



The Lake Report

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Hyper-local news for Niagara-on-the-Lake



Lai sentenced to 20 years | Page 9

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Canada's most-awarded community newspaper

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Town, CAO Nick Ruller attempt to silence valid criticism

Last week, the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, under the direction of CAO Nick Ruller and mayor Gary Zalepa, issued a public notice that can only be read as an attempt to defame and intimidate this newspaper and suppress media criticism from its nationally recognized editorial team.

In it, Ruller takes aim at this paper not for getting facts wrong, but for publishing facts the town finds inconvenient — including reporting on how certain public documents are kept under lock and key and only accessed under supervision, and how staff and council have repeatedly acted against the wishes and best interests of residents while favouring well-connected developers.

We have published the statement in full, along with a detailed editorial explaining the serious and far-reaching harm that censorship and media intimidation cause in a democratic community.

Read both the statement and editorial on Pages 14 and 15.

Shaw tears down homes

Despite court case, Shaw begins demolition of two heritage buildings



Shaw Festival demolished two homes on Victoria Street on Monday before a court order halted its next teardowns. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Dan Smeenk | Local Journalism Initiative | The Lake Report

Demolition began Monday on two side buildings at the Royal George Theatre site, marking the start of the dismantling of the 110-year-old theatre to make way for a new, bigger Royal George.

Shaw Festival executive director Tim Jennings said in an email the demolition of the Victoria Street buildings, which were two heritage-designated houses at 178 and 188 Victoria St., is expected to take about two to three

weeks, though timelines may vary depending on the weather. Jennings acknowledged delays in the project.

"We are behind," he said. "We are starting this demolition months later than we'd planned

but are pleased to now have the transformation of the Royal George Theatre site underway."

Demolition of the main theatre and box office has also been de-

Continued on Page 3

Court orders Shaw to halt demolition of Royal George

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

The Shaw Festival has temporarily halted the teardown of the Royal George Theatre and its box office after a Niagara-on-the-Lake

builder launched a court challenge alleging the town failed to follow proper planning and heritage rules.

Centurion Building Corporation, led by president Nicholas Colaneri, is asking Ontario's Divisional Court to quash council's approvals

tied to the Shaw's redevelopment project, arguing the approval process was flawed and key issues — including parking — were not properly addressed.

"I am doing this because I care deeply about Niagara-on-the-Lake and the people

who live here, and I believe our planning and heritage laws exist to protect our community not to be set aside when they become inconvenient," said Colaneri in an email.

"The residents need to be able to trust that deci-

sions affecting our town are made fairly, transparently, and in accordance with the laws meant to protect our heritage and our future."

The judicial review challenges official plan and zon-

Continued on Page 2

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Demolition of Royal George halted until judicial review

Continued from Front Page

ing amendments approved by council and seeks to pause demolition permits and related approvals tied to the properties, alleging the town failed to comply with the Planning Act, the provincial policy statement, the Ontario Heritage Act and applicable official plans.

Shaw notified residents Feb. 2 that demolition would proceed. On Feb. 6, a Divisional Court judge ruled the matter urgent and directed that a motion to stay be scheduled.

On Feb. 10, the court ordered that demolition of the theatre and its box office could not proceed pending a Feb. 26 judicial review hearing.

Demolition of the Victoria Street homes began Feb. 9, before the stay order was issued. The order applies only to the theatre and box office.

"The goal here has always been to ensure compliance with the law," said Centurion's lawyer, Eric Gillespie.

In his sworn affidavit, Colaneri said he made oral and written submissions to council and its committees throughout the planning process, including speaking at a July com-



The court has ordered the Shaw Festival to pause development of its Queen Street properties after a NOTL builder challenged the process. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

mittee of the whole meeting and again in November.

He said he also submitted written materials to council and the municipal heritage committee and repeatedly asked for evidence that conserving or reusing the existing theatre was not feasible.

Centurion also attempted to appeal council's decision to the Ontario Land Tribunal late last year, but Gillespie said the appeal was denied due to recent legislative changes, including Bill 185, passed in 2024.

"The rights of the public to appeal have been dramatically reduced under Bill 185."

Gillespie said the case cen-

tres on how the town handled the approval process.

"The process was very fragmented," he said, arguing the project was reviewed at different times by different committees examining separate parts of the proposal.

He said the Ontario Heritage Act is intended to preserve and protect heritage assets and argued that doing so requires a well-rounded understanding of a project "to look at the overall cumulative impacts of what's being proposed."

One of the central concerns, Gillespie said, is parking.

"As everyone in town

knows, there's no parking — for a theatre that seats over 300 patrons and has significant staff," he said.

Under current town rules, a theatre the size of the Royal George would normally require more than 100 on-site parking spaces. But because the theatre has existed in its current location for decades, that condition is legally grandfathered under the Ontario Planning Act — which, the town has said, means it cannot impose modern parking requirements as long as it remains a theatre.

As a result, Shaw agreed to a \$72,664 cash-in-lieu payment for one parking space tied to the redesigned building — a detail Centurion argues was not properly addressed under the town's bylaws.

"It's not clear that this existing situation can be legally continued," said Gillespie. "That is one of the other issues that the judicial review application is raising."

He added that if a new theatre were proposed today, it would require substantial parking or a significant cash payment.

"Centurion estimates (the cash payment) is about \$7.5 million," he said.

The town's communications co-ordinator Marah Minor said the town cannot comment "as this matter is under litigation."

Shaw provided a written statement from chief executive officer Tim Jennings, who said the organization believes it followed the proper planning process and has agreed to the temporary stay.

"We are certain Shaw followed or exceeded all of the town's planning procedures," Jennings said.

The festival filed "a very fulsome response to the court," he said, and does not believe "any process issues on the town's part" will surface from the review.

Shaw's legal counsel, Sara J. Premi, said she had nothing further to add beyond Jennings' statement.

If the court finds the town acted improperly, Gillespie said the approvals would likely be quashed and sent back to council.

"It would be up to the court, but often in these circumstances, the court will refer the matter back to the decision-making body

to address the areas that the court has found to be deficient."

Asked whether there could be legal consequences for demolition activity that took place before the stay order was issued, while the matter was before the court, Gillespie said: "There may be. That was discussed in court yesterday, and on consent, we all agreed that we may address that again when we're back in court on Feb. 26."

Jennings said demolition proceeded "following issuance of a building demolition permit to the Shaw last month and heritage approvals last fall."

If the court rules against Centurion, demolition could move ahead. Gillespie said information provided in court showed a demolition permit has been issued for the Victoria Street houses but not yet for the theatre and box office.

Theatre and box office demolition is expected in early April, according to the Shaw's announcement.

Gillespie said it is too early to say whether Centurion would take further legal action if it loses.

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One day before court could rule to halt demolition, Shaw Festival tore down two homes on Victoria Street to make way for its new Royal George Theatre. On Tuesday, Ontario Divisional Court ordered the work halted. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Teardown begins, but gets shut down

Continued from Front Page

laid by about one month. It was previously reported that work would begin in late February or early March.

"We expect the demolition of the Royal George Theatre and adjacent box office/costume shop building will start in early April and it will take approximately four to five weeks from that starting date," Jennings said.

The teardown of these two structures has also been put on pause due to a judicial review launched by a Niagara-on-the-Lake builder, who alleges the town failed to follow proper planning and heritage rules.

Niagara-on-the-Lake town council approved the demolition of the Victoria Street buildings in September, following a recommendation from the municipal heritage committee. The Shaw Festival, which owns the properties, said it contracted a demolition firm last fall.

Jennings said the Shaw Festival purchased 178 Victoria St. in 2017 and 188 Victoria St. in 2022. He said the first building housed artists, vocal coaching spaces, and an education gallery and garden, while the second was used as administrative office space.

Some materials from the Victoria Street buildings will be saved, Jennings said.

"We will be salvaging a few hand sawn wooden beams from 178 Victoria St., and previously removed some antique, but not original fixtures," he said. "There was nothing identified as being of heritage salvage interest in the gallery or old pizza shop."

Jennings said the cleared space will be used to install



Heavy equipment hauls out logs of freshly felled trees where the Shaw Festival demolished two Victoria Street homes for its Royal George rebuild. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

geothermal wells as part of the project's zero-carbon design. He said installation will take about five weeks after demolition is complete.

Once the wells are installed, the former Victoria Street footprint will be incorporated into the new theatre.

Jennings said the rehearsal hall and backstage areas will "primarily" occupy the space. The design also includes some green space, five accessible parking spots and an accessibility ramp to the backstage areas.

Reaction to the demolition has been mixed in the community.

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa has been supportive of the project and repeated that support.

"The demolition of the structures on Victoria Street is part of the process related to the Royal George Theatre redevelopment project," he said.

"The Shaw Festival is following the required heritage, planning, and building processes, and the town will continue to review each stage of the development

and construction works in accordance with applicable policies and legislation."

Coun. Erwin Wiens said he sees the demolition as a positive step.

"I'm excited that we're going to rebuild that George Theatre to make it last 200 years," he said.

"As we move forward, this is going to be great for the town of NOTL."

Other councillors expressed reservations. Coun. Sandra O'Connor, who voted against the Shaw Festival's proposal, said she believes the new theatre will be too large and will negatively affect the streetscape.

She said she supports changes to the existing theatre but not the current design.

"I didn't see the Shaw willing to negotiate on that aspect of it," she said.

O'Connor said she was "disappointed" by the demolition.

Coun. Gary Burroughs called the demolition "very sad to see" and said he "hoped they were making the right decision."

He described the process

surrounding the new Royal George Theatre as "less than desirable," adding he still has not seen a model of what is being built.

Residents have also shared differing views.

Sharon Noble-Hudson, who lives in Garrison Village, said the existing building is not suitable for many Shaw Festival patrons, particularly seniors. She said the lack of an elevator made it difficult to navigate the stairs with a cane after she broke her leg.

The new venue promises to be the most accessible theatre in North America, Jennings previously told The Lake Report.

However, she also raised concerns about heritage preservation.

"We should consider our heritage when we're building new things," she said.

Paulette Kennedy, a resident of Old Town, called the demolition "necessary" and said she supports the new theatre project.

"I think the residents and the businesses are going to be very happy," Kennedy said.

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Icy Niagara River a spectacle to behold



Be careful out there, NOTL: harsh climate conditions in this part of the Niagara peninsula have caused a buildup of ice on the Niagara River. But feel free to admire the view safely from the shores of the river, such as the view seen here at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Yacht Club.

DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Mayor calls councillor 'hysterical' over Ryerson Park sale

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake council voted this week to explore the possible transfer of a fenced-off strip of waterfront land in Ryerson Park — but not before a debate that included a "hysterical" remark and a complaint it was "not respectful."

Council directed town staff to look at potentially transferring about 105 square metres of town-owned waterfront parkland at 535 Niagara Blvd., part of Ryerson Park in Chautauqua. The land is adjacent to 491 Niagara Blvd. and the owners of that property requested the transfer.

Since the parkland in question has not been publicly accessible for over 25 years, staff said it would therefore not result in the loss of a park amenity if transferred.

The approval does not authorize a sale but requires staff to determine the costs involved and the land's potential value before council makes a final decision. Staff are expected to report back by late spring or the start of summer this year.

Staff will complete a title search, retain a professional from the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors to prepare a survey, obtain an evaluation of the land's fair market value and prepare



a planning report recommending severance, subject to council approval.

Staff estimated the survey could cost up to roughly \$2,500 and an appraisal between \$1,500 and \$2,000.

Chief administrative officer Nick Ruller said staff can "proactively reach out and make ourselves available" to the Chautauqua Residents Association and other stakeholders as part of that process, to address concerns raised by Coun.

Wendy Cheropita about consultation with the association.

Right now, staff anticipate any proceeds from a future transfer going to the town's parks reserve, which it said could support improvements at Ryerson Park, including beach access upgrades.

If council does not proceed with a transfer, staff would nonetheless begin removal of a portion of a fence that encroaches on Ryerson Park, erected

more than 25 years ago by the neighbouring property owners.

During discussion, Coun. Andrew Niven questioned references to a "sale" in staff's report and how that language could be interpreted. Staff reiterated that no sale had been approved and that council would need to vote again before any transfer could occur.

Coun. Tim Balasiuk said he was "a little frustrated" that he had not previously

been aware the land was identified as a natural asset, particularly following the town's recent asset management discussions.

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa described staff's recommendation as "taking a 30-year issue" and addressing it properly — by getting the right information "before getting hysterical."

That comment prompted Coun. Sandra O'Connor to raise her hand on a matter of personal privilege and

said the comment was "not respectful."

Prior to the conflict, O'Connor was pushing back against selling town-owned parkland, saying "it is not for sale unless there is a compelling reason."

"We do not see a compelling reason here," she said. "I don't think we need to waste any more staff time on this."

Resident Margaret Walker wrote a letter to council urging it to reject the recommendation outright.

"I respectfully submit that council should decline the recommendation," said Walker in her letter, which she provided to The Lake Report.

The proposal, she said, is "unsupported by the factual and historical record, inconsistent with public-interest principles governing parkland and sets a concerning precedent for the treatment of public waterfront lands in Niagara-on-the-Lake."

Walker said public waterfront parkland is "an irreplaceable community asset," calling on council to restore the land to Ryerson Park for public enjoyment and remove the encroaching fence.

Coun. Erwin Wiens said, "I think we'd be remiss if we didn't do the due diligence of finding out everything that's encumbered here."

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NOTL council asks region to delay St. Davids roundabout for safety review

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Another safety review or community consultation may be coming down the pike on the roundabout planned for St. Davids in Niagara-on-the-Lake, as the town votes to urge Niagara Region to pause work on the roundabout until it completes the regional transportation master plan.

Councillors approved the request last Tuesday, after amending a motion tied to the transportation master plan. The motion was brought forward by Coun. Adriana Vizzari, who said it was not meant to reject the roundabout or stall work.

"This motion is not about opposing a roundabout, or about delaying infrastructure for the sake of delay," Vizzari said.

She said it was reasonable to ensure major investment in St. Davids aligns with updated regional planning advice, "so decisions are made with the best and most current information available."

During discussion, Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa caucused councillors against



A rendering of the future St. Davids roundabout. FILE

assuming the regional plan's possible impact, noting the region told him it is a "macro-level study."

"I called up the director and I asked him what his thoughts and great advice would be for doing something like this — and I wrote down what he said," he said, telling The Lake Report he spoke with Frank Tassone, the director of transportation services for Niagara.

Zalepa said he was told the regional plan looks at broad transportation issues, including "the movement of goods and corridors and the movement of active transportation," but will not dictate "the level of service and

suggested infrastructure."

He said council needed that distinction in order to move forward.

"I think that's a critical piece of information — that you should have before you do something like this," said Zalepa.

Vizzari said she still saw a relation between the explanation Zalepa received from the region and her intent.

"I think what you're suggesting almost aligns with my motion," she said.

"We've now decided a massive piece of infrastructure within St. Davids," said Vizzari. "I'm suggesting that, if we're doing a transportation master plan for the area, that we pause that

to make sure that we look at what, exactly, this plan suggests."

Coun. Maria Mavridis asked Vizzari to clarify the motion's intent and said she thought Vizzari had hoped the regional plan could help address "all the safety for walkability."

Mavridis then asked council to amend the motion "to align more with what the end goal was."

Coun. Andrew Niven proposed an amendment: to "request additional safety review or community consultation based off the regional transportation master plan."

"If there's some feeling that there may be some safety issues as we go forward with this," Niven said, "maybe pull those safety mechanisms out of the transportation master plan, when it comes up, and then present it back."

Vizzari asked staff to clarify who would be responsible for the review or consultation and staff said the intention was to request that the region do those. Vizzari agreed to the amendment and council then approved the motion as amended.

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Town won't handle non-residential recycling

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report



Hannele Wegge is a Queen Street business owner who will need to find a private recycling service by the end of this year. DAN SMEENK

municipal accommodation tax revenue.

A staff report estimates a new non-residential recycling program would have cost the town between \$219,310 and \$360,000 annually — the lower figure is for biweekly collection and the higher is for weekly pickup.

In the report, staff says there are limitations to the idea of the municipality becoming the recycling collection service provider, stating many businesses already have contracts with

private recycling collectors, that the town running the service would be against the province's intent with the new system and that there are operational and governance risks if the town becomes an intermediary between businesses and contractors.

"Recycling services are readily available in the private market, and there is limited benefit — and increased risk — for the town to act as an intermediary in what is intended to be a direct business-to-provider relationship," the report said.

Freeborn said the town spent \$11,000 for cardboard recycling in 2025. In 2026, because cardboard will no longer be collected on the same trucks as residential recycling, the cost for the town to provide them will rise to "\$68,000 or so." The remaining difference will be covered by municipal accommodation tax funding.

Costs will go back down by 2027, he said, after the program is over.

Coun. Andrew Niven asked whether the cardboard program will end abruptly after Dec. 31 or be phased out during the year.

Freeborn said the town will give notices to businesses in the program following Tuesday's meeting and again closer to the program's end.

Coun. Gary Burroughs also questioned how the town would distinguish between commercial and residential cardboard.

"My concern is: How do you identify a commercial business downstairs putting out cardboard and a residence above putting out cardboard?" he asked. "I think we're going to have a problem."

Freeborn said identifying eligible materials is an issue for Circular Materials, the not-for-profit organization managing the privatization in Ontario.

He said their solution could be solved through a combination of stickers and bins that are marked for collection.

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Hunter Road igloo a work of art

Kids from the Korevaar family created a stunning igloo on Hunter Road. Reader Kim Kostiuk noticed it while walking her dogs and tipped us off. Photographer Dave Van de Laar headed out and captured the family playing outside. Left to right, Caleb, 7, Matthew, 14, Elizabeth, 12, Gideon, 4, and Miriam, 9.



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Black history talk coming to McFarland House

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Rochelle Bush, a longtime public historian of the Underground Railroad, hopes to talk about "anything good that happened, as well as anything bad that happened" on that trail on both sides of the Niagara River.

Niagara Parks will host Bush at McFarland House on Feb. 28 for a talk titled "The Freedom Trail: Slave Catchers, Runaways and Abolitionists."

Bush said she hopes to revisit ideas about the Underground Railroad that have been forgotten or dismissed over time.

"All it is, is hidden history that I'm bringing to the forefront again," she said. "It's not like it's a major discovery, because the information has been collecting dust. It just takes someone to come along, find it, and bring it to the forefront again."

This is a brand new talk from Bush. She discussed



Niagara historian Rochelle Bush will talk about the Underground Railroad on Feb. 28 at the McFarland House. The talk is titled "The Freedom Trail: Slave Catchers, Runaways and Abolitionists." FILE

with The Lake Report cases like that of Solomon Moseby, an escaped enslaved person who was arrested in Canada for horse stealing, meaning he stole his enslaver's horse to

escape.

He faced deportation back to the United States. Bush said there was considerable pressure from Moseby's former owner to have him returned.

The community of Niagara-on-the-Lake and the surrounding area then rallied to Mosby's defence. Bush said they surrounded the court house for an "extended period of time" to make sure Moseby wasn't transported out in the middle of the night.

Two Black residents, Herbert Holmes and Jacob Green, were killed. Moseby later fled to England and eventually came back to the Niagara area.

She said this is a case that is still cited today in immigration cases.

Stories like this have inspired Bush for a long time. She began her career in a research position in Toronto in 1994 before eventually returning to St. Catharines, where she was born and raised.

She is now a trustee and resident historian at Salem Chapel, BME Church Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Site, and the owner and operator of Tubman Tours Canada.

While she holds a diploma from Niagara College, Bush said her expertise comes largely from her own interest in the subject, while also following the standards of the American and Canadian Historical Associations.

Bush said she has spoken at Niagara Parks events before and has consistently drawn good crowds. She hopes people will attend despite busy schedules and possible winter weather.

"In the winter, it's hard," she said. "Anybody who can pull in 20 people is a success."

Tickets for Bush's talk and other Niagara Parks public events are available at niagaraparks.com/events/event/celebrating-black-history.

daniel@niagaranow.com



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"I'm proud to say that only the name is changing," says Cathy Turner, Chief Executive Officer Officer, of Inclusion West Niagara. "But a new name and strategy spark new ideas. It takes innovative thinking to get outside the box on barriers to inclusion."

The organization's tagline — Supporting Dreams • Building Community • Celebrating Abilities — captures its enduring mission to help people lead meaningful, self-directed lives.

The rebrand was shaped by staff, families, and the people supported by the agency. Turner emphasizes that while the name has changed, services remain the same. "Thinking in new ways helps us reimagine what inclusion really means — and how to make it real for everyone."

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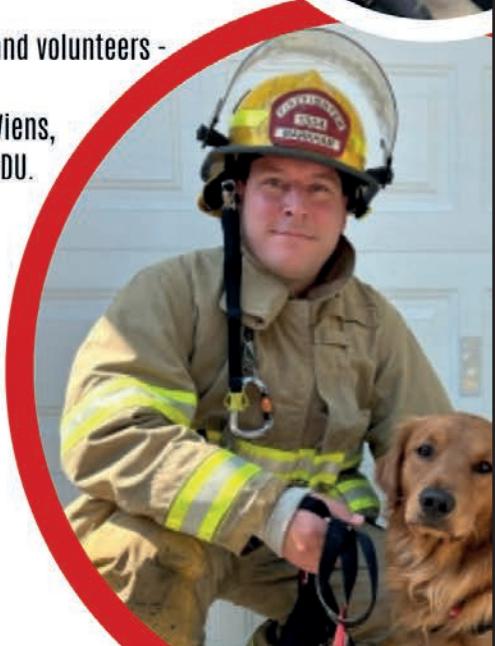
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Personal support worker celebrates 50 years at NOTL care home

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Debbie Etherington is marking her 50th anniversary working at Niagara Long Term Care Residence, with no firm retirement plans and still in good health.

Her official anniversary falls on Feb. 14, and co-workers plan to celebrate her with a party on Feb. 18 — an honour they say is well deserved.

Stephanie Cryer, a personal support worker who has spent 30 years at the residence, has worked closely with Etherington for much of that time. She describes Etherington as a natural caregiver and a consistently positive presence at work.

"Debbie is the same person as the day I met her," Cryer said. "It's not a job for Debbie."

Etherington grew up in Victoria Harbour, near Midland, Ont., where she said her family lived without running water or toilets.



Debbie Etherington, a personal support worker, has called Niagara Long Term Care Residence her place of work for the last 50 years. DAN SMEENK

"But our life was perfect," she said.

She moved to St. Catharines with her family at age 10 and began working at the long-term care home in 1976, when she was 16 and still in high school. Her sister, who worked in the kitchen, encouraged her to apply.

The building opened the year before.

Etherington took a year off from high school to consider her future and ultimately decided to stay at the residence — a choice that shaped the rest of her life.

"I loved it right away," she said. "It was a nice feeling from the get-go."

She spent three years working in the kitchen, followed by two years on the second floor with residents,

and the next 45 years on the third floor, also a resident unit.

Etherington initially learned her skills on the job, later completing a once-a-week course before moving to the third floor in what is now a professional support worker program.

She has since raised a family in St. Catharines and

has two children and two grandchildren.

The third floor houses 47 residents, all of whom Etherington helps care for daily.

Her mornings start early. Etherington said she gets a coffee at 5:30 a.m. and meets colleagues in the parking lot to debrief before beginning their shifts.

No two days are the same, she said. Some are calm, while others are busy and stressful.

To avoid compassion fatigue, Cryer said staff rely on each other for support.

"We do vent with each other," she said with a laugh, adding that time off is also important. "You find balance."

Etherington said the job has changed over the decades, including advances in technology and staffing. Cloth diapers, for example, have been replaced by disposable ones.

She and executive director Chris Poos also pointed to increased ethnic and cul-

tural diversity among staff compared with when she started in 1976.

"Coming out of COVID, I would say that's the one true, real change that we've seen," Poos said, noting the addition of "different perspectives" in the workplace.

He also cited the use of artificial intelligence and the expansion of food options and holiday traditions.

There is more staffing and government support now as well, Cryer said, adding that the residence has "absolutely" become a better place to work.

Despite the changes, Etherington said the goal has remained constant: keeping residents happy and reassuring families their loved ones are well cared for.

She said the rewards of the job far outweigh its challenges.

"(The families) sleep at night because they know their family member is in good hands," she said.

daniel@niagaranow.com



IN THE MATTER OF THE ONTARIO HERITAGE ACT R.S.O. 1990, CHAPTER 0.18

AND IN THE MATTER OF THE LAND AND PREMISES
AT THE FOLLOWING MUNICIPAL ADDRESSES IN THE
TOWN OF NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE IN THE PROVINCE
OF ONTARIO

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By-law No. 2026-003

By-law No. 2026-004

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Family devastated as Jimmy Lai sentenced

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Jimmy Lai's sentencing in China to 20 years in prison on Monday has prompted a strong show of support in Niagara-on-the-Lake, where he has deep business and family ties.

Lai, the owner of the now-defunct Apple Media as well as Vintage Hotels and Niagara's Finest Hotels, was first imprisoned in 2020 under China's controversial national security law, which critics say suppresses free speech.

The Associated Press reported that Lai was convicted in December of "conspiring with others to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security, and conspiracy to publish seditious articles."

Lai is a longtime advocate for democracy in Hong Kong.

His niece, Erica Lepp, a Niagara-on-the-Lake resident and property manager with Rentals Niagara, said the sentence is a tragedy for the family.

"My mother, children and I are devastated by the news



Jimmy Lai.

of my uncle's verdict, which is nothing short of a life sentence for him," she said in an email. "Our hearts are with his wife and children, as our entire family grapples with the thought that we may never see him again."

Lepp said the family will "continue to bring attention to his case in all our efforts and appreciate every Canadian politician on the local, provincial and federal level that are doing the same."

Niagara Falls MP Tony Baldinelli, who represents Niagara-on-the-Lake federally, released a statement on Facebook applauding Lai's courage and noted that Canada's Subcommittee on International Human Rights unanimously passed a motion condemning the sentence.

"Jimmy Lai has deep family connections to

Niagara and it is incumbent on all of us to stand and advocate for him and the people of Hong Kong, by calling for his immediate and unconditional release," he said.

Bob Jackson, chief executive officer of Vintage Hotels, said Lai's sentencing was "pre-determined" and "nothing surprising," but added that it does not "make it any less troubling" for the family.

Lai's twin sister, Si Wai Lai, manages the Oban Inn in NOTL.

Jackson called Lai the "undeniable inspiration for what we do" at Vintage Hotels and praised his advocacy for democracy in Hong Kong.

"It has a much broader significance for anybody that believes in freedom of speech, freedom of democracy and freedom of the press," he said.

Coun. Erwin Wiens said it is "unnerving" that a pro-democracy advocate like Lai has been treated this way by the Chinese government.

"It reminds me of what an amazing individual this chap is," he said. "Here's

somebody who did not have to go back to fight for democracy ... that's true leadership."

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa echoed these thoughts.

"I am deeply concerned to hear of the 20-year sentence imposed on Jimmy Lai," he said. "My thoughts are with his family, particularly those here in NOTL, at this difficult time. I have confidence that the Government of Canada will continue to advocate on Mr. Lai's behalf and pursue all appropriate diplomatic avenues in his case."

Lepp said support from the community will help her family endure Lai's imprisonment.

"The NOTL community has always been abundant in their support of my uncle and his case, and as messages flood in we are grateful to our small town for keeping their thoughts and eyes on this situation."

Vintage Hotels properties include the Pillar and Post and the Prince of Wales Hotel. Niagara's Finest Hotels operates the Charles Hotel, Harbour House and the Shaw Club.

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Debate flares over storage building planned for protected farmland

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Plans to use a protected farmland property near St. Davids to store farm equipment and crops drew push-back from nearby residents at Niagara-on-the-Lake's latest planning meeting, with critics questioning whether the project belongs on prime agricultural land.

Town staff recommended approving a zoning bylaw amendment for the 25-acre property at 263 Concession 6 Rd., but council deferred a decision at its Feb. 3 meeting and sent the report back for further review.

The proposal would allow a 43,000-square-foot building to house farm equipment, store produce in a temperature-controlled space and operate a small agricultural market. The site is in a prime agricultural area designated as a specialty crop area under Ontario's Greenbelt plan.

Under the proposed zoning, development would be limited to no more than five per cent of the property, with the building taking up about four per cent. The



Michelle Lament, a neighbouring farmer, told council the application relies on opinion rather than verifiable evidence, questioning the use of an anonymous list of farms to justify the proposal for a large storage facility on prime farmland. PAIGE SEBURN

rest of the site would be protected as woodland and wetland through open-space zoning.

Michelle Lament, who farms across the road, told council the application is based on opinion rather than evidence and does not show the project truly supports agriculture.

"Farmers do not store their equipment in a warehouse miles away from their farms," Lament said. "We are not in support of this application."

She also questioned why the town's agricultural advisory committee was not consulted and raised concerns about a list of anonymous farms submitted as evidence of support.

"Who are these 23 farms?" she asked. "Provincial policy expects evidence, not just a bunch of random numbers to appease the staff's request."

Associate planner Eric Brathwaite of MHBC Planning, speaking for property owners Parth Patel and

Sejal Patel, said the farms were kept anonymous to protect their privacy.

"This isn't an intent to hide anything from council," Brathwaite said. "That's why we are here to answer questions."

Lament said no one approached her to ask whether the facility would be useful for her 16-acre grape farm and pointed to an existing cold storage facility in St. Davids.

"We don't need another large-scale cold storage

when we already have one three kilometres down the street," she said. "Buildings like this do not require farmland and can be built on the worst possible soils."

Coun. Andrew Niven questioned whether agriculture-related uses need to be located on what he called "arguably, probably some of the most protected farmland."

"To me, proximity doesn't really relate to necessity," he said, also questioning how letters of support are vetted.

Staff said submissions are accepted as provided and are not independently verified unless clarification is required.

Nicholas Colaneri, a nearby resident, said changes made after a public meeting last March did not fix what he called fundamental policy problems and argued the proposal does not meet provincial standards for development near natural heritage features.

Brathwaite said several technical studies, including a natural heritage review, have been submitted and that the proposal has been revised to limit development, cap the building size, add setbacks and require

private water and sewage servicing, subject to regional approval.

Nick Colaneri, owner of Colaneri Estate Winery, urged council to reject the application, saying it should rely on "planning evidence and enforceable limits."

Coun. Gary Burroughs questioned how close the building would be to the intersection of Concession 6 and York roads. Brathwaite said the proposal meets the town's 15-metre setback requirement, though the exact location could still be adjusted.

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa asked whether past

agriculture-related zoning approvals required proof of business activity, while Coun. Wendy Cheropita asked whether the applicant had spoken directly with nearby farmers. Brathwaite said they had not.

He added the proposal qualifies as an agriculture-related use under provincial policy and does not require farming to take place on the property, though the zoning also sets aside a small seasonal growing area of about 3,500 square feet.

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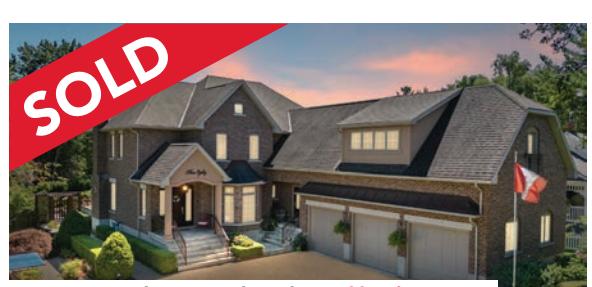
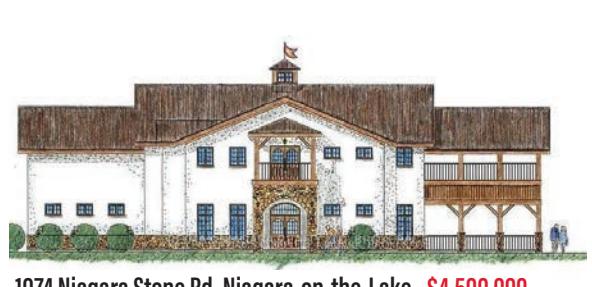
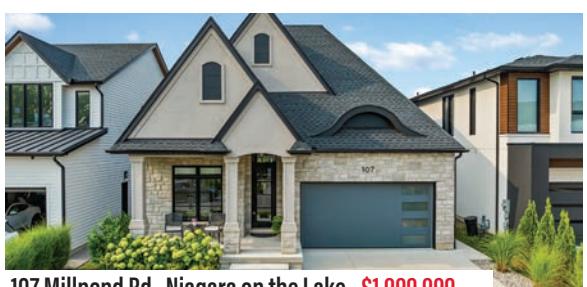
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#63: If you own a business, put a sign on the front door letting customers know that if they come in dancing, they receive something like a free drink or coffee. This makes everyone feel great.

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Contributed by Patty Garriock

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The answer is blowin' in the wind

You may have heard a whole lot of noise on Sunday night and early Monday morning if you're out living in the farmlands of NOTL. No, this wasn't the work of helicopters circling over nearby crops, or even unidentified flying objects — as temperatures dropped below -18 C, growers turned on their wind machines. As explained by Liebling Wines in a social media post on Feb. 9, these machines are designed to circulate air in the area, raising the temperature by a few degrees, reducing the risk of damage to the vines and buds that are sensitive to especially cold weather. This photo shows one of the wind machines in action on Line 3 Road. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Opinion

When old is not so beautiful



THE TURNER REPORT

Garth Turner
 Columnist



Workers stabilize an Old Town maple after it creamed the roof of Garth Turner's ancient pile of bricks. Insurance claim? Forget about it. GARTH TURNER

Some folks in Old Town have been steamed to discover what "heritage" means. More costs. Fatter premiums required by thirsty insurers.

Of course, insurance is all ethereal and suspicious until, say, a tree falls on your house.

Remember that big wind-storm last month?

I do. That's when the maple towering over our ancient pile of bricks decided it was time to throw a main limb on top of it.

The town's work crew showed up pronto to chainsaw the chunks blocking the sidewalk and road. Tree service guys came later to stabilize the maple and clean up the parts of it that crashed onto a cedar roof we installed two years ago.

Yup, five holes. Crushed shingle guts all over the place. "You need to replace the whole slope," Wayne the roofer later reported. "Ten grand."

Lucky we have home insurance, I thought. Finally a justification for the \$8,648 (plus HST, of course) I'd just

paid as the annual toll.

"Well, I wouldn't claim it," said the broker who arranged the policy. "That will forever alter the claims-free record you have which has brought better coverage and lower costs," (he seriously said that). In other words, claim \$10,000 now and pay more every year thereafter. Forever.

The insurance guy also mentioned how appraisals and even the decision to insure a property — or take a pass — are now handled by an AI bot. And those things do not like heritage. Not one little bit. Even without treeageddon.

There are almost 200 properties in NOTL on the official heritage list. A year ago, residents started in earnest to ask why this designation led to higher insurance costs and often restricted coverage or outright rejection.

Town staff talked to the industry and reported: "Insurance premiums should not go up because of a

heritage designation. Some companies do not insure buildings over a certain age, but designation itself does not place additional requirements on the insurer and should not affect premiums."

The advice was trite. Shop around.

But it turns out "heritage" is, in fact, a hated word in the insurance biz, and that only a tiny sliver of companies (called "markets" by brokers) will even consider extending coverage — no matter how much cash you throw at them.

"Definitely, there's a lack of understanding in our insurance industry of heritage properties," says Don Davis, a veteran broker with extensive experience in the area. "As soon as you say the word 'heritage,' literally the underwriters stop in their tracks and usually pass on the file."

For those few firms who can get past the designation, the higher replacement costs for a geriatric structure means bigger premiums.

And more hassles.

"I had a friend purchase a commercial heritage building and I literally begged a market to accept his file," Davis adds. "The only way I could get his file accepted was due to his strength of supporting policies. The client was forced to order his own inspection and appraisal on the file. His out-of-pocket cost was \$3,500."

Ontario does not regulate property insurance, the way it does the coverage for your car. So, if an insurer shuns the risk of a place built before 1940, with a stone foundation, with older plumbing or electrical systems, close to water, with a roof older than your teenager or (like mine) was built 207 years ago, bummer. Their choice.

Moreover, any policy issued will be conditional on a passing inspection. It probably won't have GRC (guaranteed replacement coverage). And it's only good for a year.

"You won't pay more just because the building is heritage," says Davis. "But the higher cost of insurance will occur; as the replacement value on the home will invariably be higher. Which has the appearance of higher rates."

Or, you can wait for the Shaw to buy your place and tear it down.

Garth Turner is a NOTL resident, journalist, author, wealth manager and former federal MP and minister.

garth@garth.ca



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Expect more controversial development

Dear editor:

Chances are that very little will change in the way NOTL looks at development proposals in the future, given its appointment of Aimee Alderman as planning director.

Not when she was the town's manager of planning and development from 2024-2026, years that saw NOTL staff recommend approval of several questionable and controversial projects, from the Parliament Oak hotel and the modifications to the Chrysler-Burroughs property to the demolition of three heritage-designated properties to make way for the new Royal George Theatre.

I anticipate we'll just see more of the same in the days ahead with her at the helm of the town's planning department.

Alderman has seemingly said as much herself,



Letter writer Terry Davis is skeptical that much will change under the leadership of the town's new planning director Aimee Alderman, who was the town's manager of planning from 2024 to 2026 and recommended approval of several controversial projects, such as the Parliament Oak hotel in the middle of a residential neighbourhood. FILE

stating in The Lake Report ("New director wants to help public better understand planning decisions,"

Jan. 29) that "staff must follow provincial planning law and applicable policies when dealing with proposals," but never once referring to NOTL's new official plan nor to the Ontario Municipal Act, which

clearly outlines the power-

ful role that official plans can and should play in guiding future development in Ontario communities.

I hope I'm wrong, and that things will change.

That staff will stop recommending council approval of projects that neither conform to the official plan and existing zoning nor to current bylaws.

That developers will take

NOTL's official plan into consideration before they submit development proposals, and forego requesting major variances to existing zoning in support of non-complying projects.

And that NOTL will continue to be a wonderful place to live, work and visit.

But I'm not optimistic.

Terry Davis

NOTL

Turner Report represents many residents' views

Dear editor:

Having read the negative letters by Peter Rand and Liz McElheran regarding one of our most read and popular columnists, Garth Turner, perhaps these parties should step back and reflect that Mr. Turner is expressing the sentiments of the community as a whole.

If not, why has a well-supported NOTL Residents Association sprung up under the stewardship of ex-councillor Stuart McCormack to unseat the current lord mayor and council?

They have administered like a dictatorship, completely tone-deaf to their constituents, ignoring local professional proposals to correct many of their issues and concerns.

Is it the result of the past two councils gutting the character of our town?

Do Mr. Rand and Ms. McElheran feel that criticism of events and decisions not in the public's interest are justification for their cynicism and silo mentality? Is criticising the following erosion of our infrastructure, in their view, out of bounds?

The hospital and school closings, no high school, loss of our X-ray facilities, closing of Upper Canada Lodge, bicycle rental and gelato shops on every corner — yes, we can witness the Tour de France on our roads and residential streets every weekend — or the hotelification of our neighbourhoods by short-term

rentals (ghost hotels).

I can go on: the spread of tourist residential parking in Old Town, overtourism and crowding on Queen Street, akin to a contact sport or getting out of a Bills game, plus the town's focus on attracting more tourists for tourist bucket list destination.

Why are housing prices selling, in numerous instances, below replacement costs? 2,000 square-foot and 3,000 square-foot homes selling for \$1.2 to \$1.3 million dollars when regular lots are selling at \$800,000 to \$1.2 million.

Is it supply and demand as residents are fleeing and getting out of dodge, plus our hungry commissioned realtors driving down

prices? If they don't sell, they don't eat.

In summation, the residents could fill a book as thick as "War and Peace" with the past decade of poor administration decisions and their fiduciary duties to spend out taxes wisely.

Accordingly, I challenge Mr. Rand and Ms. McElheran to provide us with their detailed accounting of how our quality of life in NOTL has improved by the actions of our last two councils.

We have much to be negative about. I plan to look forward to Garth Turner keeping our elected officials accountable and representing the voice of the masses.

Samuel A. Young

NOTL

We welcome your letters

The Lake Report welcomes your letters to the editor. Please, write early and often. Letters ideally should be under 400 words long. Occasionally, longer letters may be published. All letters may be edited for conciseness, accuracy, libel and defamation. Please include your full name, street address and a daytime telephone number so that authorship can be authenticated. Only names and general addresses (eg. Virgil, St. Davids, NOTL) will be published. Send your letters to editor@niagaranow.com or drop them by our office at 496 Mississauga St., NOTL.



This week's riddle is "Jeopardy!" style
Category: LOUNGE WEAR

Although this company sells Nulu fabric casual wear in lichen lime, it has another citrus fruit in its name.

Last issue category: HAVE I GOT NEWS FOR YOU

Clue: Dug up in France, in 2019 one of these from WWI was mistaken for a potato and sent to a chip factory before police detonated it..

Answer: What is a grenade?

Answered first by: Lynda Collet

Also answered correctly (in order) by:
Susan Hamilton, Margie Enns, Sue Rautenberg, Barry Woods, Claudia Grimwood, Jeff Lake, Esther VanGorder, Wade Durling, Nancy Rocca, Jim Dandy, Catherine Clarke, Emma Balsas, Tuija Johansson, Katie Reimer, Pat & Amanda Jankowski, Cindy Straver, Marla Percy, Donna Pearce, Michael Creager, Dawn Walker-Krahn, KC King, Jane Andersen

Email answers to editor@niagaranow.com, with your name, for a chance to win a \$25 Irish Harp Pub gift card every week. (Subject line: Riddle me this)

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EDITORIAL

Transparency and the role of local media

Richard Harley
Editor-in-Chief
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake just took a page straight out of the Trump playbook: attack and discredit the press.

Last Thursday, the town's chief administrator, Nick Ruller, released a statement, which we've published in full, that attempts to delegitimize scrutiny, question the media's motives and try to control the narrative. It is a direct shot at this paper — the only print media outlet in NOTL — and, in particular, its opinion columnists.

As the only Niagara-on-the-Lake mainstream media organization willing to criticize those in power, we're equally prepared to take criticism. In fact, we encourage it. It helps us be better.

But the problem with Ruller's actions is they are baseless, misleading and reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of a free press.

Essentially the statement is a warning to anyone who scrutinizes the municipality. While Ruller claims to support media, if we strip away the bureaucratic fluff, the message is simple: if you're critical, uncomfortable or interpretive, the town reserves the right to ignore you.

That is not openness. That is control. And everyone should recognize it as a huge problem.

As long as newspapers have been around, editorials and columns have existed to judge performance, question competence and challenge power. A government that wants to pick and choose which questions it answers — and from whom — is a government that wants to manage the conversation, not answer to the public.

It is reminiscent of the way Trump spokesperson Karoline Leavitt behaves.

Don't get us wrong. In the past we have wholeheartedly supported and been complimentary of Ruller — in editorials and opinion pieces reflecting on his job as fire chief, a councillor and an administrator. But on this issue, we wholeheartedly disagree with his stance and encourage him to reconsider.

Among his troubling claims is that senior town staff are not "public figures" and hence should not be named or criticized in the pages of The Lake

Report. That is legally and ethically unsound. Senior municipal officials are not private citizens in the ordinary sense when acting in their official roles.

Naming officials and senior staff in coverage of public administration is not reckless. It is normal, lawful and essential to accountability journalism. This is how journalism works. Pretending otherwise is either ignorant or purposefully obtuse.

Such sentiments also inaccurately portray fair criticism of staff's recommendations and decisions as personal attacks on those staff members.

The reality is that in real-world journalism, accountability comes through commentary, analysis, columns, editorials and investigative interpretation. Accountability involves naming people, describing decisions, critiquing competence, judgment or outcomes, and highlighting contradictions or failures. By framing "commentary" as something nefarious, the town is effectively saying: "Accountability is fine, as long as it's polite, narrow and controlled."

That's not how democratic scrutiny works, and, sadly, our mayor and council have left a huge number of decisions to the unelected employees. If the media does not bring them into the sunlight, nobody will. With that said, we as an organization have always tried to criticize actions and ideas, not people. So while we understand this false narrative plays to heart strings, the reality is we are not personally attacking anyone. We attack decision-making that is bad for our town — and by nature that is fairly subjective.

Then comes the emotional shield: "staff safety," "well-being," "morale," a "psychologically safe workplace." These terms are all emotionally compelling, but criticism of people exercising public power is not abuse. Discomfort is not harm. Reputational sensitivity is not a workplace injury.

No one supports harassment or threats, but a "psychologically safe workplace" cannot mean a workplace insulated from public questioning about how public business is conducted. The fact that town staff were not elected does



NOTL's chief administrator Nick Ruller doesn't understand how media works. It's common practice to name public officials — both elected ones and staff — when there's a pattern of poor decision making that harms a municipality. His idea that newspaper criticism is somehow akin to workplace harm is not grounded in reality, and shows a desire to avoid accountability. Now, he says the town will refuse to answer questions from opinion columnists — a move that is not only discriminatory, but appears to have no process of oversight for how such decisions will be made. It's akin to a temper tantrum. FILE PHOTO

“Perhaps most alarming of all is the town is positioning itself as the judge of which questions are “legitimate.” This is not only disingenuous, it is a blatant conflict of interest. You cannot be both the subject of scrutiny and the arbiter of which scrutiny is allowed ... That is textbook local-level press suppression. ie. Trump-ism.”

RICHARD HARLEY
PUBLISHER OF THE LAKE REPORT

not and should not shield them from accountability. Public criticism of officials in their professional roles is a core democratic function.

The town's statement attempts to blur that line on purpose, and the result is, in effect, a message that should worry all residents: "If public criticism makes staff uncomfortable, the town will simply stop engaging."

Ruller complains about "incomplete information" or "misleading narratives" being reported. If we've published factual errors, show us. If mistakes have been made, we want to know. We correct them quickly.

But the town hasn't flagged a single one on this subject. We have asked. Disliking the way a decision is criticized or analyzed is not the same as publishing an error in fact.

If mistakes have happened, the fault could lie with the town's penchant for secrecy and message control,

something that increased even before Ruller's tenure.

The reality is: We ask questions. We report what we're given. The real issue is the administration's preoccupation with gatekeeping and that obsession has increased markedly over the past two years.

Don't believe it? Look no further than how columnist Garth Turner was forced to view the Shaw Festival traffic plan: inside town hall, under supervision, like a suspect, barred from copying or recording a public document. This from an administration that never stops congratulating itself for being "transparent."

That's not "misleading." Those are facts the town is uncomfortable being called out about.

In talks with Ruller about access to information and the town's gatekeeping of public documents, we pointed out that these documents could easily be

retrieved with via a freedom of information request (a laborious, time-consuming process), and we questioned why the town would go to such dramatic lengths to prevent people, and the media, from accessing them. He flippantly suggested that maybe all of our inquiries should be done through FOI requests. Yes, really.

The "waste of tax dollars" line is also worth commenting on. The problem is that this frames media scrutiny as wasteful, information requests as a burden and accountability as a cost concern. That's deeply problematic. In a democracy, answering questions is not a waste. It's the cost of governing with transparency. If the town finds that cost inconvenient, the problem is not the questions.

Perhaps most alarming of all: the town is positioning itself as the judge of which questions are "legitimate," which inquiries are "verifiable," and what "meaningfully advances" accountability (will that judge just be an administrator? Our mayor? Are we allowed to know their name?).

This is not only disingenuous, it is a blatant conflict of interest. You cannot be both the subject of scrutiny and the arbiter of what scrutiny is allowed.

In other words, the town is saying that if the questions are too sharp, too critical or too uncomfortable, the town will label them "opinion" and stop answering. That is textbook local-level press suppression. ie. Trump-ism.

Telling residents to use internal forms or talk only to elected officials is little help. Those are controlled channels. They are not independent. They are exactly what a free press exists to bypass. That's why people look to journalism instead of accepting everything government news releases say without any critical thought. (And, unfortunately, today many small-town news outlets here in Niagara uncritically publish such documents as legitimate news, with no scrutiny or critical analysis.)

The town claims access to information won't change as a result of this attempt to increase its gatekeeping. That's disingenuous. Access isn't just about documents — which the town often won't even provide — it's about whether those in

power will face tough, persistent, public questioning. And provide timely answers. A government that only engages on its own terms isn't transparent. It's managing its image and implies it has something to fear.

Ruller's statement isn't about accuracy, civility or safety. It's about controlling the narrative and disengaging from real oversight. A confident institution answers criticism with facts and evidence. It doesn't threaten to disengage. It doesn't pretend public officials are private citizens. And it doesn't complain that democracy is too expensive.

And then there's our lordly mayor, late to the party of salvaging his public image, taking to Facebook to sneer at "print media" and echo the same line of attack.

He writes that "print media" outlets are failing in their democratic role, blames "business model challenges" and suggests that opinion is "replacing" journalism — as if commentary is some kind of corruption rather than a core function of a free press. He assures readers that "all opinions are valid," while simultaneously telling them to treat opinion as something lesser, something to be discounted.

That's not a defence of facts. It's a way to delegitimize criticism without answering it.

It's also rich, coming from a mayor whose administration is actively making it harder to access public information and now threatening to disengage from questions it doesn't like. If you want fewer "opinions," start by answering questions. Start by releasing documents. Start by respecting scrutiny instead of trying to manage it.

The town needs to decide what it actually believes in: real accountability, or a carefully curated version where only the "right" questions get answered. You can't claim to support a free press while openly and brazenly building a system to ignore it.

We'll be here regardless, asking the questions, publishing the answers we're given, and pointing out when they aren't good enough. And during the election campaign this fall, we'll make sure voters remember exactly who tried to teach this town that accountability is optional.

Town warns it will vet newspaper's questions

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake released the following statement on Feb. 5, further entrenching a troubling pattern by the town's administration: an ongoing effort to withhold information from the public, discredit the media and intimidate this newspaper for doing its job. The statement shows a profound lack of judgment and falsely casts town staff as victims, when in reality newspapers exist for one reason — to hold people accountable for their own actions. This is not an isolated incident. It is part of a sustained and disturbing trend that should concern every resident of this town.

A personalized version of the statement was also sent directly to *The Lake Report*, confirming the town's intent to single out and smear this publication — the most-awarded community newspaper in Canada — for its in-depth reporting, editorial positions and nationally recognized opinion columnists who take principled, fearless stands and do not bend to political pressure. The statement was signed by the town's chief administrative officer, Nick Ruller, whom we name deliberately and transparently. This kind of behaviour is not just hostile to a free press — it is undemocratic, discriminatory toward legitimate journalism, and an unacceptable attack on freedom of expression in Canada.

As Chief Administrative Officer for the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, I respect the essential role of a free and independent media. However, I have growing concerns about media coverage or commentary that, whether intended or not, relies on incomplete or inaccurate information or a lack of appropriate context. I am even more concerned about the increasing practice of individual Town staff being identified by name in opinion-based commentary.

These individuals are not public figures or decision makers. Their role is to carry out their Council-approved responsibilities on behalf of the community and, like any employee at any organization, they deserve to work in a safe and respectful workplace.

The media play a key role in keeping local governments accountable. However,



CAO Nick Ruller wants to censor media opinions.

I draw a clear distinction between accountability and commentary when individuals are associated with unverified claims, misleading narratives, or personalized criticism. Even if not intentional, the outcome is that it needlessly encourages abuse, erodes public trust, and affects employee well-being, professional reputation, and workplace morale.

The Town has spent significant public resources

and tax dollars responding to opinion-based inquiries that are not rooted in verifiable facts and do not meaningfully advance transparency or accountability. This is not an effective use of public funds.

It is my responsibility as CAO to ensure accurate communication, responsible stewardship of public resources, and, like any employer, to maintain a respectful and psychological-

ly safe workplace for Town employees. That's why I have directed that Town staff no longer respond to these types of opinion-based requests, and to focus only on matters of fact and policy by reporters acting in a reporting capacity. The Town will continue to support journalism and correct factual inaccuracies when they arise. Access to public information and statutory processes will not change.

Further, any member of the community with concerns about the work of Town staff may contact an elected official with the appropriate information, or use our online Feedback Form.

We look forward to ongoing, open engagement with the community in ways that support public dialogue and information that is timely, accurate, respectful, and constructive.

 Gary Zalepa Lord Mayor NOTL
February 5 at 4:23 PM · 2

In our democracy, we all have a responsibility to inform ourselves with facts and engage with each other respectfully.

NOTL is fortunate to have nine dedicated council members that do their homework and engage respectfully and professionally.

Town staff are dedicated to our community and bring their professional expertise to help elevate the level of community discussions.

Increasingly, print media, due to challenges with their business models and other pressures, have not been delivering on the important role which the media has in our democratic process.

Opinion articles are increasingly replacing articles by journalists.

All opinions are valid. Be sure to recognize opinion as just that, someone's opinion.

Mayor adds to damage with defamatory and false accusations

Mayor Gary Zalepa compounded the damage by taking to social media to echo and escalate Nick Ruller's defamatory and misleading letter, adding a wholly unfounded claim that this newspaper's business model is in trouble. That assertion is false and defamatory. It casts unjustified doubt on the viability of our business, our journalism and our advertising platforms.

For the record, our business model is strong — and it was among the first successful hyper-local newspaper models in Canada, many of which are now thriving and expanding with a renewed focus on genuinely local reporting.

Zalepa claims this paper is failing to deliver on its public role. News Media Canada, the Ontario Community Newspapers Association and other journalism bodies that actually understand that role disagree. To borrow the mayor's own favourite phrase, perhaps he should "trust the experts" — because on this, he is simply wrong.

This newspaper reflects the views of the community it serves. And overwhelmingly, those views show deep disappointment with an administration that resists accountability, disregards residents' wishes and has faced sustained public protest since Zalepa took office. It is also worth noting that this latest letter fits a documented pattern of disrespectful correspondence from the mayor toward constituents across the town.

Closing of Welland long-term care home trouble for Niagara seniors



Wayne Gates
Special to *The Lake Report*

To me, there's nothing more important than ensuring our seniors live in security, dignity, and safely in their golden years. These are the people who built this province, and we should never force them to accept anything less than the greatest care possible.

That's why I was so concerned at the news last week that Welland's hospital will be closing the doors of their long-term care home.

That's 87 seniors who will have to be relocated, many of whom who have called this facility a home for 20 years. That's 87 families that now must deal with the stress and pressure of moving their loved one, and 87 less beds to provide care in a community that already deals with years-

long wait lists for a bed in long-term care.

This is not how a province that values dignity and respect for seniors behaves.

And let's be clear about a few things: firstly, the decision to close this home was made by Niagara Health. Secondly, this is a cut. It's a cut of 115 beds in Niagara. It means less space for seniors who are already dealing with out of control wait times.

It affects people living across the region, including in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Less bed capacity and 87 seniors needing to find a new home means longer wait times, less access to care, and more strain on our public hospitals and health care workers.

Experts have warned of a "demographic tsunami" as our population ages and more seniors need care. This is a time for bold investment, not the slow drip of cuts and closures.

Not only have these seniors had their lives upended, 140 workers are now left wondering when or whether they will be redeployed into other jobs now



MPP Wayne Gates says Niagara Health needs to increase beds for long-term care homes and not continue a pattern of cutting and closing homes. At Pleasant Manor, the home has just added a whole new building to its facilities. FILE/PAIGE SEBURN

that theirs are cut.

This comes on the heels of nearly 100 layoffs that Niagara Health announced last year, and a report from the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions projecting that current provincial funding

models will lead to thousands of nurses and personal support workers losing their jobs by 2027-28.

Let's face it: we have an aging population in Ontario and here in Niagara-on-the-Lake, where people 65

years and older make up more than 36 per cent of the population.

In fact, we have 50,000 people on the long-term care waitlist across the province, double what it was a decade ago. Thousands of

those people are residents here in Niagara.

Niagara-on-the-Lake has faced its fair share of health care and long-term care cuts, including the closure of Upper Canada Lodge in 2024.

We've made progress here by working together as a community to open Niagara Long Term Care Residence. But let's be clear: we shouldn't accept any cuts to beds in long-term care in Niagara.

As MPP, I've already raised this with the premier and the Minister of Long-term Care. My office is working with all families affected in our riding to ensure their loved ones get the care they need and the home they deserve.

But we must stand together to say: no more cuts, fund publicly-delivered health care and long-term care appropriately, treat nurses and personal support workers with respect, and let's build a province where every senior lives with respect and dignity.

Wayne Gates is the member of provincial parliament for the Niagara Falls riding.

Public servants owe us transparency and accountability



ARCHITEXT

Brian Marshall
Columnist

Much as I would not like to do so, this columnist feels compelled to comment on Nick Ruller's (Niagara-on-the-Lake's chief administrative officer), Feb. 5 letter to The Lake Report in which he states: "Town staff will no longer respond to information requests made in support of opinion, advocacy or commentary pieces."

Quite frankly, in six years of writing the Archi-text, I have never requested supplementary information from town staff. Rather, I have depended on the publicly accessible documents, staff recommendations and livestream videos of council and committee meetings.

Further, when the publicly shared reports and data went beyond my expertise, I have sought out professionals (legal, engineering,

etc.) to properly inform my commentary.

However, there is a greater principle involved in this situation that must be considered.

To-wit, our municipal administration has taken it upon themselves to determine which citizen has, and which has not, the right to information contained in what can only be described as public documents — effectively imposing censorship by selection.

Setting aside the morphology inherent in the term "public servant," the broadly accepted definition is an individual, elected to or employed by a government, who provides services to the public good.

Regarding the responsibilities inherent in the role, the Institute of Public Administration of Canada states: "They are committed to the highest degrees of integrity. They are committed to deliver the best administration possible. They are committed to fair and transparent governance, to delivering high-quality services, to a stewardship of government funds that will maximize cost-effectiveness and for accountability."

This quotation from the Province of British Columbia demonstrates the expectations of public



Brian Marshall says neither the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, CAO Nick Ruller nor any member of council — including the mayor — has the right to pick and choose when the public, or opinion writers, are given access to open, fair and transparent information about town operations and staff paid with public money. FILE

service employees to "not just to do their job but to: Serve ethically and with integrity, loyalty, impartiality and objectivity; put the interests of the public and the public service ahead of their own personal interests; and maintain and enhance the public's trust and confidence in the public service."

Fulfilment of which will: "make sure that our actions are impartial, objective and beyond reproach."

And it is recognized by the Government of Canada, on page 13 of Public Service 2000, a public service reform initiative that: "Pub-

lic servants know that they work in a goldfish bowl, each action subject to control and audit, to parliamentary and public scrutiny, and to legal requirements and conventional processes."

In other words, it is fundamental to the job that the interests of the public are paramount and should be continually demonstrable in day-to-day performance; that their actions should be fair and transparent to the public's satisfaction; and, that they and their work shall be subject to public scrutiny and review.

Nowhere, in any pub-

lished document I could find, is the right to subjectively and selectively deny any part of the "public" open, fair and transparent disclosure conferred on the public service, except and whereas the information is deemed "secret" in the public interest.

Look, the fact is that no one is perfect — we all make mistakes. And, when a person makes a mistake, they should not be shamed but rather simply held accountable with an expectation for improved performance in the future.

Of course, if there is an

undertaking — individual or concerted — to deny, hide or attempt to justify an action that is counter to what is generally considered by the electorate as the public good (at whatever level), it becomes an entirely different matter.

Contrary to what some bureaucrats may believe, public servants are ultimately employed by, and accountable to the public. It is the role of ethical professional journalism-based news media in all its parts — reporting, editorializing and opinion commentary — to ensure the public is kept informed.

May I observe that if the public service provided full, complete, easily obtainable access to all documentation in its possession and communicated with its citizens in an open, straight-forward manner, it would largely eliminate this municipality's issues with news media.

It would certainly be a remarkable departure from the "us-versus-them" CYA construct of the "two solitudes" that has been constructed between public service and the public they serve.

Brian Marshall is a NOTL realtor, author and expert consultant on architectural design, restoration and heritage.

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Reflections on comfort during a long and cold winter



ROSS'S RAMBLINGS

Ross Robinson
Columnist

So what's an amateur scribbler to do? Ramble about the present or the future? Reflect about the past? Certainly not repeat or reiterate

And don't even think about regurgitating previous thoughts.

This winter, like almost every other winter since we have been keeping accurate and useful meteorological records, has been cold. And this year, really cold. For a long spell.

I have been looking forward to the Winter Olympics in Milan (or is it Milano?) Cortina for several months. But the Olympics are so different now.

No truly centralized

village, no one cauldron in which the Olympic flame would burn for the duration of the games. Six or eight venues for the events. Several temporary villages constructed to house the athletes and their retinues. Lengthy, often twisty turny roads on which to travel. And train tracks. Many tunnels.

Using multiple venues has no doubt kept construction costs down, but just imagine the organizational logistics for the food services. I worked in the Munich and Montreal Olympic villages many years ago, and they were miracle enough.

For these 2026 Winter Olympic Games, the organizers couldn't even build the ice hockey rink to the right dimensions. It's three feet too short, but on with the games.

But really, in the midst of our current world situation, who really cares?

The horrible disappearance of Nancy Guthrie in Arizona. The serious civil rights abuses in so many parts of the world. Wars killing people and destroying families.



The killing of an innocent U.S. citizen across the border by its own government is a stark reminder how good we have it.

Our sheltered lives in Niagara-on-the-Lake seem even smaller than usual this winter, don't they? But earlier today, on a freezing cold day under a bright blue sky, a reassuring and repetitive sight. The great Saskatchewan hockey player Gordie Howe regularly said it: "There is no such thing as cold weather. Just cold clothing."

Our well known local walker Angela proved this again today.

Traveling down Niagara Stone Road, there she walked on the Bob Howse

Trail. Cozily clad in a stylish ski outfit topped off with a warm wool toque, the indefatigable Angela was striding along on her daily long walk. Only very rarely does weather keep her from her daily commitment to exercise.

Not that long ago, many of us walked every day. People walked to work, to school, to church, to visit. To get water, to wash clothes. We walked. To get food for sustenance. Now, we drive.

Getting in a daily walk is one of many good reasons to own a dog. Once a day, or

in some cases more often, a dog must be walked. This used to be a simple task. Or, the dog was simply let out to "do his business."

Now, I admire the warm, rain repellent and colourful outfits that so many dogs get to wear.

Please bear with me patiently as I wander along with this weekly Ramblings contribution. Things happen so fast now, and with satellites and whatnot, we see all the news all the time. Almost in real time.

Not that long ago, news traveled so slowly, if at all.

There were tragedies and horrible happenings, but we didn't hear about them.

So now, as we sit and get bombarded with news from around the world on our television screens, in our newspapers and on our computers and hand held devices, we must determine to stay positive.

Perhaps watch some of the Winter Olympic Games. And don't get too upset when Latvia beats Canada in curling. Love it when a nation new to the Winter Games takes part..

rossrocket9@gmail.com

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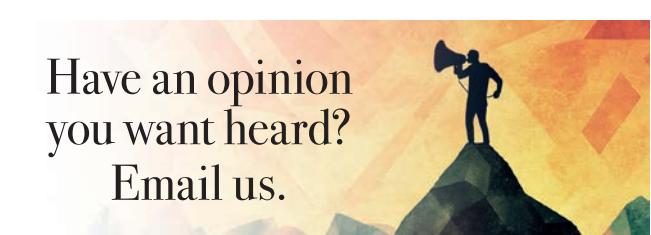
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Newsflash: Critical opinions are valuable to NOTL, not damaging

Dear editor:

On Feb. 5, Mr. Nick Ruller issued a statement on the NOTL municipal webpage wherein he highlighted concerns linking media coverage/commentary to the creation of an unsafe and disrespectful workplace that seemingly in his mind encourages abuse, the erosion of public trust, negatively affecting employee well-being, professional reputation and negatively affecting workplace morale.

According to some, the definition of a safe working environment is one where employees feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically secure, free from hazards, discrimination, and harassment.

He has worrisome justifiable concerns, but his statements have innuendos and suppositions where actual instances of unsafe workplace incidents are not identified. If they had occurred legal action, inhouse terminations, the Human Rights Commission and the ombudsman would have been involved. So what is the purpose of his statement?

Any media that contains criticism of our municipal decision-makers and supporting staff could lead to any of the things that Mr. Ruller has mentioned. But these criticisms could also inspire our municipal government to alter their decision-making trajectory, take more notice of the existing public discontent with town council's decision-making, and incorporate resident's concerns/suggestions/recommendations into their approvals.

From that perspective criticisms and resident contributions would generate a very positive result, if they were received in a positive perspective.

He has a concern with the media identifying staff because they are not public figures, nor decision makers. What Mr. Ruller seems to be saying is that town staff should not be criticized by name because they are not public figures.

I think for the majority of people in Canada, it doesn't really matter whether you are a public figure or not, abusive behavior should never be tolerated or accepted in the workplace. So, what's Mr. Ruller's trying to say?

I really don't understand why town staff should not



Reader Gienek Ksiazkiewicz says the town's plan to censor media by refusing to answer tough questions from this paper's national award-winning opinion writers is undemocratic. He wants CAO Nick Ruller to understand to understand the value in a free and unfettered press. FILE

be questioned or criticized for such things such as the perceived (real or not) lack of due diligence or risk analysis.

I don't understand how criticism, questionings or requests for public documents can encourage abuse, and create an unsafe and disrespectful workplace. Perhaps Mr. Ruller can clarify this for everyone, because it doesn't appear to be clear in his statement?

Mr. Ruller has used the words "encourages abuse." Abuse is generally defined as a situation where one uses something to bad effect/purpose, or is the cruel and violent treatment of a person.

Can Mr. Ruller specifically point out how media coverage encourages "the cruel and violent treatment of a person" or how it is used for a bad purpose? Please clarify this Mr. Ruller. Otherwise, in the interest of free speech, perhaps you should consider retracting your statement.

As far as erosion of public trust is concerned, there appears to be a number of residents that would like to replace the existing council based on events that have transpired and are transpiring — that to me seems like there already exists concerns about the existing council's decision and has resulted in the formation of the NOTL Residents Association.

Media attention to this has been in the public eye for years. Why is Mr. Ruller concerned with this now?

I give credit to Coun. Maria Mavridis who has publicly responded about being locked out of the Residents 4 a Better NOTL website that prevented her

sues described in the media. So, can Mr. Ruller provide what amount of money has been spent on what he calls "opinion-based inquiries"?

Fiscal responsibility is another topic, with the forgiveness of a Parliament Oak fee coming to mind. Opinions on what constitutes fiscal responsibility resound.

Questions to town staff and council aren't normally based in verifiable facts as Mr. Ruller has stated. They are fact-finding inquiries designed to advance transparency, accountability and confirm facts or deficiencies related to such things as infrastructure designs, consulting reports, etc.

These requested items have been paid for by taxpayer and we should have unfettered timely access to this information. It appears that he has recently restricted information flows to the same taxpayers that have paid for the town's informational databanks. How does this make sense?

Elected officials and their employees, I believe, have an obligation to provide specific answers to inquiries, verified by specific facts within their historical informational databanks that they took into account (and which taxpayers have paid for) when recommendations or decisions were made. In my opinion it's their job — it's what they were elected to do and are being paid to do: a societal democratic contract.

Unlike the provincial and federal "theatre" of political intrigue, there is no opposition party in municipal politics to hold the "party in power" to account.

The electorate are in a sense, therefore, the unelected opposition party that is needed to question whether the trajectory of our municipal government is in keeping with their individual electoral promises and the well being of the community.

To take this democratic aspect away, is in my opinion, an anathema to the democratic process. We need satire and criticism; we need the opinions and satire of people like Garth Turner. He reflects a lot of our views. He is the Jimmy Kimmel of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Too bad if you're a Republican.

Gienek Ksiazkiewicz
NOTL

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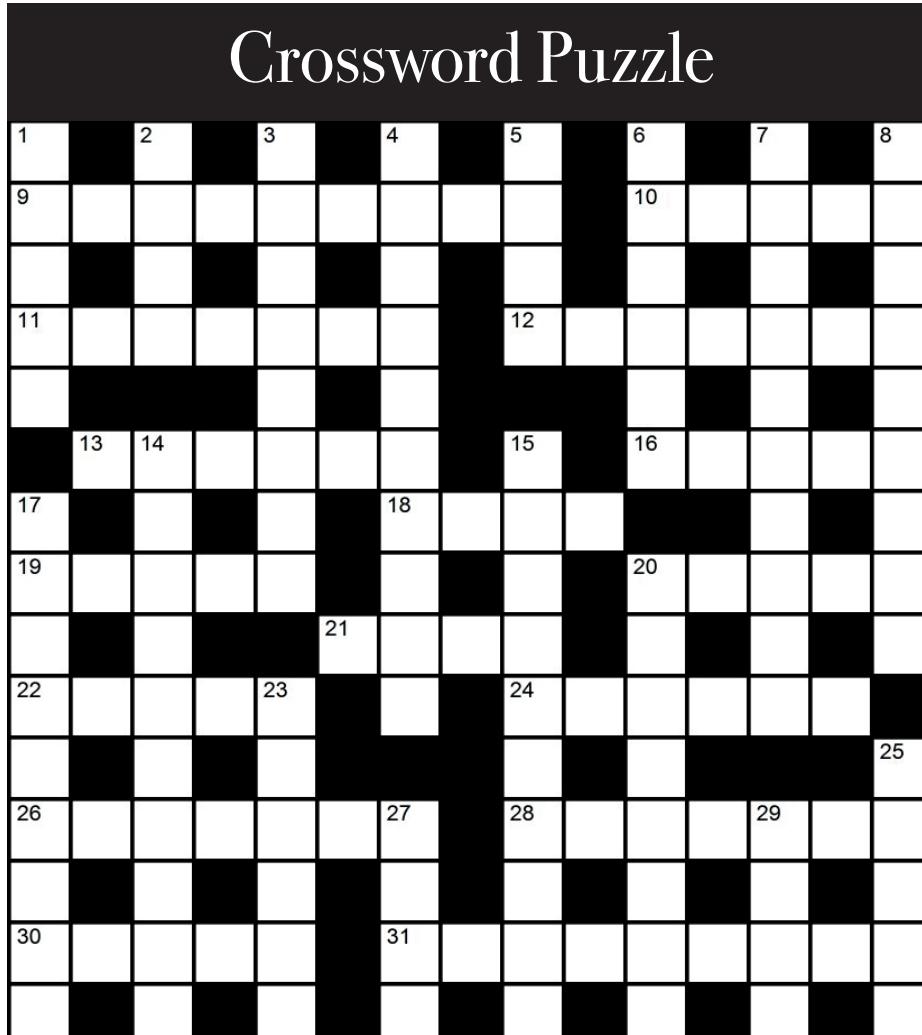
Across

- 9. Cloudburst (9)
- 10. Move stealthily (5)
- 11. Possibly (7)
- 12. Glitter (7)
- 13. Reach one's destination (6)
- 16. Eddy (5)
- 18. Thick cord (4)
- 19. Overturn (5)
- 20. Long stories (5)
- 21. Seethe (4)
- 22. Irritably impatient (5)
- 24. Passenger ships (6)
- 26. Dental filling (7)
- 28. Out wooing (2,1,4)
- 30. Run up (5)
- 31. Christian festival (9)

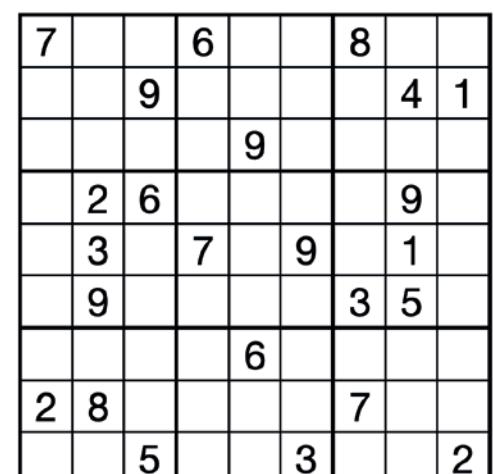
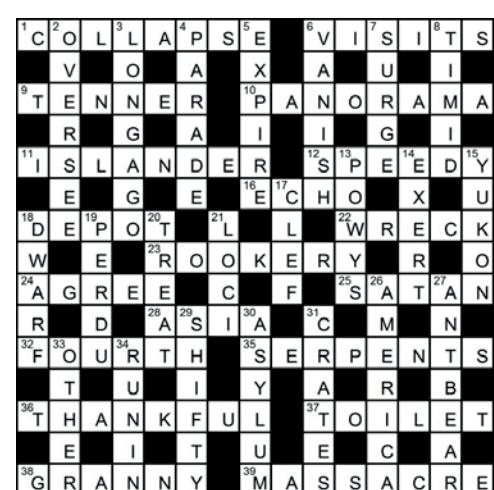
Down

- 1. Burst forth (5)
- 2. Coffin stand (4)
- 3. Betrayer (8)
- 4. Crustacean catcher (7,3)
- 5. Little devils (4)
- 6. Squirts (6)
- 7. Minstrel (4,6)
- 8. Insomniac (9)
- 14. Opposition (10)
- 15. Enchanted (10)
- 17. Smallest continent (9)
- 20. Parched (3-5)
- 23. Curdled milk (6)
- 25. Cults (5)
- 27. Brood (4)
- 29. Speck (4)

Crossword Puzzle



Last issue's answers



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EXPLORING HISTORY
WITH NOTL MUSEUM



Busy day at the NOTL docks

Taken from the balcony of the American Hotel (the King George III Inn) around 1935, this photograph captures a moment when Niagara-on-the-Lake's docks were bustling with ships, visitors and fishermen. Commercial fishing boats in the basin highlight a time when local fishermen carried on their family tradition, setting nets offshore for whitefish, pickerel and sturgeon. The Cayuga regularly docked in NOTL as it did the day this image was captured. Known as "the ship of romance," it once brought millions of passengers to NOTL between 1906 and 1957. Though the bustling shipping and commercial fishing eras have ended, this image offers a vivid glimpse into the lively past of this now-quiet corner in town.

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In search of the earliest stars and galaxies in our universe



DR. BROWN

Dr. William Brown
Columnist

The 20th century was the age of modern cosmology. From a universe thought to be unchanging, without a beginning or ending, everything changed.

Einstein's masterpiece general theory of relativity strongly suggested that large enough masses could collapse space-time into what was initially called a singularity and later forms, black holes.

For physicists, the math strongly suggested that the universe was expanding and began with something incredibly tiny and energetic, which suddenly inflated exponentially for less than a second, created the first subatomic particles within a few seconds and thereafter continued to expand stretching the wavelength of the ever diminishing heat energy into the microwave range as the universe continued to expand and cool.

That radiation, called the cosmic background radiation was the first solid evidence for the Big Bang hypothesis to explain the beginning of the universe.

Since then, enormous progress has been made in understanding the life cycle of stars, how elements beyond the original three created in the Big Bang — hydrogen, helium and a bit of lithium — to heavier elements forged by nuclear fusion in the lifetime and especially death of stars.

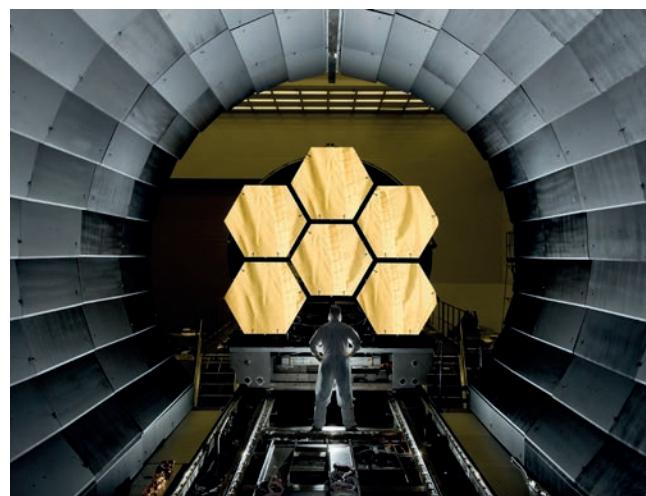
Progress in cosmology was rapid especially in the latter half of the 20th century, leading to several Nobel Prizes and the emergence of a working "standard cosmological model" for how the universe evolved.

However, many questions remain.

Observational studies and theoretical models of the universe left a surfeit of mass and thus gravitational force to explain how rapidly orbiting stars in the outermost regions of galaxies managed to stay together.

Hence, there had to be more matter than what we can see which doesn't interact with electromagnetic energy and is therefore, invisible.

Or what about dark energy, the expansive force in the universe? What is it? Why



Evidence obtained from the James Webb telescope suggests the earliest stars might have formed 100 million years after the Big Bang — a time when the universe was much smaller. WIKIMEDIA

does the rate of expansion seem to vary with time and position in the universe?

How and when did the first stars and later galaxies appear and what role did theoretical early giant black holes and dark matter play in the genesis of those early stars?

Estimates suggest the universe is 13.8 billion years old. Theoretical models and tantalizing evidence using the James Webb telescope suggest that the earliest stars might have formed as early as 100 million years after the Big Bang, a time when the universe was much smaller, denser and also simpler — only hydrogen, helium and some

lithium — as yet no other elements.

To create those first stars would have required enough gravitational force to clump matter together — possibly generated by massive black holes, dark matter or both.

The earliest stars were probably giants — hundreds, even thousands of times larger the size of our Sun and probably burned through their hydrogen fast enough to make them burn brightly before collapsing in supernovae a few hundred thousand years following their birth.

So far, no giant stars meeting the criteria for "first" stars have been spotted or even whole galaxies

of bright first stars. Why?

The problem is that the James Webb telescope isn't large enough to spot those first generation stars and galaxies without help.

For help, physicists can thank Albert Einstein who many years ago suggested, based on his general relativity studies, that large masses such as single galaxy or even multiple galaxies could act as a stellar lens between a very distant galaxy or giant star of interest and the lens of an observer's telescope — in this case, the James Webb telescope.

Under the right conditions, stellar lensing can magnify galaxies and stars of interest by as much as a thousand times or more.

The real answer may require more powerful telescopes capable of seeing back in time to within a few million years of the Big Bang, if we're ever going to see what generated the first stars.

Possibly, we've reached the limits of what we can see now, even with the aid of stellar lensing.

There are limits to what we can know, given that estimates suggest that 95 per cent of the universe is beyond what we can see, because of the limit imposed by the speed of light and the continuing expansion of the

universe.

Whatever the limits to studying the universe now and in the future, the creation story told by science is stunning at so many levels including the origins and evolution of the universe on the largest and quantum scales and the origins and evolution of earth and life, including town species beginning 200,000 years.

With the possible exception of our cousin species the neanderthals and denisovans, modern humans are the only species to create and imagine stories but unlike our extinct cousins, our creation stories continue to evolve as we understand more.

That doesn't mean we should ditch older creation stories because they might not be factually true. Many creation stories speak to relationships between nature and humans and between humans, which remain as true in our time as when they were first experienced or imagined.

Science's creation stories are "works in progress" subject to evidence.

Dr. William Brown is a professor of neurology at McMaster University and co-founder of the InfoHealth series at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library.



Sandtrap Super Bowl party raises hundreds for Red Roof Retreat

Andrew Hawlitzky
The Lake Report

It was a full house at the Sandtrap Pub and Grill on Sunday night, with football fans' eyes glued to the screens above the bar as the biggest night in American football unfolded.

At the same time, the Sandtrap hosted a sold-out fundraiser to support Red Roof Retreat and its multi-million-dollar expansion plans.

The Seattle Seahawks took on the New England Patriots and won 29-13, claiming their second Super Bowl victory.

Sandtrap co-owner Paul Dietsch joked that the already sold-out bar room might have looked a lot different if the Buffalo Bills were playing.

"Boy, if it was Bills, it'd be standing room only," said Dietsch.

Sandtrap's annual event is helping finance a \$4.4 million expansion that aims to build a larger respite home



Bill Krahn, Tony Dolinski, Denise Wilson, and Dawn Krahn gather at the Sandtrap, repping Bills jerseys, during the Super Bowl fundraiser for Red Roof Retreat. ANDREW HAWLITZKY

for children and young adults with special needs, with an opening target of late October 2026 if donations keep coming.

"This is probably one of our busiest Super Bowls. We are sold out tonight," said Dietsch.

The fundraiser offered ticket packages priced at \$30, 20 to 25 raffle prizes on a table in the corner, a 50-50 draw and football squares, with all proceeds going to Red Roof Retreat.

Ward Simpson, chairperson and fundraiser volunteer with Red Roof Retreat, said he hoped to sell about 100 ticket packages at \$30 each, roughly \$3,000, plus additional revenue from the raffles and draws, and he noted the fundraiser already exceeded expectations before the night ended.

"We exceeded expectations already, and there are still lots of people coming in," said Simpson.

Red Roof Retreat is

raising funds for a new fully accessible two-storey respite centre on Concession 6 to replace its current smaller bungalow and expand programs for children and young adults with special needs.

Plans call for a roughly 5,700-square-foot building, preservation and upgrade of the historic red barn on the site and added outdoor program space so services can continue year round while demand for care

continues to grow.

"It's a \$4.4 million fundraising project, and the longer it takes to build, the more fundraising we need because prices keep going up," said Simpson.

Steffanie Bjorgan, executive director of Red Roof Retreat, said the Sandtrap event has provided yearly support for Red Roof and has a record of exceeding her expectations for what they can raise.

"They represent what community is about, and they have done this for us every single year ... it always exceeds anything we thought would happen, and that is what makes Niagara-on-the-Lake special," said Bjorgan.

Matt Dietsch, Sandtrap co-owner, is also a parent with a child supported by Red Roof Retreat. He said he is proud to continue hosting this Super Bowl party for Red Roof because the charity plays a direct role for families who need its support.

"They are such an important part of the community, and my 15-year-old with special needs uses their programs, so I know firsthand how much they matter," said Dietsch.

Dietsch said many attendees, most of whom are repeat customers at the Sandtrap, are less focused on the teams and more interested in enjoying the Super Bowl with community while supporting the charity.

Simpson commended Cornerstone Church for providing space for Red Roof during construction, with programs continuing there for clients.

Red Roof will also sell Valentine's cookies at Cornerstone Church ahead of Valentine's Day, with six chocolate chip cookies priced at \$10. He said the sale raised more than \$1,000 last year and will run from the church space where a Red Roof Retreat sign directs buyers to the back entrance.

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