



The Lake Report

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



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Canada's most-awarded community newspaper

January 8, 2026

2025 IN REVIEW:

Growing pains, a grassroots movement and a speed cam mystery

Kevin MacLean
The Lake Report

Development continues apace in Niagara-on-the-Lake and whether it was the ongoing saga of Parliament Oak and its planned hotel, the new "airport terminal" hotel in the Village plaza or sundry other projects from Glendale to Old Town, the spectre of growth hung heavy over town throughout 2025.

In response, a new grassroots residents association has sprung up to try to make people's voices are heard, especially as there is a municipal election barely 11 months away.

Council debates and decisions of the past three years, coupled with new provincial rules that make developing property less onerous, will continue to change the face of NOTL over the next few years.

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Newsmakers of the year

Developers, council face strong new challenger in residents association



Top: The NOTL Residents Association's first meeting packs the community centre. A testament to how many people are feeling.
Bottom row, from left: Developers Benny Marotta, John Hawley, Rainer Hummel, David Jones and NOTLRA chair Stuart McCormack.

Kevin MacLean | The Lake Report

Lord Mayor **Gary Zalepa** and most of his current council, developers **Rainer Hummel, Benny Marotta, David Jones and John Hawley, Stuart McCormack** and the men and women behind the newly

formed **NOTL Residents Association** — together they are among The Lake Report's "Newsmakers of the Year" in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

NOTL remains a town in transition and all of the afore-

mentioned folks will have a say in how the next chapter in this historic town's story is written.

The sleepy rural village of 40-plus years ago morphed into the wine and tourist mecca that we all know and (mostly) love.

NOTL grew up, attracting thousands of new residents as a result but many of those denizens have strong feelings about what should happen next.

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Farmworker Hub calls for support as workers prepare to return

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

As migrant farmworkers prepare to return to Niagara-on-the-Lake, the Farmworker Hub NOTL hopes to

welcome them with wellness bags of everyday essentials, offering some relief at the start of the season after a challenging year marked by Hurricane Melissa.

The hub is now calling on the NOTL community to

help make that possible. It launched the wellness bag initiative last year, after receiving an influx of donated hygiene items and realizing they could be assembled into something meaningful.

"(It) kind of clicked," said Brittney Kranz, lead co-ordinator of the Farmworker Hub NOTL. "Wouldn't it be nice to have these wellness bags at the farms when the workers come back?"

For ease, the hub has

created an Amazon wishlist at amazon.ca/hz/wishlist/ls/3GJFNZ4OP9OFB. Items ordered are shipped directly to Kranz's home, then brought to the hub and packed by volunteers.

Donations can also be

dropped off at 1570 Niagara Stone Rd. every Tuesday from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., or arranged outside those hours by calling or texting 905-483-9717.

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Jamaican workers feel hurricane impact

Continued from Front Page

The hub also accepts unopened, non-expired items people may already have at home and invites short notes of welcome or encouragement to include in the bags.

The goal, Kranz said, is to remove one immediate burden from workers as they arrive.

The hub hopes to place wellness bags directly in workers' rooms, stocked with everyday essentials such as soap, toothpaste and razors — items workers typically buy immediately after arriving in Canada.

"So instead of having to worry about putting money out for those items, we'd like them to just be able to come here and get settled in and not have to worry about that," she said.

"It also kind of welcomes them," she added. "Your hub family is here and thinking of you."

Kranz said the need is greater this year: "We did not receive the items that we had the previous year."

The end of 2025 was also devastating for workers from Jamaica, she said, who continue to feel the impacts



The Farmworker Hub is seeking donations for migrant farm workers returning to Niagara-on-the-Lake. This year, the need for those items is even greater following the devastating impacts of Hurricane Melissa. BRITTNEY KRANZ

of Hurricane Melissa, the category 5 hurricane that struck the island in late October.

Some remain without electricity, with downed hydro poles in their communities, and are dealing with widespread damage to their farms and livestock.

"Everyone in Niagara-on-the-Lake, they've been asking, 'How are the workers, how are they doing?'" she said. "A lot of the men I talked to lost their chickens, and cows, and their farms, and their crops — that they do rely on."

When workers returned

home, time normally spent resting and reconnecting with family was instead consumed by damage and disruption, Kranz said.

"You're not spending that quality time with your family — you're literally rebuilding your house," she said. "Now, these men are going to have to come back to work here, because that's their job and they need to make money for their families."

Kranz said the response from the community has been encouraging.

By the morning after the request was posted, donated

items were already waiting outside her home: "It's like, it's really awesome."

But the timing has made fundraising more difficult, she added.

"We're coming off of the holidays and then, also, there are other organizations asking for the same things for different efforts," she said.

"We have received 20 tubes of toothpaste, which is amazing, but at the same time, we need to keep pushing because we have hundreds of men that are coming back that we're looking to support."

Kranz said every item matters.

"If we can get 100 people to donate one tube of toothpaste, that's 100 tubes," she said.

She shared the initiative on her Facebook account, asking residents to help spread the word.

"We just need to keep the push going."

The hub encourages any businesses interested in sponsoring wellness bags to contact the hub at the same number provided above.

paigeseburn@niagaranow.com

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NEWS 



Penguins take c-c-cool dip

These courageous souls braved the Boxing Day freeze and dived into the chilly waters of the Niagara River on Dec. 26 for the annual Penguin Dip. This yearly tradition sees participants dive into the shores of Balls Beach to raise money for Red Roof Retreat in Virgil. These swimmers spite the harsh conditions by making the most of the occasion, marking the tradition with laughter, joy and camaraderie.

Development a major focus of 2025

Continued from Front Page

With dozens of new subdivision and commercial projects approved or in the pipeline, NOTL is on the cusp of big things.

To many residents, old and new, that future will make the town unrecognizable. For them, that is unacceptable.

But as town council decisions over the past three years show, it really might not matter what ordinary folks want.

Because change and growth are inevitable. And in **Doug Ford's** Ontario, the grand plans of developers seem to be all that matters.

For those reasons and more, NOTL's Newsmakers of the Year are focused on people from the political and development realms.

The decisions and actions of these individuals and companies have long-lasting and far-reaching effects on NOTL.

During his first term as mayor, Zalepa, to his credit, has been consistent in how he has directed the municipality. And taken a lot of heat for it.

Editorially, this newspaper disagrees with a great many of the Zalepa council's decisions.

Council's insistence on a laissez-faire approach when people or businesses violate the rules ("negotiate, don't litigate"), can work in some instances, but in many others the town is simply being walked all over.

Wineries ignoring bylaws without penalty or build-



Proposed highrise towers at White Oaks are just one of the contentious developments facing Niagara-on-the-Lake.

ers carrying on without required permits are two of the more egregious cases in which the tail has wagged the dog.

In contrast, it seems council probably did the right thing in settling with developer Rainer Hummel's company.

Hummel Properties Inc. scored a generous \$1-million payday with its suit sparked by the questionable actions of then-mayor **Betty Disero** and her council back in 2018.

That wasn't the only out-of-court settlement the town made, but it was the biggest by far.

In addition, Hummel made the news via his severance of a historic property on Queen Street and his ongoing plans for his estate at the corner of Mississauga and Queen.

Marotta, a man loathed by many in NOTL who only

know him by reputation, builds first-class wineries, but seems unconcerned with appeasing opponents of his Rand Estate or Parliament Oak projects.

We can't wait to see how folks will view whatever Marotta envisions for the former Mori Gardens property in Virgil.

Good, bad or anywhere in between, no matter what the man does, he makes headlines.

David Jones of 124 on Queen Hotel and John Hawley, the man who brought the Village to life, move more quietly than some industry titans but both have made big statements with the projects they built.

We expect to see more from Jones downtown, while Hawley's company is nearing completion of the Village, some two decades after the project began.

Together with Marotta's nearby Stone Eagle winery, Jackson-Triggs and Stratus, the Village has redefined the entrance to Old Town.

Another life-changing gateway development on the horizon remains **White Oaks'** plan for multiple towers along the QEW in Glendale.

That project seems stalled, at least for now, maybe forever. It's awaiting permission from Transport Canada because the towers could interfere with flight paths to Niagara District Airport. That's even before Ford's grand scheme to boost airport traffic. Stay tuned.

A year ago at this time,

while there had been a loud public outcry about some council decisions, there was no well-organized, cross-town group prepared to stand up "for the people," to quote Premier Doug Ford's tired old slogan.

Enter the NOTL Residents Association, with the focus on "Our town, our future."

Led by an all-star cast, including former councillors **Stuart McCormack** and **Norm Arsenault**, Glendale's **Steve Hardaker**, engineer **Ron Simkus**, **Andrea Leja**, **Betty Ann James** and **Peter Neame**, the association is building support and momentum heading into a municipal election year.

Uber-organized, professional in its approach and thorough in its research, this group aims to push back on issues and hold town power-brokers, including developers, to account.

It's admirable what its members are doing — and much-needed.

The big unanswerable question, however, is, with Ford already loosening the rules around development and pushing a pro-build agenda, will what "the people" have to say matter one iota?

Or, will builders and developers have free rein to "build, baby, build" here in NOTL and everywhere else in the province?

The future of places like Niagara-on-the-Lake hang in the balance.

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New hotels, settlements, Trump and an election

Continued from Front Page

And residents no doubt will continue to let their feelings be known.

But that's not all that made news here in 2025. We also endured federal and provincial elections, Trump trade wars, a polar vortex and scorching summer temperatures. And the vandals who repeatedly cut down the Virgil speed camera remain a mystery.

Here are some of the biggest and best stories of the first six months of 2025.

JANUARY

Jan. 9 edition: A new hotel located planned for the Garrison Village plaza beside Shoppers Drug Mart will be part of the **Hyatt Hotel** family's line of boutique hotels, the project's developer announces. Set to open in spring 2026, the Clayfield will have 60 rooms and 42 vacation rental apartments.

A fixture in Old Town for more than 20 years, **Willow Cakes & Pastries** decides to close its storefront operation and focus on online and mail-order production. A Willow café inside Regal



The NOTL Icewine Festival kicks off a year chock full of news.

Florist & Garden Centre in Virgil proves to be a popular option for Willow's longtime fans.

Columnist Brian Marshall says the Town of NOTL has had a **Climate Change Adaptation Plan** for nearly three years but has not implemented any of the action plans it calls for.

Jan. 16: Housing prices in Niagara-on-the-Lake, like many other communities, are in the stratosphere and "affordable housing" is a buzz phrase embraced by many politicians. When it approved Glendale's secondary plan in January,

town councillors discussed the need for more affordable homes in NOTL. It's unclear how those sentiments might translate into reality.

NOTL's popular (with some) on-again, off-again **temporary patio program** is on again. For now. But in March council cancels it and on April 29 councillors unanimously vote to kill the program.

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa steps into the lion's den in St. Davids to host the first of a series of open house sessions. And he gets an earful from people opposed to the region's

planned roundabout in the village.

Jan. 23: The first weekend of the annual **Icewine Festival** is a chilly one. And area farmers, concerned about the deep freeze accompanying the polar vortex that is blanketing Ontario, warn that the extreme cold could affect grape buds.

The town settles a dispute with developer **Rainer Hummel**, allowing him to divide a historic property at 187 Queen St. into two properties. Heritage advocate Gracia Janes is among those extremely critical of

council's decision.

Jan. 30: In the wake of the return of Donald Trump to the White House, **Premier Doug Ford** calls a snap election for Feb. 27, claiming he needs the new mandate to go up against Trump. Few buy his schtick but they re-elect Ford anyway.

In statements delivered in a St. Catharines courtroom, relatives of 84-year-old **Nestor Chemerika** express their profound sorrow, anger and grief over his death caused by a hit-and-run driver. NOTL native Richard Alan Moore, then 38, pleads guilty to the criminal charge of failing to stop at an accident causing death. Later in the year he will be sentenced to 11 months in jail.

The Ontario Land Tribunal rejects developer **Solmar's** appeal of an earlier ruling regarding plans for the Rand Estate. The tribunal had said Solmar's plans "do not represent good planning in the public interest."

FEBRUARY
Feb. 6: Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa's latest **open house**

again attracts residents who are unhappy with the way he and council are handling NOTL's affairs. Many complain their concerns are being ignored.

With Donald Trump's threatened **tariff war** looming, NOTL business operators are bracing for fallout, but some, like grocer Tony Hendriks say consumer are pushing back and are trying to buy Canadian-made products — or at least not purchasing items from the U.S.

Town chief administrator **Marnie Cluckie** left for the bright lights of Hamilton in December 2023 and the town has been unable to replace her more than 13 months later. Some candidates who were offered the job have turned it down.

Feb. 13: Doug Ford campaigns in NOTL, stopping at the Niagara District Airport, where he promises increased border security and says the province will give the Shaw Festival \$35 million to help rebuild the Royal George Theatre.

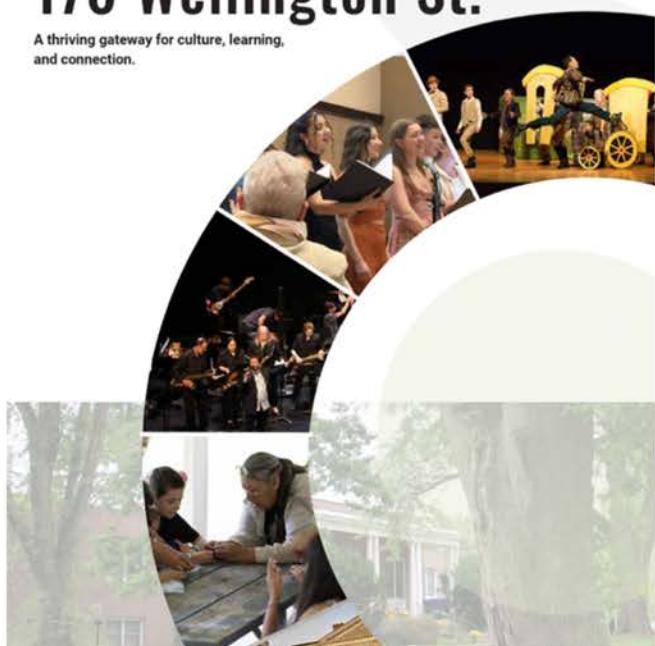
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Vandalism, Royal George plans

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seeing an alarming spike in **flu cases**, with a growing number of patients requiring hospitalization — including several who are in intensive care.

Forget about a **real estate boom** in time for the traditional spring housing market, warns columnist Garth Turner. Not going to happen. So, be patient.

Feb. 20: A \$100,000 donation from the Wise Guys Charity Fund will help Niagara-on-the-Lake's **Red Roof Retreat** with major expansion plans, says executive director Steffanie Bjorgan.

"Dragons' Den" star **Arlene Dickinson** is on hand for the annual Keystone Awards, which honour a number of NOTL entrepreneurs, including John and Adam Hawley, builders of the Village residential and commercial development in Old Town.

The Lake Report once again wins more awards than any other publication, taking home 19 prizes in the Ontario Community Newspapers Association's annual contest.

With her sights set on the Olympics, NOTL swimmer **Peyton Leigh**, 17, is taking her talents to the University of Miami, where she'll compete for the Hurricanes.

Feb. 27: A wave of **auto vandalism** appears to sweep across NOTL as numerous vehicles are damaged in driveways and at the Pillar and Post hotel over the previous few weeks. As well, thieves broke into several cars and stole valuables. Police are investigating.

The Wayne Gretzky Estates winery, owned by Andrew Peller Ltd., takes some heat, especially on social media, over the Great One's appearance at Donald Trump's victory party. While some people call for a boycott of the winery's products, others think it's no big deal.

MARCH

March 6: Incumbent New Democrat MPP **Wayne Gates** sweeps to re-election, taking nearly 55 per cent of ballots cast in the provincial election. Gates beat his



THE WILD WEST OF WINE

Bylaw bypass: Does zoning matter?

How a farm winery isn't following the rules, bylaw enforcement is practically non-existent and competitors are getting frustrated



Top: NOTL women gather for a photo to celebrate International Women's Day. The gathering has become a Lake Report tradition and will happen again in 2026. **Bottom:** A Lake Report investigation exposes serious flaws in NOTL's bylaw enforcement which has allowed a winery to flout the rules and operate illegally.

nearest opponent, Ruth-Ann Nieuwesteeg, by almost 11,000 votes.

Seven NOTL residents — Steffanie Bjorgan, Tony Chisholm, Lt.- Col. (Ret.) Al Magnacca, Joe Pillitteri, Dorothy Soo-Wiens, Art Viola and Peter Warrack — are awarded the **King Charles III Coronation Medal** in a ceremony in Niagara Falls. MP Tony Baldinelli presents the medals.

There's no municipal election in 2025 and **town taxes** soar almost 8 per cent, increasing about \$112 on an average home assessed at \$546,000. With an election coming in 2026, many residents hope for a smaller hike down the road.

March 13: As The Lake Report marks **International Women's Day**, NOTL women offer a defiant "elbows up" in the wake of Trump's tariff war. Women gathered in Simcoe Park for an annual group photo to mark the occasion.

In a remarkable fiscal turnaround, the **Shaw Festival** goes from a \$5.7-million loss a year ago to a \$768,000 surplus, thanks in large part to a record \$12 million in private funding

and donations.

Vineland Growers, a major agricultural co-op on East and West Line, unveils plans for an expansion of its operations. The co-op sells about \$120 million in fresh Niagara fruit annually.

March 20: Amid environmental concerns, NOTL councillors approve a draft plan for a 28-acre **industrial subdivision** on Townline Road in Glendale. The project still needs final council approval once all conditions are met.

Carter Simpson, 31, wins two bronze medals and a fourth-place finish in the 2025 Special Olympics World Winter Games in Italy.

The **U13 NOTL Wolves** rep team wraps up its season with a runner-up finish in the Niagara District Hockey League championship. The Wolves lost two extremely close games to the champions, the Halldemand River Kings.

Marathoner **John Bobrel** earns the Six Star medal, a rare sports award honouring runners who compete in the world's original six major marathons: Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago, New York and Tokyo. The 68-year-old,

retired from his career as head electrician at the Shaw Festival, ran the Tokyo race on March 2.

March 27: "The Wild West of Wine," an investigation by The Lake Report, finds that the **Ferox by Fabian Reis** winery appears to be operating in violation of town bylaws, bringing NOTL's winery zoning requirements and enforcement practices into question.

A judge refuses to throw out a \$2-million **defamation suit** filed by developer Benny Marotta against a NOTL man who made critical comments about him on social media. In late May, Stewart Hall's lawyers ask the Court of Appeal to dismiss the case, saying the presiding judge made several serious errors.

Is the third time the charm? After PM Mark Carney calls a **snap election**, Liberal Andrea Kaiser will face off against Tory Tony Baldinelli for the third time when NOTLers go to the polls on April 28.

APRIL

April 3: About six weeks after making a campaign promise to give the Shaw Festival \$35 million for the **Royal George Theatre** restoration, Premier Doug Ford sends Tourism Minister Stan Cho to town to again commit to delivering the goods. The government shuts down Queen Street to stage a made-for-the-media ceremony outside the theatre — on April Fool's Day.

After a story in The Lake Report lets the community know that **Bikes for Farmworkers** desperately needs bicycles to refurbish for seasonal workers, dozens of two-wheelers roll into the old Virgil public school to fulfil the need.

April 10: The province plans to expand its "**strong mayor powers**" to smaller municipalities, including NOTL, a move that would allow the lord mayor to unilaterally do things such as appointing a chief administrator, proposing the municipal budget and vetoing some bylaws.

Tourism NOTL plans to spend heavily on marketing the town to visitors, with

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Glencairn destroyed, federal election, hotel tax

Continued from Page 5

\$400,000 earmarked for advertising and promotion. Almost half of that total could be spent on media trips and so-called influencers.

With 40 wins and only two losses all season, the NOTL Wolves U18 rep team had hopes of winning a provincial championship as they headed to Georgetown for the Ontario Minor Hockey Association finals. The Wolves played well but came up short by the narrowest of margins, but still had a phenomenal season overall, said coach Adam Whyte.

April 17: The historic **Glencairn Estate** on the Niagara River Parkway in Queenston is destroyed by fire. A news photo published by The Lake Report shows a large red gas can near the scene and investigators later say that arson is suspected in the blaze.

Drawings depicting the future **Clayfield hotel** and new Foodland grocery store in the Village plaza in Old Town are released. Some residents are critical of the hotel's curved glass



This photo by Doug Munkley sparked an arson investigation because of the visible gas can. Police determined the building was purposely set ablaze.

and concrete look, saying it looks like an airport terminal.

It seems no one wants to take on the challenge of being NOTL's **chief administrator**. Well over a year after Marnie Cluckie left for Hamilton three possible successors have all rejected offers to join the town. The search continues.

NOTL senior **Margot Devlin** completes her 20th marathon, this time run-

ning through the cobblestoned streets of Paris. And for good measure, while she's in Europe, she will race on April 27 in the London Marathon for the sixth time.

April 24: The Ontario Land Tribunal issues a final order dismissing developer Solmar's appeals related to plans for the **Randwood Estate**. In October 2024, the tribunal ruled that Solmar's proposal for a

172-unit subdivision on the estate required significant revisions before approval could be granted.

Easter came late this year and the annual Kinsmen and Niagara Nursery School **Easter egg hunt** outside the NOTL Community Centre was a huge hit. It also raised about \$15,000 for the nursery school.

The **federal election campaign** is winding down and candidate signs are everywhere, and mostly where they are not allowed. NOTL only allows signs on private property but as a story in The Lake Report shows, most signs are on public land. The town has removed a few signs but is taking an "education first" approach instead of punishing offenders.

MAY

May 1: Conservative **Tony Baldinelli** is victorious over Andrea Kaiser for the third time, outpolling his Liberal challenger and cruising to victory in the snap federal election called by PM Mark Carney.

Council revises rules for how revenue from the **municipal accommoda-**

tion tax, with all funding in 2025 and 2026 restricted to town-led tourism infrastructure projects. Starting in 2027, the new rules mean 20 per cent of the tax windfall will go to town infrastructure projects, 20 per cent for a new grant program for public and town-led projects under \$100,000, and 60 per cent for grants to projects over \$100,000.

A decade of songs, stories and standing ovations fills the NOTL Community Centre as the **Yellow Door Theatre Project** celebrates 10 years of bringing youth theatre to town.

May 8: Terrible weather wreaks havoc on the opening weekend of the viewing the millions of blooms at the **TASC Tulip Pick Farm** in rural NOTL. Heavy rain, mud, cars stuck, frayed tempers and long traffic jams spoiled what organizers had hoped would be the debut of a positive new attraction.

The town decides to use more than **\$1.3 million** in municipal accommodation tax revenue to reconstruct part of Mississauga Street, including the road, storm

sewers and better street lighting.

Is NOTL still "wine country"? With dozens of wineries, the answer is yes, but Tourism NOTL sparks controversy in some quarters by dropping the words "wine country" from its new tourism strategy.

May 15: About 300 people fill the auditorium at the community centre as the **NOTL Residents Association** officially holds its first public gathering. The group aims to create a unified voice for residents, encourage reasonable development and advocate for the interests of residents.

The **Niagara District Airport** is preparing for major upgrades and looking at ways to fly more travellers to more places in Canada and North America — but officials caution it's still early and they need public feedback to shape the next 20 years.

It's still considered a pie-in-the-sky idea by many, but **Hoverlink Ontario** has taken a big step forward by securing docking access

Continued on Page 7

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10
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School crowding, library bash, irrigation, E. coli

Continued from Page 6

near Toronto's Billy Bishop Airport. The service, to depart from Port Weller, is still at least two years away from launching.

May 22: Virgil Stampede organizers deliver another spectacular holiday weekend extravaganza as huge crowds turn out — and the Virgil Business Association event raises more than \$100,000 for charity.

Councillors respond to criticism that they've mocked residents and sometimes appear to be using their phones in the middle of meetings. They say the claims are unfair and that councillors respect constituents.

A new seasonal kiosk on Queen Street is helping the **NOTL Ambassadors** better connect with people and promote what the town has to offer, says Laurie Harley, one of the leaders of the program.

May 29: The traffic camera near Crossroads Public School returned but it didn't last long. Vandals, who have never been identified, cut it down again, for the umpteenth time.

Council agrees to consult



Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa reads to a group of kids at the NOTL library's 225th anniversary celebration.

with stakeholders over density limits and cottage rental numbers, after a lengthy debate about the state of the **short-term rental industry** in town and its impact on the community.

The **Niagara Thunder-hawks** hosted its annual minor lacrosse tournament and all four NOTL teams made it to the finals, with the U13 team winning gold thanks to a 10-4 win over St. Catharines.

Before the **Bank of Canada** governor decides whether to raise or lower the key short-term interest rate, he hears from a panel of experts, including NOTL economist Ted Carmichael.

JUNE

June 5: A fifth portable is coming to **St. Davids Public School** in the fall as enrolment keeps climbing — and some parents say enough's enough — it's time the school board stepped in to balance the load with nearby schools.

The Niagara Foundation is raising \$1 million to preserve and restore **the Wilderness**, a historic property at 407 King St. in NOTL. The next phase of the project will involve clearing overgrowth, removing invasive species and hazardous trees, and restoring the grounds.

Gleeful kids line up at **Crossroads Public School's** annual home show

and fun fair for the chance to dunk principal Kate Fish. It's one of the highlights of the weekend event.

Playing in the Business Women's league, Erin Howe-Hull notches the first **hole-in-one** of the season at the NOTL Golf Club, sending her drive on the 167-yard par-3 ninth hole right into the cup. "It was all very exciting," she says later.

June 12: NOTL is considering expanding the **heritage conservation district** around many buildings in the area of Queen and Picton streets. The aim would be to preserve the historical look and feel of that part of town and protect it from significant alteration.

For the first time, the annual **Ride to Conquer Cancer** starts in NOTL as 400 cyclists pedalled from Peller Estates to Hamilton and back, raising a record \$20.6 million for cancer research.

Members of the **Polish community** gather to remember 26 soldiers who died of influenza at Camp Kościuszko in NOTL more than 100 years ago. They are buried in a section of St. Vincent de Paul's cemetery that is officially Polish ter-

ritory and known as Haller Army Cemetery.

The NOTL Public Library holds a big bash to kick off celebrations of its 225th anniversary. Among the wide range of activities, Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa was on hand to read to children.

June 19: Irrigation systems are the lifeblood of the farms that produce major crops in NOTL and they're badly in need of upgrading. But Niagara Region has earmarked up to \$500,000 to help NOTL farms, an amount that will be "transformational," says Coun. Erwin Wiens.

No one really likes **speed cameras** and someone seems to have a real hate on for the one near Crossroads Public School — it's been chopped down twice in the past two weeks. And by next week it will be cut down again.

Most people he talks to are unaware of the details regarding the planned expansion of Shaw's **Royal George Theatre**, writes columnist Garth Turner. Many are shocked when the find out about the sheer size of the new building, he says. In the coming months,

the project sparks a lot of loud public debate.

June 26: Finally. After a 17-month search for someone to step up and fill the Town of NOTL's top administrative role, the municipality hires former councillor and fire chief **Nick Ruller** for the role.

With Canada Day and the Cherry Festival just around the corner, the 40th annual **Strawberry Festival** kicks off summer and some 5,000 people flock to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church for bountiful berries, a barbecue and delicious shortcake.

Temps hit the high 30s and swimmers try to cool off in Lake Ontario. However, NOTL's only monitored beach, at **Queen's Royal Park**, is unsafe due to high E. coli levels. But no signs warn beach goers to stay out of the water. They'll only find out if they check Niagara Region's website. As an investigation by The Lake Report analyzing summer-long testing data will show, the water will be unsafe for most of the season. And in July, it was safe on only 10 of 31 days.

Next week: A look at the headlines from July to December.

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Hummel steps up to help soccer star

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Janice Dodd's family, including her 12-year-old son Christian, received an early Christmas surprise that highlighted holiday spirit.

On Dec. 18, the family learned through team assistant coach Shannon Danku that Rainer Hummel of Hummel Properties Inc. had donated around \$1,910 to them. The donation, combined with the family's own funds of about \$1,600, covers Christian's registration fees for the upcoming soccer season.

Christian plays for the Niagara Falls Football Club under-13 competitive team. Janice has been seeking sponsorships to help cover costs for her son and his teammates since December.

Hummel said he responded after reading an article published in The Lake Report about her sponsorship efforts.

"Our family has been supporting little kids' soccer in Niagara-on-the-Lake for decades," he said, adding it was "not complicated" to decide whether or not to support the Dodd family.

Youth soccer is a cause that Hummel said is dif-



Thank you Mr. Hummel for your sponsorship. Our family and especially me, are very grateful for supporting us. And merry Christmas and a Happy New year!

From Christian, Dodd and family



To: Mr. Hummel

ficult for the organizations to find funding for, which is a big reason they tend to support it.

Christian and his mother said they were thrilled by the news.

"I felt awesome," said Christian. "I felt very grateful this is happening."

Competitive sports can cost families thousands of dollars, and Janice said she was hoping to ease that amount for her family and others on the team.

Soon after the article was published, Danku told her it was already generating interest and advised her to "stay tuned." A few days later, Danku said a potential donor wanted to help. That donor was Hummel.

"(It's) such a relief for us," said Janice. "We promise our kids, 'Don't worry about anything, just do

their best.' This makes us keep(ing) our promise."

Janice said her goal after the article was published was to continue collecting sponsorships for the rest of the team. She said she had already secured support from Fine Estates and TASC Tulip Farms and hopes to attract more sponsors.

"I know that some of the team members, they are less fortunate," she said. "Anything that comes together will help."

She said she hopes to continue sponsorship efforts for future seasons as well.

Janice said she has spoken with Hummel since receiving the donation. She said he told her he has been involved in other sponsorship initiatives and that the article motivated him to help give Christian an

The Dodd family received a pleasant surprise when Rainer Hummel helped cover 12-year-old Christian's soccer fees for his upcoming season. Christian wrote this letter to Hummel in thanks. SUBMITTED

opportunity to play sports, something he did not have growing up.

She said she hopes Hummel can attend one of Christian's games in the Niagara region this summer. Hummel echoed this to The Lake Report.

Christian said having his fees covered allows him to focus on soccer.

"I feel a lot more focused on what the goal is," he said.

Christian is currently playing pre-season games with Niagara Falls Football Club. The league's regular season begins in May. He said he is enjoying spending time with his teammates.

Further sponsorship inquiries can be directed to the team's coach, Shannon Danku, at coachshannon-danku@outlook.com.

daniel@niagaranow.com



New Foodland grocery store opens its doors Jan. 29

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Big changes are coming to the Garrison Village neighbourhood this year, and it all starts with the opening of a new grocery store at the end of this month.

Foodland, a grocery store chain under the Sobeys umbrella, is set to hold its grand opening at the Village Centre, 111 Garrison Village Dr., on Jan. 29.

Store owner Lindsey Bridgeman said the opening has been a long time coming.

"It's getting really exciting around here," she said. "We're putting in the final details in store right about now."

In the weeks leading up to the opening, Bridgeman said staff are stocking shelves and preparing the store's departments.

The first few weeks after opening will be special, said Bridgeman, who previously



While it doesn't yet bear the Foodland name, this building is set to open as a chain of the Sobeys-owned grocery store in Garrison Village later this month. DAN SMEENK

managed a Sobeys store in Niagara Falls.

"You can expect a really exciting event" at the grand opening on Jan. 29, she said.

The new grocery store is part of a bevy of new developments coming to the Village in the future: the neighbourhood is expected to see the opening of the Clayfield Hotel, with 60 rooms and 42 vacation rental apartments behind the hotel, and Clayfield

Commons, a major commercial development.

Both projects are slated to be completed by this spring.

Adam Hawley, vice-president of Traditional Neighbourhood Developments, is the landlord for the new Foodland store, along with his father, John Hawley and David Feldberg of Stratus Vineyards.

He is also behind the development of the hotel and the commons that is set to come to the Village.

He said he would personally be coming to the store to do his grocery shopping and was a fan of how Sobeys and Foodland do business.

"Sobeys and Foodland were fantastic to work with," he said. "They were collaborative all along the way."

Residents were generally excited about a new grocery store coming to town.

Neera Kapoor lives in Garrison Village and said

she's looking forward to its opening, though she'll wait to see if it becomes her go-to grocery spot.

"The first day it's going to be really busy," she said. "I'm sure everybody would love to see it."

Irene MacKenzie lives on Lakeshore Road and she thinks the new store is "wonderful." She said that easier parking would make getting groceries a more pleasant experience.

Jane Shrubbs, who lives in Old Town, said she does her grocery shopping in Niagara Falls doesn't really have an opinion. Though she said she likes the Sobeys that she's familiar with.

Foodland will offer special treats throughout opening weekend and in the weeks that follow. Planned activities include in-store giveaways such as gift cards, offers and food samples, as well as radio stations broadcasting on site.

"We're still working on the details on some of the

other things but that's kind of the gist of it, giveaways, sampling," she said.

Bridgeman said she does not yet have details on specific food deals but noted there will be Scene Plus offers, including grand opening promotions.

The store will employ about 75 people.

Bridgeman said she hopes residents will appreciate the finished store, particularly its focus on working with nearby producers.

"Once it's done, it's going to be very beautiful," she said.

"I just want to have friendly service, and I really like to focus on local. That's really my specialty."

The store held a launch event in November 2024.

Foodland will be open daily from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. It will join two Independent Grocer stores in Old Town and Virgil as grocery options in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

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#58: When your birthday is approaching, rather than accept gifts, create a 'go fund me' or 'special cause' ask on Facebook and invite friends and family to donate rather than getting you a gift.

This tiny column gives tips to help promote kindness in our lives and spread joy and happiness.



Contributed by Patty Garriock

“More than anything, I must have flowers, always, always.” - Claude Monet

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Family time tobogganing

This winter's been generous with the powder so far, making it perfect for all kinds of outdoor activities, including tobogganing. At Browns Point on Jan. 4, three-year-old Aidan Andrews goes down the hill with his mother, Aleigh Andrews Burns, while the family watches, cheering them on. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Opinion

First the Fence, then the flood



THE TURNER REPORT

Garth Turner
Columnist

In the fading light, a few hours before Christmas, the Fence went up.

The barrier was expected. But not the messages. The branding. The slogans. “We build differently,” it said beside the name of the builder, the architect, the consultants and, of course, the Shaw. In short order, Victoria Street looked like another condo alley in the Big Smoke, a mall wall in suburbia or Brampton’s latest industrial park.

But this was Old Town, where the reality of a major big-box construction project has become instantly apparent.

“Out of simple respect for our traditional and historic area,” said Sue Chapman, whose home backs on the site of the Royal George project, “delaying this blatant barrier until after Christmas day would have been more appropriate.”

Across the street, Maria Vaneva watched in disdain.

“We’re trying very hard not to be upset and spoil the joyous moments of the holiday season with this totally wrong project,” she told me. “My heartfelt comments



Promoting Shaw and the Royal George builder, this construction fence in Old Town has saddened residents.

GARTH TURNER

are that what is planned to happen will forever change the beauty and character of this town that we love so much and it is already visible ... with the ugly advertising fence! So very disappointing from such a ‘reputable’ organization as the mighty Shaw Festival. It is very sad that destruction of the paradise is allowed to proceed...

Soon the historic buildings behind the chain-link — some dating to the 1880s — will be razed. The excavators will move in. Then the erection of a 55,000-square foot complex with a six-storey height and loading docks where gables now exist as the Shaw Festival pushes ahead with a massive new build that no private sector developer would ever be allowed.

Council caved. Every single heritage rule and restriction will be broken by this project. But just before the holidays came clarity on why this destruction and refacing of

NOTL’s signature street is being allowed.

The province’s Destination Niagara strategy aims to double the tourist traffic around us “by unlocking the full potential of the Niagara region as a world-renowned tourism destination.” The Shaw’s planned Royal George mega-theatre is a key part of that, with Ontario’s \$35 million contribution a highlight of the strategy.

If you build it, they will come.

But wait. Are we ready? Do we know what lies in store?

The burgeoning local residents’ association is wary — and worried — even though the new casinos, zip lines and theme parks will be concentrated down at the Falls. They may get most of the action, says NOTLRA czar Stuart MacCormack, but we’ll see the tax increase.

“This puts extra pressure on the infrastructure that already exists,” he says. “And

who’s going to pay? Niagara Falls gets all that casino money and not a dime goes to the region. Who pays for the roads as more tourists drive here? Who’s going to deal with the increased traffic that comes through town? Where’s the benefit to us?”

Besides the swelling Shaw, could this mean a casino here? Maybe at the Pillar and Post?

“I have no idea,” McCormack says. “But one thing we have got to deal with is over-tourism, which does not improve the quality of this town. We don’t need another food shop.”

“We need to take care of the people that are here, who are paying for those roads tourists drive on, for their subsidized parking and more. Yes, we want people to come here. But when you flood a town, you end up in a situation where residents are bearing the cost, and the services change dramatically. You know, there actually used to be a barber here. Not just ice cream.”

By the way, big winds came and blew the Shaw’s ugly barrier down two days after it went up.

“Mother Nature is also mad at the Shaw!” Maria Vaneva messaged me. “The fence has fallen!”

Then the Shaw trucks arrived. Orange sandbags appeared. Back up she went. The show must go on.

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

garth@garth.ca





Canada, a.k.a. Venezuela North?

J. Richard Wright
Special to The Lake Report

Living in Niagara-on-the-Lake for the last 20 years with the U.S. border a stone's throw away, it seems that American policies and actions have, somehow, always been immensely personal. But never more than right now.

With the U.S. president threatening to invade Canada ("annex" is merely a polite word for invade and kill people) and steal our resources and decree that we love him and everything he does, no matter how idiotic or outside the norms of civilized behaviour it is, our sense of security and comradeship has been forever altered.

Now, upon seeing how the United States treats countries such as Venezuela when it plainly desires its resources, there can be little doubt that Canada might be an additional target on Donald Trump's radar.

After all, Canada is rich in several resources that the U.S. needs, such as oil, lumber, aluminum, hydro-electric energy and rare earth minerals. And Trump's actions and statements demonstrate his persistent narcissistic megalomania, while his newly stated "Don Doctrine" replacing the 19th-century Monroe Doctrine signals that he feels Canada should be owned and directed by the U.S.



With Venezuela's sovereignty being targeted by U.S. President Donald Trump, who's said the United States is going to "run" the South American nation, J. Richard Wright says Canada could be next. WIKIMEDIA

In fact, he has repeatedly made the statement: "I can do anything I want. I'm the president of the United States." One has to presume that would include invading Canada to take what he wants. Perhaps even polished granite from our Canadian Precambrian Shield for his grand ballroom.

Which brings us to a pending matter that now rises in importance for our country: the choice that Canada must make between buying American Lockheed F-35 jets, or the Swedish Saab Gripen E jets to replace the aging Northrup Grumman F-18 Hornets currently deployed by our Royal Canadian Air Force.

Consider that with purchase, the U.S. still refuses to transfer the F-35 technology to Canada making us

dependent on a potential invader for the viability of our defense capabilities. Further dependence on the U.S. would be that the F-35 uses a made-in-America GE power plant. And, the American fighters would, of course, be manufactured in America.

In contrast, Sweden and Saab are offering to give us all the required technology to maintain and repair our new jet fighters. In addition, it is now exploring offering a British Rolls Royce engine, further enabling Canada to avoid dependence on a General Electric engine made in the U.S. Finally, Saab is committing to manufacturing the fighters in Canada with potentially 10,000 jobs being created.

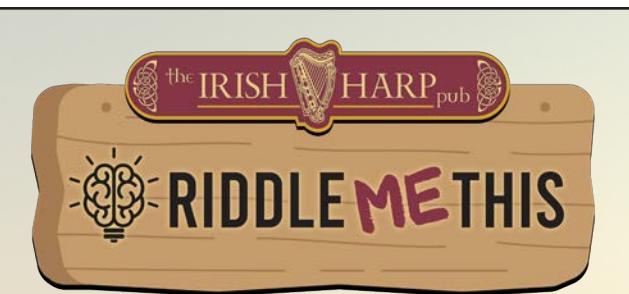
Add in other advantages, such as Gripen E's cost

of about \$22,000 an hour to operate, while the F-35 costs up to \$47,000 an hour to operate. Also, the Gripen E is a hardened (winter) fighter suitable for Canada's north, with capabilities such as being able to take off and land on a 500/600-meter frozen highway, versus the F-35 requiring a full dressing room kept at 80 degrees, filled with mineral water, Dom Perignon, mixed nuts and a Swedish — talk about irony — masseuse.

After all, it's no secret the Lockheed F-35 has been an increasingly temperamental aircraft with premature air frame cracking, arresting hooks not working and a variety of spectacular system failures. According to reports, concerns centered on its availability, maintainability and reliability. One would think that alone would be a deal-breaker.

I hope, for our collective well being, Canada makes a choice that is good for Canada and lets Donald Trump explain to the U.S. aerospace industry how his brilliant, if skewed to the point of schizophrenia, policies are doing so much to help America prosper.

J. Richard Wright is a TV, radio and print writer with three novels — "The Plan," "Torngat" and "Final Approach Menihik" — available for sale on Amazon, or for loan at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library.



*This week's riddle is "Jeopardy!" style.
Category: MAKING SOME BONES ABOUT IT*

The masseter muscle closes the mouth by elevating this jawbone.

Last issue category: CHRISTMAS SONGS

Clue: "It's Christmas time in the city, ring-a-ling (ring-a-ling), hear them ring, (ting-a-ling) — these.

Answer: What are silver bells?

Answered first by: Margie Enns

Also answered correctly (in order) by: Claudia Grimwood, Sue Rautenberg, Susan Hamilton, Bob Wheatley, Jeff Lake, Sylvia Wiens, Wade Durling, Esther VanGorder, Lynda Collet, Howard Jones, Jane Andersen, Katie Reimer, Jim Dandy, Catherine Clarke, Nancy Rocca, Marla Percy, Bob Stevens, Charles Davis, Sheila Meloche, Kimberly Amaral

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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Development control done for right reasons

Dear editor:
Technically, councillor Maria Malvadis may be correct ("Council's million-dollar mistake," Dec. 18, 2025).

The NOTL council which came to office in 2018 likely erred when it enacted two interim control bylaws with the intent of temporarily halting development in the town.

I say "may" because the Ontario Superior Court and the Ontario appeals court differed in their rulings on the case, and the NOTL council elected in 2022 chose not to pursue the matter further.

The new council may have made the right decision from a legal perspective.

It's possible that the likelihood of a successful outcome for the town in court was negligible, and that it made sense from a financial perspective to reach a settlement with Hummel Properties. I'm not a lawyer, and I am not fully aware of the ins and outs of the case.

But I do know this: the 2018-2022 NOTL council consistently strove to protect the natural and built heritage of Old Town, from our tree canopy and green spaces to our historic buildings and streetscapes.

It said no to unacceptable development proposals, didn't hesitate to defend

its decisions at the Ontario Land Tribunal or in court and took residents' concerns into consideration in its decision-making.

The lord mayor and councillors actually tried to live up to the promises they made during the election campaign. Bravo.

Contrast that to NOTL's current council, which seems more concerned about avoiding legal bills than it is about preserving our town's heritage.

A council that did virtually nothing to stop a developer from beginning a major excavation at a building site, despite the fact that the de-

veloper did not have a permit to undertake the work.

A council that encouraged its regional counterpart to waive a significant portion of the development fees associated with that site, at the request of the developer, effectively passing them onto taxpayers.

A council that appears to have been bullied into approving the construction of a new theatre project that will have devastating impacts on NOTL's heritage district.

And the list goes on. I know which council I'd rather have representing my interests.

*Terry Davis
Old Town*



CURATORS: OUR ERAS TOUR

The Niagara Historical Society just celebrated its 130th Anniversary, and there is no way we could have marked this occasion without celebrating our Curators and the fascinating items they have collected over the years. Our feature exhibit, now extended to March 31, 2026, is inspired by Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, so those "Swifties" will notice some references for a little fun.

905-468-3912 | notlmuseum.ca | 43 Castlereagh St.





If development eats up farmland, who will feed us?



ARCHITEXT

Brian Marshall
Columnist

Recently, I had the opportunity to watch the 2024 TVO documentary "Crossroads: Beyond Boom & Bust" focusing on the community of Fergus, Ont.

For those who don't know, Fergus is a storied town with roots that reach back to 1822 when Richard Pierpoint — a freed slave who served in Butler's Rangers during the American Revolution and again during the War of 1812 — established a settlement for Black freedom seekers on his 100-acre land grant.

Scottish settlers began moving in around 1832 and the majority of the town's historic streetscapes are thanks to their stone masons.

However, as historically interesting as Fergus may be, it was not the town's past which caught my atten-

tion but rather, its future.

You see, Fergus — like many other cities and towns in Ontario — is under immense pressure by the provincial government to facilitate new development.

Currently, the town has a population of approximately 25,000, which is anticipated to more than double over the next 25 years.

While the town's mayor, Shawn Watters, suggests they will focus on "growing up in terms of getting physically taller" buildings, he admits there "will be pressure to grow out."

In fact, the Ford government's Bill 97 in 2023 and subsequent inclusions in the provincial planning statement calls for the town's urban development boundaries to expand by 2000 acres.

But here's the rub: Fergus is completely surrounded by class 1 (the most fertile and productive arable soil in the province) agricultural land. So, the 2,000-acre expansion will sacrifice the food production of several high-yielding farming businesses.

And towns and cities across Ontario are being required to expand similarly.

Oddly, the same government that is actively requiring productive agricultural land to be taken out of



Today, houses rise on land where, until recently, an orchard had thrived for decades producing bountiful peach crops to feed Canadians. BRIAN MARSHALL

production simultaneously claims to recognize the value and contribution of agri-business.

In the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness' message released with the 2025 local food report, Trevor Jones writes, "The agri-food industry in Ontario contributes nearly \$51 billion to the province's GDP and employs over 871,000 people — representing one in nine jobs. With 48,346 farms producing more than 200 different commodities, Ontario is a leading producer of food and currently, providing 54 per cent of the food consumed in Ontario."

Interestingly, this is a

significantly greater GDP contribution than many other sectors (including tourism that generates annual revenues of approximately \$17.6 billion less).

Moreover, he suggests that the provincial government has a "10-year goal to increase the production and consumption of food grown and prepared in Ontario by 30 per cent ..."

Perhaps the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing?

On the other hand, perhaps because the real estate, rental and leasing sector (existing property transactions, rentals, imputed rents, etc.) generates approximately \$111.7 billion and

the construction sector (new development and related business activities) revenues amount to roughly \$61.7 billion, the agri-food industry has simply been become a photo-op afterthought in Ford government policy.

It is a fact that in 2016, Ontario was losing 175 acres of prime agricultural land per day. Nine years later, in 2025, that rate of loss has nearly doubled to 319 acres per day or 116,435 acres per year.

Since 2001, Ontario has lost approximately 2.2 million acres of farmland (or over 16 per cent of 2001 total) with the highest rate of conversion of arable land to settlement (urban) occurring in the Golden Horseshoe (most land classed as prime agricultural).

As of 2025, 46 per cent of the food necessary to feed Ontario's population is imported from abroad. In other words, this province is incapable of feeding nearly half of its population.

Should this trend continue, or worse, escalate (as per Ford's current policies), within this decade Ontario will become a net importer of food — dependent on other countries for the basic necessities of life and highly susceptible to the vagaries of international

costs and policies.

Even if we moderate Thomas Sankara's 1984 statement "He who feeds you controls you" to read "If you cannot feed yourself, you are dependent on the goodwill of others," in the last year, U.S. President Donald Trump has amply demonstrated that goodwill — even between the "closest allies and friends" — is a very fragile thing.

Food sovereignty and security must be considered paramount in all government policy. Otherwise, we may find ourselves as a banana republic — the beggars at the table.

Combining the need for new housing and the requirement for food security in public policy will require a bold new direction (see one concept in the March 1, 2022 Arch-i-text column, "A new vision for affordable housing") by a government with guts, vision and a commitment to the people of this province above political expediency.

Unfortunately, that's something that has not been seen in this province for way too many years.

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



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Best time for town to act on future of old hospital is now



David Israelson
Special to The Lake Report

Now that Niagara-on-the-Lake's town council has a professional survey on what people would like for one of Old Town's last public properties, it's time for residents to speak up if they support putting the community first at 176 Wellington St.

The report by NPG Planning Solutions Inc. is clear about one thing — the public wants 176 Wellington to stay in public hands. This should enable council to act decisively to rule out private sector-based ideas that have been floating about, such as condos attached to a "wellness centre" or exclusive

luxury seniors' housing for a privileged few.

That should make it easier for the public and the town to move forward to support the only credible, well-thought-out proposal that has emerged for 176 Wellington so far.

This is the community-focused proposal to turn the site into a "gateway" for education, music, art, Indigenous learning, history and more. It's an idea that already has a financially viable plan, support from NOTL's major not-for-profit organizations and a generous benefactor in the James A. Burton & Family Foundation.

Based on what we know already, council should have the confidence to move forward now. It's not being asked for a final decision, just to issue a request for proposals RFP for the site. An RFP formally invites people and groups to submit ideas that council can then



The former hospital site at 176 Wellington St. FILE

evaluate with fairness, openness, clarity and in a reasonable time.

Issuing an RFP is something council can do right away, which would make it possible to make a decision about 176 Wellington by summer.

Meanwhile, it's important now for those who like the not-for-profit community gateway that the Burton Foundation proposes to look more closely at the benefits the idea has to offer. Those who don't yet know much about the idea can look

at the proposal's website, 176wellington.ca.

The broad outline is already there. The new 176 Wellington would be a keystone site for Niagara-on-the-Lake for residents and visitors alike. Organizations already onboard to be part of the vision include Parks Canada, the Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Niagara, local wineries, Yellow Door Theatre Project, Music Niagara, Bravo Niagara and Niagara Jazz.

The Shaw Festival is also supportive, and keep-

ing the site public would enable Royal Oak Community School to build on its success in keeping elementary education alive in Old Town for more than 10 years.

For everyone, the site is perfect for learning spaces, culinary classes, studios, films and concerts, and the project would protect and preserve the public trees, greenery and pathways.

Most importantly for this history-rich town, the site will be a gateway to our expanding museum and also the headquarters for the Niagara Academy of Indigenous Relations, offering a long-overdue opportunity to broaden understanding of our past and provide insights into building our future together.

Our council will rightly want to know practical details about the foundation-led proposal for 176 Wellington. Is it financially viable? How will traffic

be handled? Could it add parking at the edge of Old Town? If it does include parking, who shares the revenues?

The Burton Foundation promises a robust business plan that will make the case that their vision and generosity are only the start, and that 176 Wellington will always be financially sustainable.

For whatever reasons, Niagara-on-the-Lake has a history of delaying important decisions; here's a chance for council to break that pattern and make Canada's most beautiful town even better.

It's time for council to issue its request for proposal for 176 Wellington St. — and for those who want it to be a keystone for the community to make their voices heard.

David Israelson is a writer and non-practising lawyer who lives in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Santa Ford's lump of coal: return to sender



THE FORUM

Steve McGuinness
Columnist

The Boxing Week sales have ended. It's time to return our unwanted gifts. That includes most of the presents Santa Ford recently delivered to Niagara, with our lord mayor standing dutifully and silently among his supporting elf entourage.

Let's unpack the Ontario Premier's Destination Niagara tourism plan. The centrepiece is upsized casino gambling, blindly ignoring Las Vegas's recent tourism downturn, posting an 11 per cent decline in international traveller arrivals year-on-year, according to data from the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.

For families he promises



Premier Doug Ford during a campaign stop at the Niagara District Airport. FILE

and the Two Sisters Parliament Oak — with the latter engulfed in continuous controversy.

Meanwhile, town council repeatedly squanders chances to control the runaway number of un-hosted short-term rental units, ignoring escalating noise complaints flooding in to our bylaw enforcement officers.

Converting residential properties over to short-term rental use depletes pre-existing housing stock. We lose homes formerly

occupied by permanent residents, while town planners simultaneously approve new zoning to turn vacant fields into new subdivisions.

Employees in lower-paying tourism sector jobs cannot lease affordable units here precisely because it's more lucrative for landlords to rent to tourists on a short-term basis. So employers here must hire non-residents, who commute longer distances, inevitably in private vehicles (given the sad state of our public transit), magnifying environmental damage.

Doug Ford is the same premier who presided over our COVID public health shutdowns and cast himself as "Captain Canada" in his re-election campaign last year. Now he is ignoring the lessons learned about the vulnerability of tourism to trade wars and pandemics.

Why would we want to put more eggs in this same economic basket? Wouldn't our provincial government be wiser to support economic diversification? NOTL may aspire to be Napa North, but we lack their

nearby Silicon Valley.

Mr. Ford also foresees Niagara as a year-round travel destination. But students that normally take these jobs during summer school breaks will be unavailable as staff in other seasons. Hospitality jobs do not pay well enough to lure workers away to better paying jobs in other sectors.

This means we will need to import more labour from outside of Canada. We already rely on foreign workers in our agricultural sector to produce our food. Will they now be serving that same food to tourists as well? Did our premier miss the recent federal directive reducing temporary foreign worker visas?

The most alarming part of his plan is to upsize the Niagara District Airport to handle regularly scheduled commercial jetliner flights. While landing closer to the new Niagara Falls casinos may be more convenient than using larger nearby airports in Hamilton, Buffalo or Toronto, this will impose a huge new environmental toll resting solely on our

town to bear, as the gateway to attractions located outside of it.

The airport's recent master plan update proposed a runway lengthening to 7,500 feet from 5,000 feet to handle narrow-bodied jets. Premier Ford suggested increasing it further, by between 3,000 to 5,000 feet.

Comparatively, the runway length at Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport (our country's ninth-busiest) is less than 4,000 feet. A 10,000-foot-long runway could handle wide-body intercontinental jet flights.

The noise pollution impacts on approach routes over Glendale and Virgil would be intolerable, not only to residents but also to ecotourists here sampling wine in our naturally scenic Niagara Peninsula.

Steve McGuinness, CPA, is retired from a career in financial management on Bay Street. He holds degrees in political science and business administration. He offers reflections on public policy issues within our community.

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Ford's 'Las Vegas North' bid draws support mixed with questions

Dan Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Leaders in Niagara-on-the-Lake are looking to the future with excitement as they anticipate the town will grow to new heights as a tourism destination, thanks to the Ford government's plans to make Niagara the Las Vegas of the north.

However, while the general sentiments among those who spoke The Lake Report was positive, it was not without questions about what the future will specifically entail for NOTL and how it will handle this growth.

The province announced the "Destination Niagara" strategy right before the holidays, outlining plans to make the Niagara region a "world-class destination" for year-round tourism, in order to help Ontario's economy, with more investment visitor attractions, like a theme park and large observation wheel, and more casinos.

While news of the strategy came with no new funding announcements for Niagara-on-the-Lake, it made reference to previ-



Nancy Garlick, left, of Niagara Falls, with Niagara-on-the-Lake resident Kim Downey in front of the Royal George Theatre, which is being rebuilt with \$35 million in provincial funding linked with Destination Ontario. DAN SMEENK

ously announced measures to boost visitation in town, such as the \$35-million investment to renovate the Royal George Theatre.

From a town council perspective, Coun. Erwin Wiens called the announcement "super exciting" and praised the province for recognizing Niagara as a tourist destination, funding the Shaw Festival and exploring improvements to the Niagara District Airport.

However, Wiens raised infrastructure concerns tied to increased tourism, including whether the town might eventually use the old hospital site on Wellington Street for parking.

He said that could become a possibility if tourism grows, particularly

since parking generates municipal revenue. He added he does not believe an influx of visitors would prompt council to reconsider efforts to close Queen Street to vehicle traffic.

"We have to always be constantly looking at our infrastructure, how are we able to handle it?" he said, adding that "progress is inevitable" when it comes to tourism growth and the town must address those challenges.

Wiens said the province's larger focus appears to be on attracting new visitors and attractions to Niagara Falls, which he believes will ultimately benefit NOTL as well.

Jamie-Lynn Jones, manager of Cool as a Moose, a

souvenir store in Old Town, said tourism is central to her business. While she supports the strategy, she hopes more advertising will highlight Niagara-on-the-Lake for visitors who primarily go to Niagara Falls.

"If they could just work on advertising to the tourists in Niagara Falls to all of the different areas in the region I think that would help," she said.

Local residents also expressed support — alongside caution about growth.

Judy McLeod, who lives in Garrison Village, said tourism should focus on attractions such as the Shaw Festival and wineries. She said she worries about NOTL becoming "Niagara Falls 2."

"I'm concerned about the type of tourists we seem to be attracting these days," she said. "The main street has nothing for me anymore. It's all candy bars and ice cream cones. So, it's not a liveable town main street any longer."

Marco Ganassini said he has "mixed feelings" but leans in favour of Destination Niagara plans.

"There's an inadequate

amount of opportunity for younger people in particular," he said, referring to the number of jobs the tourism boost could bring.

He added that he believes the town needs "an improvement in infrastructure," such as in transportation services, to accommodate this growth.

Holmes Hooke, who lives in Chautauqua, said tourism does not play a major role in his daily life. He said the province's plan has both benefits and drawbacks, particularly when balancing small-town living with the "excitement" of areas such as Old Town.

"I'm ambivalent, as they say," he said with a laugh.

Debbie Zimmerman, chief executive officer of the Grape Growers of Ontario, said she's enthusiastic about the strategy.

"I don't see the cons," she said. "We've had great success with some recent investments through the Ontario government into our industry. It's only going to benefit everyone."

Niagara Parks chief executive officer David Adaems also welcomed the announcement, while noting

that some projects tied to Destination Niagara, such as Niagara Takes Flight, a flying theatre ride that opened last summer in the Falls, are already up and running.

Dan Pilon, CEO of the Niagara District Airport, which is seen as a key asset for tourism, said it was "certainly good news" and that it was great to get "broad-based support at the highest levels," but that they "still have to move forward on a funding strategy."

Outside the world of travel and tourism, real estate agent Andrew Perrie said the strategy is unlikely to affect home prices in NOTL if most visitors continue to focus on Niagara Falls.

He said there is limited overlap between tourism in the two municipalities and that, if that remains the case, the housing market would not see major impacts.

"If they're coming to NOTL, they're usually staying in NOTL," he said.

Perrie said the strategy could have a "big effect" on the short-term rental market, with fewer vacancies as tourism increases.

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Family with St. Davids ties remembered after fatal crash

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Nicole Boyer, whose life included important years in St. Davids, her daughters Zoe and Pyper and the family labrador, Jasper, are being remembered following a fatal collision on Highway 11 in northern Ontario on Dec. 21 that took their lives.

Ontario Provincial Police said officers responded around 12:30 a.m. to a two-vehicle collision involving a tractor-trailer and a pickup truck on Highway 11 in Opasatika Township, roughly 1,000 kilometres north of Niagara-on-the-Lake by road.

Four people were in the pickup truck. Three passengers — Nicole, 41, Zoe, 15, and Pyper, 12 — were pronounced dead at the scene, while the driver, her husband, Jason Boyer, 41, was taken to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries. No injuries were reported for the driver of the



Nicole Boyer, left, with her daughters Pyper, middle, and Zoe, right. The three, along with their family dog, were killed in a fatal collision on Highway 11 in northern Ontario on Dec. 21. The family is being remembered for the love, warmth and joy they brought to those around them. SOURCED

tractor-trailer.

The cause of the collision is still being investigated.

In a Jan. 6 email, when asked about weather conditions being a possible factor, acting OPP Sgt. Martin Thibault told The Lake Report there have been no updates beyond the original media release and

the investigation remains ongoing. The Kapuskasing detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police is investigating.

Police are also working with the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario and specialized OPP traffic and collision investigators.

Nicole met Jason while



In the online obituary, Nicole is remembered for her "joie de vivre," her infectious laughter and her deep love of nature.

"She didn't just live life, she was all in," it said. "Whole heart."

She graduated from York University with a bachelor of fine arts and later worked as co-ordinator of emergency care profile at the Red Cross — helping coordinate 1,600 emergency care workers for deployment during COVID-19 operations and natural disasters.

A 12-year-old with a love of animals and dreams of working with them, Pyper was remembered as a "ray of sunshine" and excelled in figure skating and team sports.

She was known for her gentle, happy nature, "except when it came to eating certain vegetables," the obituary said.

"And no amount of cajoling or bribery or threats made a bit of difference. When she made up her

mind, that was it."

Zoe, 15, was a "natural leader" who volunteered widely for the community library. "Generous to a fault," she recently treated her cousins to treats even though she was carefully saving toward a school trip to Greece in 2027, a trip she spoke about often and was excited to join.

"Pyper was her closest friend, and biggest supporter - sibling rivalry and all," the obituary said.

The obituary requests that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made in their memory to Second Chance Pet Network, the Red Cross or Make-A-Wish.

The Kapuskasing OPP asks anyone who witnessed the collision or who has dashcam footage from the area at the time of the incident to contact them at 1-888-310-1122. Anonymous tips can be submitted to Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS) or online at ontariocrimestoppers.ca.

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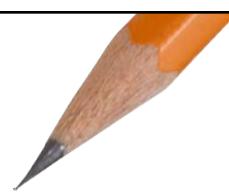


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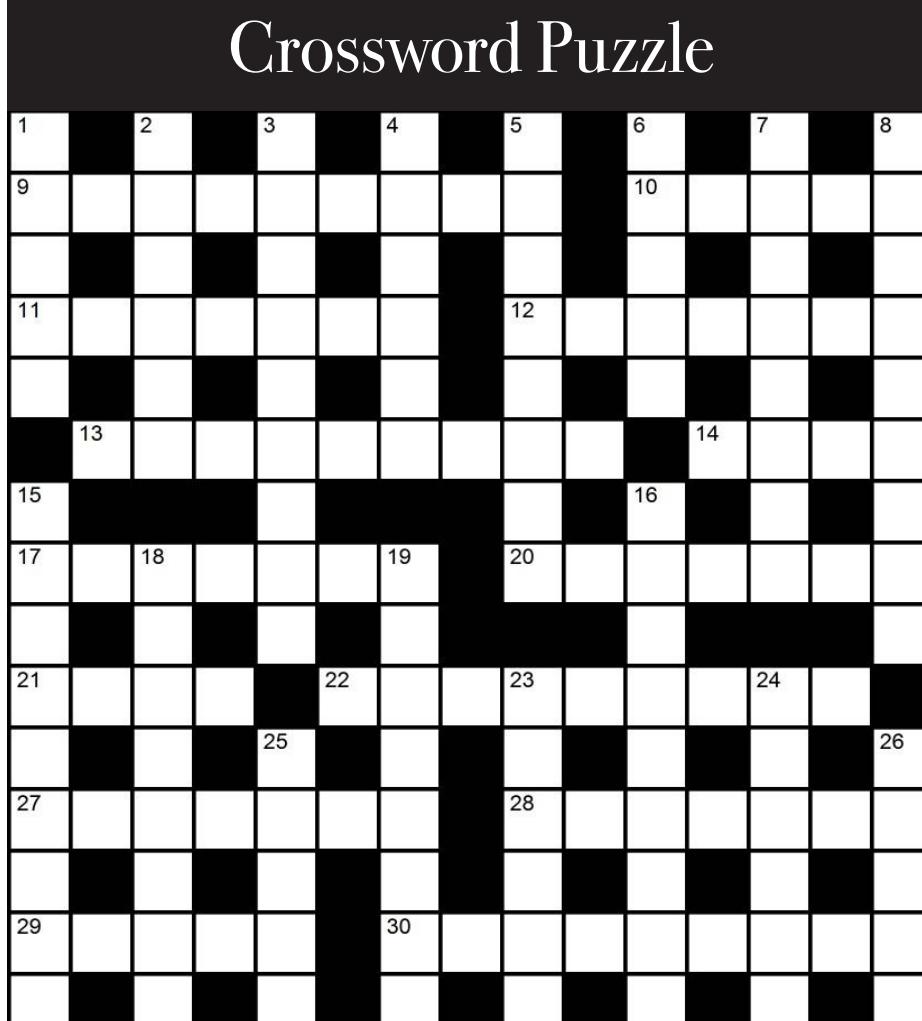
9. Strangle (9)
10. "Steady State" astronomer Sir Fred
--- (5)

11. Creatures (7)
12. Senior Australian politician (7)
13. Deliberate destruction of property (9)
14. Career golfers (4)
17. Six legged creatures (7)
20. Superficial area (7)
21. Short death notice (4)
22. Not here (9)
27. Makes sorrowful (7)
28. Regulate (7)
29. Essentials (5)
30. Genuine (9)

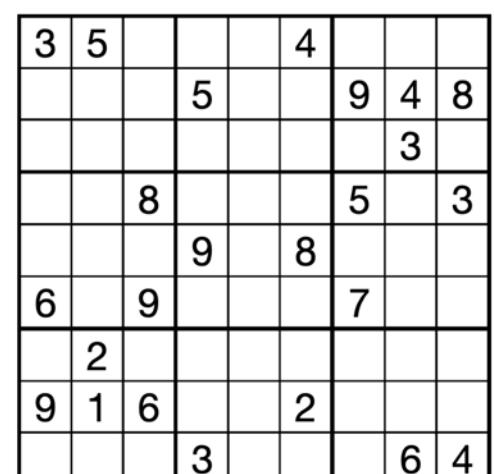
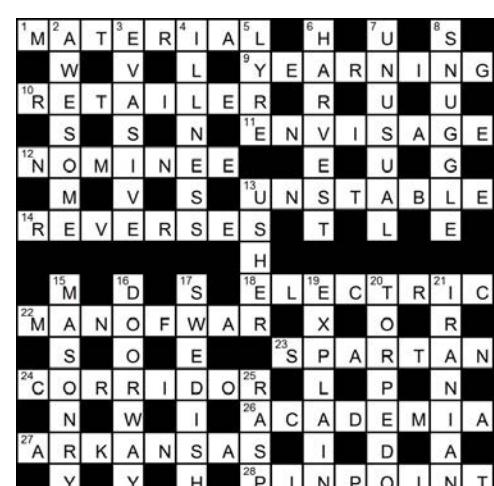
Down

1. Dam across the Nile (5)
2. Second-largest continent (6)
3. Timidity (9)
4. Maiden (6)
5. Continues obstinately (8)
6. Ring (5)
7. Emotional outburst (8)
8. Downcast (9)
15. Luxurious car (9)
16. Northern Russian city (9)
18. Superficial (4-4)
19. Rep (8)
23. Stir to action (6)
24. Something unusual (6)
25. Animal (5)
26. Absence of light (5)

Crossword Puzzle



Last issue's answers



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EXPLORING HISTORY
WITH NOTL MUSEUM



The good ol' hockey game

Niagara-on-the-Lake has always been a community of firsts — the first capital of Upper Canada, the first lighthouse on the Great Lakes, and the site of the first game in the Southern Ontario Hockey Association. But hockey here wasn't just a pastime — if we are to believe local lore, it was also a place for innovation. In those first hockey matches of the 1890s, players battled on outdoor rinks, braving the cold with minimal gear. Scoring disputes were common, since open goal posts often led to arguments over whether a goal counted. After one dramatic match, frustrated players from this Niagara team decided to fix the problem themselves. Around 1894–95, this team is said to have invented the hockey net. Many of the players on this team were fishermen, so it's no surprise the first net was made from an old fishing seine, fastened to the posts, with the bottom edge frozen into the ice to stop pucks from slipping underneath. Innovation didn't stop there. Niagara players on this team are also credited with creating the wide-bladed goalie stick and helping pioneer the long-handled hockey stick, still used today. Whether it's in World Junior tournaments, NHL showdowns or Olympic gold-medal moments, every pass, slapshot and goal on the ice today can be traced back to early hockey played in NOTL.

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AI may make mistakes, but humans aren't perfect, either



Dr. William Brown
Columnist

ChatGPT and equivalent artificial intelligence devices often capture the attention of the public because of the naturalness of the encounters, especially when human users and AI devices chat with each other.

One example of which was recently illustrated in the New York Times by a driver talking to his AI therapist through an iPhone perched on the car's dashboard. Without the video, the conversation could well have taken place in an office between a human therapist and patient.

That's what was so mesmerizing, even shocking, to me about the clip — its very naturalism. As if the driver was talking to a real human therapist who listened, empathized and offered advice when prompted — and which, by tone and content, was almost human.

The content and natural-

ness of the encounter were a product of a computer loaded with a large data base of information in this case about psychotherapy and large language models capable of sounding, well, like you and I — hence the naturalness.

The versions of AI we experience in the form of ChatGPT, and similar products developed by companies such as Google, are far from perfect. They make mistakes and even make stuff up — so-called hallucinations.

Mistakes are usually related to the quality and source of the database, where especially in the case of health care, databases are based on "freely available" information on the internet, which are not checked for accuracy and can be misleading, even wrong.

For medicine, databases should be based on the best information available within quality health-care systems such as Harvard or the Mayo systems where there's some measure of control over the quality of the data, while recognizing that they too make mistakes which might be incorporated in the system.

High-quality health-care systems can also afford to pay for data published in the best not-for-free



Dr. William Brown says AI will far exceed its human creators well before this half century is out with no option for accelerating human intelligence except perhaps by risky gene editing or possibly human-AI hybrids. SOURCED

journals and textbooks. But again, even best sources make mistakes and in some instances in medicine, there may be no "right" answers.

In the public sphere, AI's prowess mastering qualifying examinations in medicine have reached the point where AI regularly matches or exceeds human performance and for mathematics, challenge even the best college-level mathematicians, as AI companies are quick to draw the public's attention to as evidence of their growing prowess in

developing AI.

Some mathematicians criticize AI's success in solving complex problems because sometimes it's not obvious how AI solved the problem.

The same might be said for Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger, whose math may have been excellent, but who sometimes struggled to understand the implications of their mathematical solutions.

One perfect example of this was Einstein's stubborn refusal to acknowledge that his masterpiece — general relativity — predicted an expanding universe, not an unchanging universe as he philosophically much preferred.

In 2025, *Science* and *Nature*, both high profile, high standard science journals, ran several articles on the 100th anniversary of quantum mechanics. Many of the equations which underpin quantum mechanics are highly precise and predictive, yet most physicists in the modern era continue to argue about the meaning of the equations they use every day in the workaday practical world of quantum physics.

The response of some human critics is often to dis-

parage AI because it makes mistakes and hallucinates while ignoring the common tendency of humans to also make stuff up and embellish their own stories and claims. But it's important to remember that AI is in its infancy.

Sure, there are lots of shortcomings and even mistakes with AI, but given improving databases and computational methods, AI continues to rapidly evolve. The potential for AI to do so is enormous.

Steven Weinberg, a particle physicist and Nobel laureate, claimed there were limits to human intelligence, at least for individuals. The collective intelligence of groups of humans working on problems is much greater but probably will fall well short of where AI's achievements could be in decades to come and certainly no match for quantum computers once the bugs are worked out.

For now, AI is essential in the worlds of engineering and science. How else could data collected by powerful telescopes such as the Webb and, most recently, Rubin telescopes operate which require analyzing masses of data?

AI and quantum computers may be creatures of human intelligence but

this time around humans have created a form of intelligence, which already exceeds humans intelligence for specific tasks and worryingly is on track to achieving levels of general intelligence exceeding humans.

Constraining AI in the future is a hopeless task. AI will far exceed its human creators well before this half century is out with no option for accelerating human intelligence except perhaps by risky gene editing or possibly human-AI hybrids.

Some see AI as an existential threat for humans now and in the near future. If so, that future can't be controlled by companies, or even countries, without international agreements with enforcement teeth.

Unfortunately, enforceable controls simply aren't possible for tribalistic humans, as we've recently witnessed in our response to climate change and attempts to resolve intractable conflicts like Ukraine, the Middle East and the looming threat of a Chinese forceful takeover of Taiwan.

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.



FEATURED



Ringing in chilly new year in NOTL

A small but determined crowd braved the elements and upheld the tradition of welcoming the new year by gathering at Niagara-on-the-Lake's clock tower cenotaph on Wednesday night. With snow falling most of the day and the temperature plunging well below zero in the evening, many revellers opted to stay warm — and inside. But a few hearty souls ventured out to ring in 2026 at midnight on Queen Street. All the best of the season and a Happy New Year from everyone at The Lake Report!

LINDA ANDERSON-KOZIK

In Memoriam

Karen Madene Gansel



May 25, 1944 – Jan. 7, 2025

You will never be forgotten

Karen (Pratt) was born and raised in Plumas, Manitoba and lived in Niagara on-the-Lake for 35 years.

Mirella DeBon

In loving memory of Mirella DeBon

July 26, 1939 - Jan. 7, 2006

We lost you 20 years ago and not a day goes by that we don't think about you or miss your smile. Those who touch our lives stay in our hearts forever.

Lovingly remembered by Paul and Cathy, Perry and Carrie, Dina, Daniel, Rachel and Matt, Jack, Samantha, Matthew and Gavin.



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- Long term presence in Niagara-on-the-Lake. **Local Right at Home Realty Team Office in NOTL** (Over 6000 in GTA, #1 independent brokerage in the GTA for 10 years**)
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