publication Dates:
March 31, April 7, 14, 21 and 28
Booking Deadline: Monday at noon for each publication week

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Kayla Thwaites is sunbathing on her staycation, as is Elliot Chard.

Trying to get home as news of pandemic travelled

Randy Klaassen
The Local

Just prior to the announcement of the global pandemic a year ago, my wife Renate and I had arrived in Uruguay for a family visit. Her parents had also travelled there, where they had spent the early part of their young adult life. Motivation for us making the trip was to meet with Uruguayan relatives, and to hear stories of Renate's grandfather. Before he died, he had written most of his memoir of life in Germany, but not the latter part of his time in Uruguay.

Before leaving Niagara, we heard news of a COVID

virus, but there were no reported cases in Uruguay. We travelled with caution, yet had a purpose. The weekend after arrival was our story-telling session with family members.

The following day Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called Canadians to return home. In Montevideo we walked to our airline office, where there was a line-up of people. The representative told us "everything was normal." The only option of re-booking gained us two days from our scheduled return. Three days later, all flights were cancelled, and like Canada, Uruguay locked down.

We had registered our trip with the Canadian Embassy,

and they kept us informed, giving us alternate options to get home as they became available. We lived with uncertainty as to when we might be able to return home.

Our extended time was spent with a cousin's family, on a rural dairy farm. Unable to visit others, we enjoyed quiet days of summer weather. We tried to help our hosts where we could, and took afternoon walks on the country road. Peaceful, yet anxious.

Our three-week vacation extended to six, and it became a significant challenge, and cost, to make arrangements for getting home.

A year later we are deeply grateful to relatives who

hosted our extended stay, and thankful for the St. Catharines travel agent who booked our alternate flights. Our cousin had to lend us funds when we could not pay for a flight by credit card. Then family in Niagara assisted us during our time of isolation at home. Our experience was akin to the *Come From Away* story of stranded passengers.

When there is much to be discouraged about, we are very aware of the sense of care and compassion we share as a community when we act for the well-being of others. For this, the past year has taught us we have so much for which to be thankful.



Randy Klaassen had taken The Local with him to Uruguay to catch up on news from home a year ago, where COVID-19 was new to us. Klaassen is sitting in the Plaza Independencia, with the Palacio Salvo in Montevideo, Uruguay, in the background. (Photo supplied)

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SCHOOLS

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Learning through art



Jayden D'Cruz concentrates on his St. Patrick's day art work.



Mila Treanor and Lucy McSween show off their rainbow art.



Ava Mieleand, Elliana Malachowsky (back), with T.J. Gauld, Ariana LeBrasseur and Auston Cwiertniewski make leprechaun rainbow hats and rainbows, with, of course, pots of gold at the end.



St. Michael Catholic Elementary School's Grade 7 class, including Ben Raso, Elizabeth Nolan, Cal Wilkins, Peyton Leigh, Ella Murray and Gabriella Julien researched the notable Canadians that are potential candidates for the new \$5 bill. Each day students shared the candidate's history and contributions to Canada on the morning announcements, presenting persuasive oral arguments as to why their notable figure should be chosen. This week students will depict their choice on a \$5 template, and the school will vote. They are looking forward to seeing if their choice will make it into Canadian currency. (Photos supplied)

LocalHAPPENINGS

NOTL HISTORICAL MUSEUM ONLINE LECTURE

March 24 @ 11 a.m. - 12 p.m.

"A History of the Queenston Quarry": A Zoom presentation by Frank Racioppo. Visit www.nhsm.ca to register or email contact@nhsm.ca for more information.



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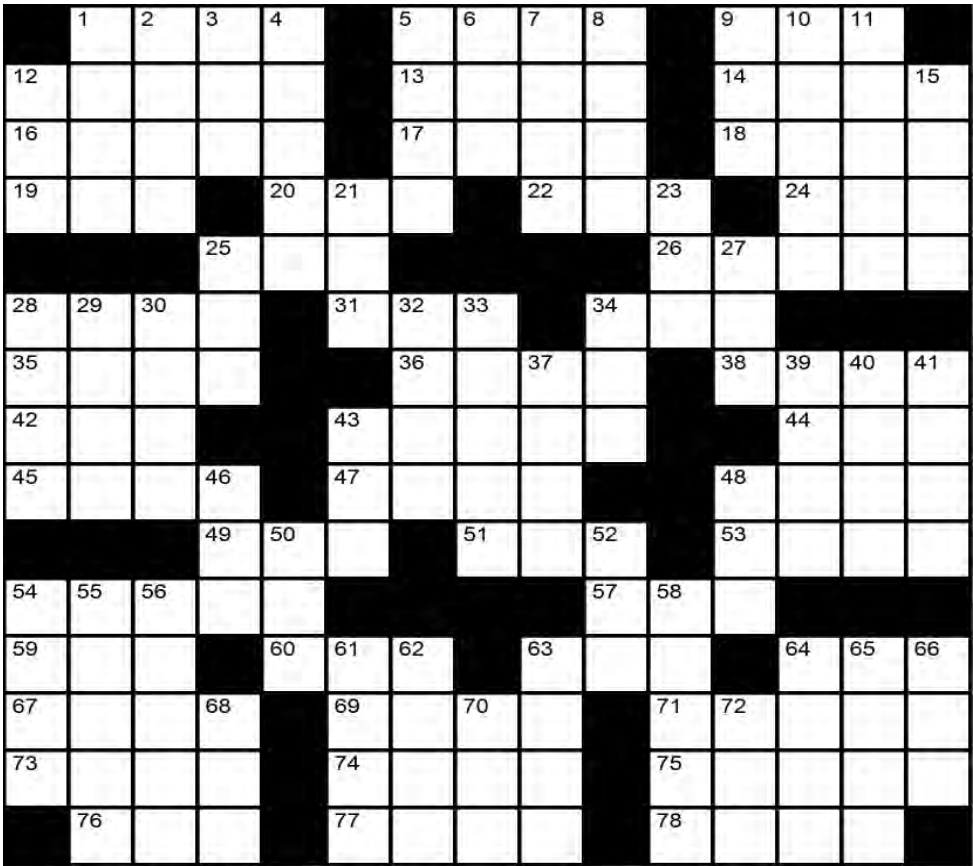
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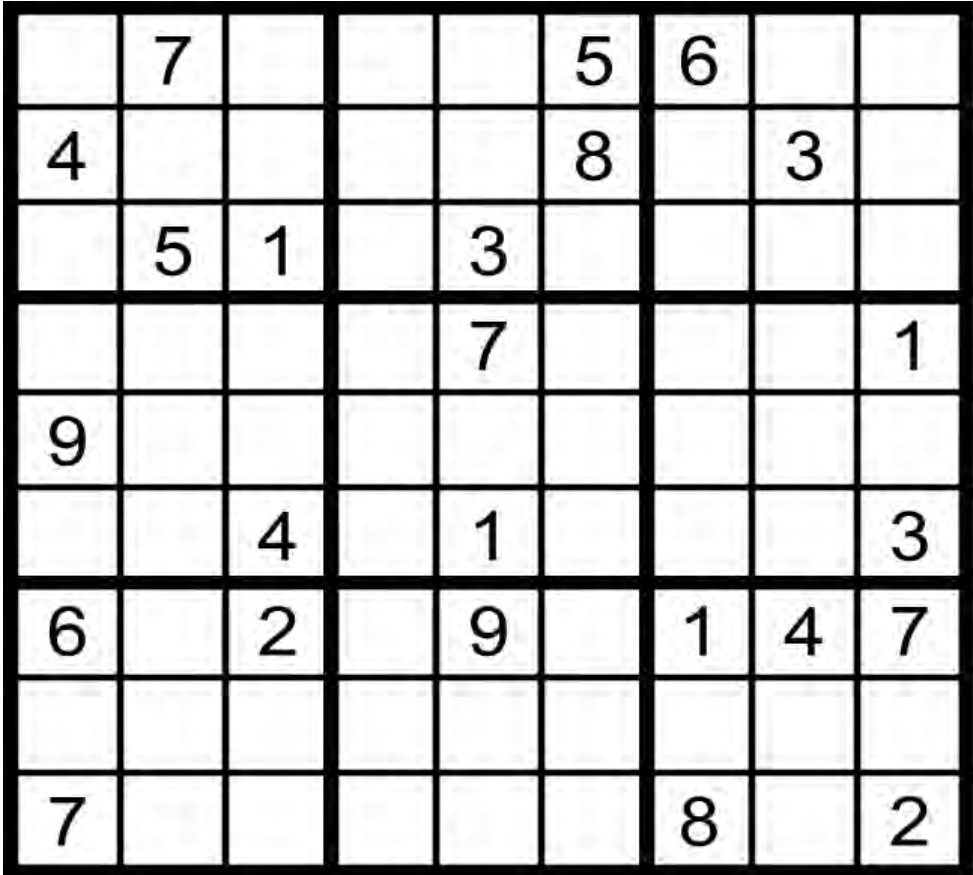


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- Across:
1 #
5 Conversation
9 P C to web link company
12 Persian Gulf port
13 Gypsy people
14 Immediately, in hospital
16 Edgar --- Poe
17 Upon
18 Insect destructive of clothes
19 Negative
20 One coming out
22 Big beer can
24 --- Grande
25 Solar system center
26 Casing
28 Electrical connector
31 Passed away (Abbr.)
34 Old card game
35 "Would it be ---?" (Presley: "Can't help falling in love")
36 Father's sibling
38 Physicians
42 So far
43 Sour-smelling
44 Sticky stuff
45 Junction
47 Not us
48 Killer whale
49 Rotational speed measure
51 Bashful
53 Top
- 54 Harsh treatment
57 Applicable
59 Entertainment
60 Bench with a back
63 Letters on Royal Navy ships
64 E.g. a street kiss
67 Horse controller
69 Spanish fashion designer --- Rabanne
71 Long
73 Aware of
74 Overnight stops
75 Law
76 Fight against underwater threats
77 Penny
78 U R L starter
- Down:
1 Kind of hoop
2 Competently
3 Cape Town carrier
4 One of the Indian majority
5 Quarrelsome grouch
6 Very fashionable
7 Hog-wild
8 Recording medium
9 Belief system
10 Bad weather
11 Paved outdoor area
12 Karate degree
15 Hammer god
21 Aim
23 Federal fiscal watchdog
25 One of a hundred in D C
27 Eye cell
28 Methods
29 Statement of understanding
30 The Beatles' lovely meter maid
32 Apiece
33 Antidotes
34 Classic Ford model
37 Type of rechargeable cell
39 Man-eating giant
40 Stimulating South American shrub
41 Sit in a tub
43 Bank machine
46 E.g. Robinson, Doubtfire
48 Plump
50 Vigor
52 Thanksgiving dish
54 Spherical hairdo
55 --- Vista, Disney brand
56 Military groups
58 Outguess
61 Heroic
62 Diminish slowly
63 Vast multitude
64 Gasp
65 Bead
66 Newswoman --- Curry
68 The present time
70 Cable/satellite network
72 Dine



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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Sudoku solution from
March 10, 2021

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

Across: 1 Hash, 5 Chat, 9 I S P, 12 Dubai, 13 Roma, 14 Stat.
16 Allan, 17 Atop, 18 Moth, 19 Nay, 20 Deb, 22 Keg, 24 Rio,
25 Sun, 26 Armor, 28 Wire, 31 Dec, 34 Loo, 35 A sin, 36 Aunt,
38 Docs, 42 Yet, 43 Acid, 44 Goo, 45 Seam, 47 Them, 48
Orca, 49 R p m, 51 Shy, 53 Peak, 54 Abuse, 57 Apt, 59 Fun,
60 Pew, 63 H M S, 64 P D A, 67 Rein, 69 Paco, 71 Yearn, 73
Onto, 74 lms, 75 Canon, 76 A-S-W, 77 Cent, 78 Hit p.
Down: 1 Hula, 2 Ably, 3 S A, 4 Hindu, 5 Crab, 6 Hot, 7 Amok,
8 Tape, 9 lsm, 10 Storm, 11 Patio, 12 Dan, 15 Thor, 21 End,
23 G A O, 25 Sen, 27 Rod, 28 Ways, 29 I see, 30 Rita, 32
Each, 33 Cures, 34 LTD, 37 N-M-H, 39 Ogre, 40 Coca, 41
Soak, 43 A T M, 46 Mrs, 48 Opt, 50 Pep, 52 Yam, 54 Afro, 55
Buena, 56 Units, 58 Psych, 61 Epic, 62 Ware, 63 Host, 64
Pant, 65 Drop, 66 Ann, 68 Now, 70 C N N, 72 Eat.

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This magnificent red-tailed hawk was spotted on a recent photo walk. (Photos by David Gilchrist)



The four goose pals have been active along the edge of the Niagara River this winter, and look to be thriving.



This red-winged blackbird was spotted on the road into the Peller Estate Winery.