



The Lake Report

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Niagara-on-the-Lake

IS FORD PLANNING THE CITY OF NIAGARA?



Premier Doug Ford has announced a review of Ontario's regional governments, including the Niagara Region and all of its municipalities. EUNICE TANG/THE LAKE REPORT

AMALGAMATION TALK HAS LOCAL LEADERS WORRIED ABOUT SMALL COMMUNITIES LOSING THEIR IDENTITIES

Richard Harley
Editor

The province's review of regional governments could mean Niagara-on-the-Lake, Niagara Falls and Fort Erie will be forced to amalgamate as the new City of Niagara, area political leaders fear.

Or maybe one giant Niagara metropolis is in the cards.

Whatever happens, the change likely would not take

effect until the next municipal election in 2022, but the decision to create a Niagara super city could come as early as this fall.

The province has launched an extensive review of regional governments across Ontario aiming to cut duplication and find efficiencies. With a report due by summer, local leaders are worried the outcome will be a shotgun-style wedding of small municipalities right

across the province.

Premier Doug Ford's track record of acting quickly, despite opposition, on issues like cutting Toronto council in half, has politicians wondering if Niagara and other regions are next.

While many politicians acknowledge there is plenty of room for improvement to the regional model of government, they are deeply concerned about the creation of a series of super cities roughly along federal and provincial riding boundaries.

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WHISPERS OF A NEW ERA

Future City of Grimsby?
Future City of St. Catharines?
Future City of Niagara?
Future City of Port Colborne?

Mayors across the region put out a message to media saying they support the provincial government in its review, there are no answers as to what might happen. Given the Ford government's quick-acting methods in the past, it's left some mayors questioning whether the review will be as comprehensive as it they believe it should be. Lord Mayor Betty Disero said she's heard "every scenario" out there, but until there is a clear proposal, it's not worth getting into an argument yet. What is clear is mayors across Niagara believe in preserving the identities of their communities.

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Residents, councillors worried about loss of identity

Continued from Front Page

No one yet knows how the review will play out, but interviews with a number of Niagara Region politicians showed they are all hearing a lot of rumblings about large-scale amalgamations.

NOTL Coun. Clare Cameron, the town's deputy mayor, said the idea of one mega city for all of Niagara has also been mentioned.

"I have heard there's a contingent working right now to drum up support for the idea of one Niagara, a single city for all of the Niagara Region. That's not something I support, but I, of course, believe that every local mayor in the Niagara should be willing and ready to work together," she said.

NOTL Lord Mayor Betty Disero said, "I've heard every scenario through the grapevine. Everybody is talking about everything."

In extensive interviews, the mayors of NOTL, Niagara Falls and Fort Erie all said there is deep concern about how quickly the Ford government has acted in the past, especially in chopping the size of Toronto council.

"If I was a betting man, I'd guess that the province is going to look to a common denominator, and they're going to look for one simple approach," Niagara Falls Mayor Jim Diodati said. "And I'd be quite surprised if it doesn't involve a reduction in politicians and some form of amalgamation."

It can be hard for small cities to get "sincere attention" at Queen's Park compared to bigger cities, he added. "That's the big concern. We need to go as one voice. Are there inefficiencies and overlapping? Of course there are."

"But at the same time, there's a move towards super cities," Diodati said.

Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekop also expects fewer politicians will result. "I wish I knew what was in the head of premier, but I don't."

"Obviously the premier is very interested in the number of elected officials, somehow equating fewer elected officials to better government, which I don't believe is accurate. I don't know how you have better democracy by having fewer elected repre-

sentatives," he said.

"But, it's pretty clear that's one of the targets of the premier." He pointed out salary savings from fewer politicians would be minimal since many local councillors make only about \$13,000 a year. Regional councillors earn about \$30,000.

Disero, Cameron and Regional Coun. Gary Zalepa Jr. agreed improvements can be made to avoid duplications in management processes, but don't necessarily think a blanket government should cover the whole region.

Maintaining the local identities of smaller communities would be tough, Disero said, pointing out NOTL's communities have distinct identities, like the rural areas and the urban zones. Those differences already present a challenge to local councillors.

"Whatever happens, we need to maintain the local identities of those neighbourhoods and of the existing municipalities. To try to merge it into one monolithic city I think would not be an appropriate thing to do," she said.

"(The province) is reviewing everything, and everything is on the table. So smaller amalgamations may be the way they go, big amalgamations might be the way they go, or they might just keep the local municipalities."

Zalepa said towns with distinct identities like NOTL often require unique approaches to dealing with planning, development and preservation.

The solution needs to come from the municipalities themselves and not a "top-down order" from the premier, he said.

Cameron echoed that sentiment, noting she was speaking as both a councillor and a resident of NOTL. "I think everybody wants to see a successful future for the Niagara area, I'm just not convinced that amalgamation or elimination of elected officials is the best way to go about that."

Every municipality in Niagara needs to be willing to partner and work together, she added. "We're not competing with each other. We're all in this together."

Amalgamation, large or

small, can create a lot of upheaval.

"I'm really concerned about the potential disruption and loss of identity that could result. The idea that amalgamation or elimination of one particular layer of government can solve all of our challenges I think is a foolish notion," Cameron said.

"I totally appreciate wanting to see governments run as efficiently as possible, however I'm still not convinced the best way to go about that is to reduce the number of politicians. The word politician is often used as a dirty word, but in a democratic system elected representatives are there to represent people."

Zalepa said communities should decide for themselves if they'd like to merge with another municipality and discuss the best options together.

He said he doesn't want to see an end to NOTL. "Can you imagine if there was no Niagara-on-the-Lake? I think that could hurt tourism in Ontario," he said.

Diodati agreed the biggest concern is local identities. "And people want to preserve that," he said.

"However, when you look at past amalgamations, in Niagara Falls, approximately 50 years ago Chippawa was amalgamated into the city of Niagara Falls. Yet today, Chippawa is as distinct and unique as its ever been. They still have a sign, 'Welcome to Chippawa,' same with Stanford Centre in Niagara

“My concern is that at some point, whether it's this year or next year, the wrench will be dropped ... and suddenly municipalities that have existed for generations may simply no longer exist by provincial order, without very much consultation with those communities.”

NOTL TOWN COUN. CLARE CAMERON

Falls. When you go to St. Catharines, Port Dalhousie is as distinct and unique as it's always been."

Diodati noted many other municipalities have amalgamated successfully in the past.

"It doesn't make things



disappear. You end up having a stronger voice when you've got more people collectively working as a group. And nobody wants to lose the distinctive character of different neighbourhoods and towns

being a "bigger voice" with the province and preserving uniqueness.

Mayors across the region met Monday with two provincial representatives who are working on the

water, and are people open to and accepting of changes?"

The representatives asked for feedback, "trying to get a feel for how people are perceiving this, and benefits that can be obtained through governance review and some forms of amalgamation, Diodati said. He acknowledged it's "human nature to be resistant to change."

Disero noted the premier has not given any hints as to what he wants to happen, but, "You can tell by what happened in Toronto that the number of politicians is certainly on the top of mind for him."

"If they amalgamate into one big city, then everyone shares everything in terms of debt and revenue. If they decide that they're only going to amalgamate some areas, again, some municipalities would become one and they would share everything," she said.

Mega-mergers don't necessarily save money, as Toronto discovered.

When the Mike Harris government forced Toronto to amalgamate in 1998, the city ended up with six town halls and six service areas anyway, Disero said.

"So really it was just administered by one big bureaucracy ... It was divided, but together."

Disero, who was on Toronto council when the city's six municipalities were merged, says it's not an easy thing to do. Toronto is "still struggling" to figure out how to preserve the identities of smaller communities while bringing down the cost to taxpayers, she said.

"Having lived through the Toronto experience with amalgamation, we went from sort of six municipalities doing their own thing, to an amalgamated version that made the cost of doing business go to the highest possible cost," she said.

For example, a Scarborough firefighter couldn't sit in the same firetruck as an Etobicoke firefighter unless they were both being paid equal wages.

"Well, the union isn't going to let you go to the lower wage, it's going to go up."

Continued on Page 3



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Mayors expect 'big changes'

Continued from Page 2

And while costs went up, service levels often dropped, she noted.

For example, areas that had twice-weekly garbage collection were levelled to once a week.

"Everybody went to once a week at that point ... and yet the costs to do it went up."

Nonetheless, Disero said she thinks there could be a solution to improve the government structure in Niagara.

"All the politicians agree with trying to do something more streamlined and cost-effective for everybody," she said. "There probably is some duplication in what we all do."

"But the big question is going to be, 'What is the most effective way of providing services?'" Disero said, adding she's interested in the idea of getting private sector businesses involved to help.

"Look at our waste disposal. There are companies out there that can take our waste."

She said the region's mayors need to talk about potential changes and how to get the best prices to make services more cost-effective, which could include a bigger role for private companies.

While Disero is against the idea of mega-mergers, she said provincially subsidized services — like Ontario Works and government housing — probably should not be managed by local municipalities "and should probably stay at a more central location."

"But when you look at issues with respect to planning, what do people want? They want their garbage collected, they want their streets cleaned and their snow removed, and they want their recreation centres open so they can go to them."

"We can all agree that we want what's best for the taxpayers. How we get there is what we've got to sort out with the province."

Cameron said because the Niagara Region has many small municipalities it means there are a large number of elected officials.

"I know there are examples of duplicated areas of expertise between the region and the lower tiers, which

is definitely worth looking at. But my concern is that at some point, whether it's this year or next year, the wrench will be dropped let's say, and suddenly municipalities that have existed for generations may simply no longer exist by provincial order, without very much consultation with those communities."

Cameron imagines there are only a few possible outcomes of the Ford government's regional review.

"Number one is that we're all told at a certain day in the future that Niagara is one city. And that itself could mean lots of different things. It could mean that regional council no longer

exists — maybe just the local area mayors would become representatives on a regional kind of board or council. Maybe the region would no longer exist and local area municipalities would continue to exist, but the mayors would get together every month let's say and co-ordinate services. Maybe the region would continue to exist, but some of the lower tiers would be amalgamated."

"So maybe NOTL would end up amalgamated with St. Catharines and Thorold, or maybe the boundaries would follow provincial and federal riding boundaries and we would get amalgamated with

Niagara Falls and Fort Erie. Maybe the upper tier and lower tier would still continue to exist but the number of elected officials will be cut in half. So does that mean that every municipality runs by-elections?"

"The reason why I think that is possibly significant is because of how the recent reduction of city council members in Toronto went last year. A lot of the justification for that was related to riding boundaries in the city of Toronto. So I'm just wondering, well, if that was the logic applied to Toronto, maybe a similar logic would be applied to the province."

LITTLE LEARNED FROM MEETING

Mayors from across Niagara Region met Monday with two provincial officials conducting a review of regional government.

"They gave me no information," said Niagara-on-the-Lake Lord Mayor Betty Disero. "And that's what was so surprising about it."

She said they asked her how she feels about the current political representation, asked about service providers and wondered where she sees the municipality in 10 years.

"They gave me nothing. They, in terms of where they're headed, basically said they're open to conversations with everyone, and the public, and they're not tied to anything."

Niagara Falls Mayor Jim Diodati is convinced that big changes are afoot.

He said he told fellow mayors, "Change is coming. In what form I'm not certain, but I can tell you that change is coming, and by ignoring it or resisting it, it's just going to be that much more unpleasant."

He warned that if local politicians simply try to sell the province on ideas that benefit the municipalities, "You're going to be very disappointed in the outcome of this, because I think this government has shown its knack for deciding what it wants to do and then following through expediently."

Look no further than Toronto council going to 25 politicians from 47, just prior to the municipal election, he said.

"I believe there's some going to be some major changes in the region, and when we go back to the polls for municipal elections in 2022, things are going to be very different than they are today," Diodati said. "I think there will be a lot less politicians and I think there's going to be major changes to the way the governance is done."

Diodati said Niagara needs a "major overhaul" and he expects the majority of politicians won't be around after 2022.

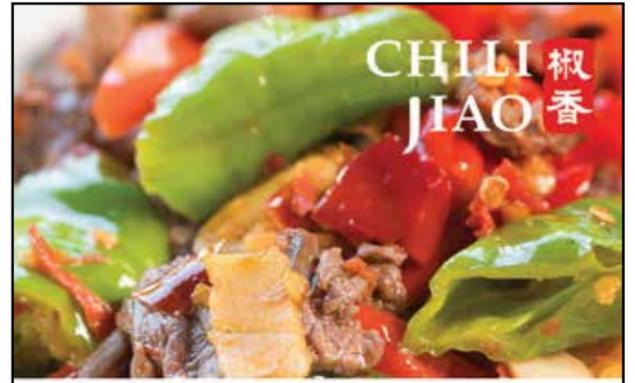
Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekop isn't sure a massive merger of Niagara municipalities is wise. "I just think that we don't have the scale for one city for sure, and we need an opportunity to mature as a region. I mean, the premier can force whatever he wants. Whether that will be good for the residents and business of Niagara is a completely different story, I think."

At Monday's meeting, the provincial representatives said they have come to no conclusions yet, Redekop said. "They're looking at a clean slate with respect to what, if anything, should be done."

"It could mean that the government has already made up its mind and is look for reinforcement from these advisers, or it could mean that they really don't know what they want to do, and they're looking from advice from two very experienced individuals as to what the potential for changes could be."

Disero said the mayors made their concerns known to the advisers.

"I think they heard loud and clear that most municipalities wanted to retain their own identities and that they felt there wasn't adequate scale to be, for example, eliminating the region and just having municipalities."



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The Lake Report

Editorial: Our identity could suffer if municipalities merge

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Amalgamation — it could be the best thing that ever happened to Niagara-on-the-Lake?

We could merge with Niagara Falls, get half of the revenues from the casinos, adopt the hotel tax and rake

in the dough.

We could put more flowers on Queen Street, Royal Oak could have that extra \$4,000 — maybe even afford that fancy new indoor pool. If we bring Jordan in on the deal we can *really* capture the wine market.

Or, it could be the nail in the coffin that kills the

identity of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The idea of merging with other municipalities doesn't seem likely for NOTL, but then again, Donald Trump is president of the United States. So nothing should shock us anymore.

That doesn't mean it's a good idea.



More letters

Re: 'snobby NOTLers'

Perhaps people who think NOTLers are snobby misunderstand the reason why we fight and complain. We are passionate to retain a community of diverse buildings and some local availability of social, job and shopping requirements. We want the same for St. Davids. Part of our complaining is against the rampant housing development there without responsibility for supplying some planned space for local retail, commercial and green space which would make a bus less imperative or addressing the transportation issue as part of the development plan. Perhaps St. Davids residents should also be joining together to campaign for the planning improvements which make a better community.

So many areas in which we live nowadays are a mass of housing with a mall in the middle, the mall comprising of exactly the same stores as the mall in the middle of the next housing area.

So what is so wrong with wanting to be a unique little town? What is wrong with preserving a small main street of different stores, residential streets with a little character and walkability to amenities? What is wrong with fighting to preserve a community which provides the quality of life we came here to find?

In this era of profit above everything it takes a lot of people making a lot of noise to keep identifiable, livable towns rather than spreading suburbs. So don't misunderstand us, St. Davids. Join us.

Ann Handels



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Issues and fixes with NOTL

1. Issue: Environmental concerns — garbage

Fix: There are so many public events that use countless single use plastics. Ban the use of straws, plastic cutlery, and go compostable. See eco-defenders for alternatives to plastic.

2. Issue: Same as above

Fix: Get all restaurants and shops to sign on to zero single use plastics (or ban them outright in NOTL) and have recycling pick up and bins available everywhere there are people (for cans and glass) and plenty of organics bins and disposal too.

3. Issue: Uncontrolled development in Old Town

Fix: Council to oversee "smart growth plan" initiatives going forward

4. Issue: Dangers for pedestrians and cyclists

Fix: More off-road sidewalks and bike paths

5. Issue: Not enough emphasis on the value of keeping the waters of the Niagara River and Lake Ontario central to importance for this municipality

Fix: Make sure all sewer structures and treatment plants are effectively working and ensure land sourced run-off is managed well. Create awareness and festivals to celebrate the (relatively clean) waters and their importance to this community.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak.

Claudette Young

The Lake Report

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Happy Valentine's Day: Town and Marotta in court

Jer Houghton
The Lake Report

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and developers Solmar and Two Sisters Resorts are set to face off in court on Valentine's Day.

Two Sisters Resorts Corp. and Solmar (Niagara 2) Inc. are trying to quash a proposed heritage designation of four Randwood Estate properties under the Ontario Heritage Act.

There's no love lost among residents, the town and the developers as plans for the landmark Randwood Estate have been a focal point of local controversy for months.

The court application filed by Solmar and Two Sisters states the heritage act "prohibits the alteration or demolition of buildings" and "prohibits the alteration of property if the alteration is likely to affect the property's 'heritage attributes.'" Solmar and Two Sisters



A rendering of a proposed hotel on the properties of the Randwood Estate. SUPPLIED PHOTO

say "the town's actions must be undone" and accuse the town of acting "outside the fundamental principles of administrative law."

The properties intended for designation include 144 John St. E., 176 John St. E., 200 John St. E. and 599 Charlotte St. in the Historic

Old Town.

The application also alleges the town violated the Municipal Act at a special council meeting on Aug. 13, 2018, when council passed recommendations of the Municipal Heritage Committee to designate the lands.

In addition, the application claims the town is illegally attempting to designate the lands under the heritage act and says the notice of intent doesn't conform with the town's official plan.

Solmar and Two Sisters are also asking for their legal costs to be paid.

According to application, the 144 and 176 John St. E. properties are listed on the town's register as cultural heritage properties but are not formally designated under the act.

The two adjacent properties, 200 John St. E. and 599 Charlotte St., which are subdivided and parcelled for future residential development, are also listed as cultural heritage properties and neither is designated under the act.

The hearing will take place Feb. 14 at 10 a.m. at the Robert S.K. Welch Court House in St. Catharines.

Town strategic plan at 'standstill' over hiring consultant

Dariya Baiguzhiyeva
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake councillors couldn't agree on which strategic plan consultant to hire during the council meeting Monday night. So they rejected them all.

"The plan will be re-opened," said Lord Mayor Betty Disero. "Right now, we're at a standstill."

Council will reconsider its strategic plan at the next council meeting on March 11.

Initially, five companies were recommended for consideration to do the strategic plan. Four of them provided quotations and plans at costs ranging from \$23,000 to \$52,500.

Three companies – 2WA

Consulting, Bill Winegard and Level 5 Strategy Group – were invited to make presentations to council. However, their delegations were cancelled prior to the council meeting.

"It seemed odd to me that we would have three respondents come in, one after the other, and talk about what they could offer us," said Disero. "I just felt that it would put us into an awkward position doing something like that in a public session."

Disero said she got in touch with most councillors and they agreed it was "unnecessary for them to come in and speak to us."

The staff report recommended hiring Bill Winegard and David Cash, who are part of Municipal Strategic

Planning Associates, a group of four people who have been chief administrative officers in small municipalities.

At the meeting, Coun. Wendy Cheropita recommended hiring 2WA Consulting, but council defeated her motion with a 5-4 vote.

Council also voted not to hire Winegard and Cash. Two councillors, Stuart McCormack and Erwin Wiens, abstained from voting.

Cheropita, who is a strategic planning consultant, said she will reintroduce the plan at the next council meeting.

"You have one shot at producing a strategy," Cheropita told The Lake Report. "In order to be able to move forward, you have to have a plan."

Everyone, from staff to residents and business stakeholders, will have a chance to be involved in planning the strategy, she said.

"We'll probably have an online survey, something accessible to everyone. That's how important this is," she said.

When asked why he abstained from voting, Wiens said he didn't want to make a "hasty decision."

"I support the hard work that the staff and CAO are doing," he said. "I also respect Coun. Cheropita's experience in the strategic planning that she brings to the table. I want to support all of them but I didn't have enough information."

McCormack declined to comment.

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Niagara-on-the-Lake

Zalepa talks transparency and infrastructure

Jer Houghton
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake Regional Coun. Gary Zalepa Jr. has his sights set on improving town infrastructure.

In his short time with the region, road upgrades, wetlands and the new Glendale development have been at the immediate forefront.

"We've got some great people there and they're all wanting to do the same thing, which is bring greater transparency to regional government and help people better understand what regional government does," said Zalepa.

"So there's a really good vibe from the other councillors wanting to work together and make some good impacts for Niagara residents."

Out of the 32 regional council positions, 23 officials were newly elected. He said it is a bigger change, something he has never seen before.

His experience so far has been "somewhat familiar" and "really positive" at regional council, but he said the learning curve has not been as steep because of his past experience as a NOTL town councillor.

Zalepa has also served on numerous boards across the province where the scale and size has been like that of the region.

"I was able to get going pretty quickly, I think," he said.

"A lot of the concerns that I heard, and I feel are important were around infrastructure, specially regional infrastructure and that would be mainly in the form of regional roads."

This concerns Niagara Stone Road, Lakeshore Road and other transportation issues of people coming to and entering into NOTL.

"These are a big concern because as you probably know, as you come down Niagara Stone Road in the summer, it's really a traffic nightmare – so that's one of the things that the region can help with," said Zalepa.

"Already we've been able to have some good conversations at the region with the public works committee and also following through on budget committee."

Zalepa and the region first took to action on town infrastructure with the construction project underway that is upgrading Lakeshore Road between Creek Road and Townline Road.

He said this major regional project to widen the road was really important from a safety point of view for both drivers and cyclists.

The next major project is going to address Niagara Stone Road in Virgil, between Creek Road and East West Line.

"We're looking at that within this mandate so by 2021 work will begin on that – and that's really important because that's the bottleneck in Niagara-on-the-Lake," he said.

"The region has a plan to upgrade that infrastructure to allow for a third lane, so a turning lane through Virgil would be a really big assistance."

Zalepa's responsibilities on regional council has now extended to a newly appointed board role with the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority. That duty started in December.

As a conservation board member, Zalepa said part of his job there has been to do a "little bit of a clean up" due to problems with transparency around the previous hiring of staff.

"The biggest thing and point we circled around is transparency and basically making sure the authority is properly structured to do what it needs to under the Provincial Conservation Act," he said.

"There were concerns about that in the past, and there were concerns around transparency, around staff relationships, hiring staff and things like that."

He said the job as a government is to go into the conservation authority and set up better and stronger policies for the organization

so it can "properly move forward" and "get the proper people in place to run the organization."

The authority is in the process of hiring a new chief administrative officer. A report by the provincial auditor general last year recommended a number of major changes at the agency.

And because the conservation authority, in part, is tasked with developing wood lots and wetlands across the region, and because some areas in NOTL fall into that category, Zalepa said there will be some conversations about the Parks Canada land on Lakeshore Road.

"The region has operated sewage lagoons there for many years and that site is going to be decommissioned as we get the new sewage treatment plant up and running," he said.

"So what's going to happen there is that site is going to be returned to Parks Canada and, like the sewage lagoon site, the lagoons are going to be returned to their natural state, which is wetland."

He said there is a strong opportunity for the conservation authority to be involved with Parks Canada, the town and the region on how to all move forward with the development of wet-

lands so that residents can access and enjoy them.

On top of his duties to the conservation authority, Zalepa has also been elected as chair to the budget review committee of the whole for regional council. That committee, comprised of all regional councillors, oversees and administers the budget for the entire region.

The committee has debated the capital budget, which led to discussions about regional road construction and the town lands to be returned to wetlands.

"Getting involved with that committee allows us to have a part of the decision-making process in a better way, and we also get to understand what's happening across the whole region on a larger scale because you get to see where everything kind of comes together," he said.

Zalepa's longer term agenda now includes the completion of the district plan for Glendale, a joint effort by the region, the town and the City of St. Catharines to develop the 700 hectares surrounding the Queen Elizabeth Way to the Welland Canal and the escarpment.

According to Zalepa, 300 hectares that are "park-dedicated" owned by the Seaway will not be developed, but

the remaining 400 hectares can be.

"This is important for Glendale because Glendale has been identified as a growth opportunity for both the region and the town as far as more affordability and housing," he said.

"(It's) more affordability for investors and job employment opportunities for companies to locate in the Niagara region and we're very lucky in Niagara-on-the-Lake that Glendale is one of these areas."

The working group for this planning process had its first meeting on Feb. 7 and a report will be submitted to regional council within the next six months. This will include input from Lord Mayor Betty Disero (who also sits on regional council), a consulting firm and key stakeholders such as residents from Niagara On The Green.

"We can provide transportation into it, future GO train, future GO bus transit. The highway interchange at Glendale is being rebuilt, the province is going to put a new interchange starting this year, so there's going to be lots of changes happening."

Between his duties at the region and his role with the conservation authority – not to mention his job as director of strategic growth and development for Century 21 and time dedicated as parent council volunteer with the local 809 Newark Air Cadets Squadron – he said he is "keeping busy and that's a good thing."

He said there are many items being talked about – with infrastructure among the top of the list.

"Getting elected to regional council, the idea was to be able to bring that kind of conversation to the region and see how we can work towards fixing it."

Zalepa's longer term agenda now includes the completion of the district plan for Glendale, a joint effort by the region, the town and the City of St. Catharines to develop the 700 hectares surrounding the Queen Elizabeth Way to the Welland Canal and the escarpment.



Niagara-on-the-Lake Regional Coun. Gary Zalepa Jr.



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Locals for Carriages raising money to battle protesters' aggressive tactics

Brittany Carter
The Lake Report

A group of Niagara-on-the-Lake residents is trying to raise money for potential action against animal rights activist group At War for Animals Niagara.

The driving force behind a group calling itself Locals for Carriages, co-founders Karen Jones and daughter Jennifer Jones-Butski, said they want to see an end to the horse-carriage protests in historic Old Town.

On May 11, Locals for Carriages is planning to host a fundraising pasta dinner and trivia night at the NOTL Legion on King Street. The goal is to raise money to help Sentineal Carriages pay any fees incurred in pushing back against the activist group. A GoFundMe campaign has also been set up.

Jones-Butski said the activist group focuses on the carriages because they are an easy target.

They know this is a tourist town. They know they're going to get publicity, they know people are watching. They're not going to go after the RCMP, they're not going to go after people for using police dogs or service dogs, because they know that's not going to get them where they need to be."

Locals for Carriages has more than 400 members on Facebook, and Jones-Butski said it's growing every day.

Jones said the protesters have been growing more aggressive with their tactics, causing the carriage drivers and staff to feel unsafe on the job.

Carriage driver Abby Moran said she was on the scene during Operation Rolling Thunder, a demonstration by the activists to bring awareness to their cause during the Icewine Festival. The protest included SUVs and trucks driving around the streets of NOTL.

Moran said while driving her horse carriage, everywhere she turned the group was waiting for her in big vehicles.

"Every single street I looked down, they would



A group of NOTL residents called Locals for Carriages is standing up against protesters. SUPPLIED PHOTO

have their trucks. They almost hit a pedestrian."

She said it was stressful to do her job with the harassment by the activists, adding the tourists on the carriage were unhappy with the situation as well.

"A lot of them had kids. Some specifically said, 'Please stop filming my child,' but they kept filming."

As an employee with Sentineal Carriages for more than three years, Moran said the Sentineals treat everyone who works for them, including the horses, as a part of the family. It's unfair what the activists are doing to them, she said.

Jones said there is nothing wrong with the way the horses are managed.

"They (the protesters) are talking about things that they don't really understand."

And the activists are not interested in hearing from people with different views. "It's like talking to a brick wall" when trying to present the group with arguments to contradict their statements, she said.

The activist group's Facebook page said the aim is to "promote activism locally and globally for animals by sharing news and providing ways for individuals to get involved and change the world."

Jones-Butski said the activists are taking their right to protest too far by making

threats on social media and harassing the carriage drivers, as well as driving aggressively and filming children during their protests. She mentioned one instance where she said a member of the activist group planned to seek her out and strap her to the front of a carriage after Jones-Butski tried to explain that the carriages are not too heavy for the horses.

"We don't care if they end up doing it over by (Simcoe Park). Just something that's not harassing the carriage driver, something away from the horses, something that's going to stop annoying the general public."

"They're attacking a company that doesn't need to be attacked."

Sentineal Carriages did not initiate the fundraising. Laura Sentineal, co-owner, said she is appreciative that the community has spoken out against the protesters in the town.

At War for Animals of Niagara was founded in August 2016. The activists advocate for an end to speciesism, saying it is a form of discrimination based on species membership.

Their website says: "We learn at a very early age some non-humans are to love, some are to eat, others are for entertainment etc."

The group held protests in Old Town throughout the summer, carrying signs and filming residents and tourists who were using the

carriages. On Feb. 9, four members of the group were seen holding signs outside of Elle Du Monde on Queen Street to protest the use of animal products. The protest was part of National Anti-fur Day.

Jones said she doesn't have an issue with the activists standing up for their beliefs, it's their tactics she is protesting.

The Lake Report tried to contact the activist group on two occasions. Members declined to comment on the effectiveness of their protests, the tactics used or the accusations of following or "stalking" the carriage drivers.

"They threaten the whole town by saying either adhere to what they want, or they'll be here forever. They're not going anywhere. I feel like that's a threat," said Jones.

From her experience with the activist group, Jones said it's been tough to decipher what it stands for, adding that the group's mission statement has changed over time. Initially, she said, it was against all forms of domestication of animals, but that stance has changed over time. The group says adoption of animals is now acceptable.

Locals for Carriages wants to get the word out to put an end to the aggressive protests and protect the personal safety of the Sentineals and their staff.

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Upper Canada Lodge set to close

Dariya Baiguzhiyeva
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake's long-term care residents will have to move to a new home.

The discussion about the redevelopment of NOTL's facility has been going on for a couple of years now. Upper Canada Lodge was one of the three long-term homes in Niagara Region – along with Fort Erie's Linhaven Lodge and St. Catharines' Gilmore Lodge – that was considered for redevelopment to meet provincial standards by 2025.

However, Regional Coun. Gary Zalepa Jr. confirmed Friday that NOTL's site is not going to be redeveloped, but will be closed instead.

Linhaven and Gilmore Lodge will be shutting down, too, he said, though the region is planning to offset the loss by building two new facilities, which will keep the number of long-term care beds in the region at 948, plus an ad-

ditional 13 beds.

Zalepa said he doesn't know when exactly the closings will happen.

One of the reasons for closing is the change in the "provincial funding formula" that requires long-term homes to have 120 beds and having a building with such amount of beds in NOTL is impossible, said Zalepa.

"The reality is that the (80)-bed unit home is not viable. And not only economically, from a funding point of view. But you can't sustain services, you can't put services in there that can't adequately support residents without significantly spending a lot of extra dollars."

Another reason was that the world of long-term care turned into palliative care nowadays.

"Our homes that we have aren't designed for that reality," said Zalepa. "People didn't require as many palliative and nursing services. Today, many of the people who come to

long-term care are on critical illnesses, coming right out of the hospital. So their needs are really different."

After the sites are closed, no residents will be left without accommodation. The region will develop new facilities and provide space for all, said Zalepa.

As the Upper Canada Lodge's land is owned by Parks Canada, the site with the existing buildings will be available for rent.

"If they can't find a tenant, the region has to return the site as it was. So the buildings will have to be removed and the site cleared," said Zalepa.

Niagara Region currently has 33 long-term care homes, eight of which are owned by the region.

Although three long-term care homes will be closed, there will be two new properties opened with at least 120 beds, said Zalepa.

One will be in Fort Erie and another will be at Linhaven's site in St. Catharines. The construction will



Upper Canada Lodge residents will need to relocate when the facility closes.
DARIYA BAIGUZHIEVA

have to be completed by 2022 and the bed allocation will be in 2020, Zalepa told The Lake Report.

The funding for the new development will come from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

However, NOTL is lucky to have some organizations that run long-term care homes, said Zalepa.

One of them, Chartwell Niagara Long Term Care Residence in Old Town is a

for-profit organization, while Pleasant Manor in Virgil run by Radiant Care, is a not-for-profit organization.

"We're lucky to have them. There's an opportunity to work and help those operators increase their bed count. Once everything is settled, Niagara-on-the-Lake will actually end up with more beds even with Upper Canada Lodge closing," said Zalepa.

Henriette Koning, the region's director of senior

services, confirmed the region is working on opening two sites.

"We're still in the early days of the process," said Koning. "We're confirming the number of beds in Fort Erie and the number of beds in St. Catharines."

The project for new sites will have to go before the regional council for approval.

The administrators at Upper Canada Lodge, Linhaven and Gilmore Lodge declined to comment.

NOTL Hydro quick on the scene during ice storm

Brittany Carter
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake Hydro tackled outages caused by the Feb. 6 ice storm quickly and effectively, says a senior official with the utility.

During last Wednesday's storm, St. Davids and Virgil were affected the most, putting many people without power for a few hours throughout the day, said Kazi Marouf, vice president of operations for NOTL Hydro.

"We had two major pockets that were out — one in St. Davids and one in Virgil. Those are larger pockets and we focused on those knowing that quite a few customers were out at the same time."

He said as soon as hydro workers discovered the source of the outages, they

were able to tackle the issue and restore power quickly.

In both cases, Marouf said, large branches had fallen across the lines.

"We had to go out and cut those branches, repair anything that was damaged as a result of that, and then restore the power supply."

NOTL Hydro has devices in the field to alert it to any disruption in service. Smart meters report back to hydro's outage management system when there's a disruption in service. That gives an early warning that power has been interrupted in certain areas and allows hydro workers to troubleshoot the problem before they even receive calls of outages.

"We have a good idea automatically through this system and devices in the field."

When outages are

detected and calls are received, hydro staff rank the seriousness to determine which areas to address first. They also determine if the issue is theirs.

"We like to confirm that the problems are ours when a customer calls us."

The most serious outages, such as wires on a car or fallen poles, are tackled immediately as they can be "extremely dangerous."

Inclement weather proves dangerous, but Marouf said workers are "highly trained" and always keep safety at the forefront.

"Everything that they work on is safe, in good weather and in bad weather. Trucks, equipment, clothing, tools and so on are safe for them to be working in."

Using judgment and common sense, workers aim to restore power quickly, but will never put themselves



NOTL Hydro workers reacted quickly when last week's ice storm knocked out power in St. Davids and Virgil.
DARIYA BAIGUZHIEVA

at risk. They will never work on energized wires and will stop if the weather gets too dangerous.

"Where it becomes trickier is when they are doing work during an ice-storm or high winds. In those areas they use their better judgment."

Hydro staff often work together with other services: road work crews, police and fire departments and other utilities to ensure they are safe and the surrounding area isn't hazardous.

"They are asked for help to clear the way or protect the area. All of that then

becomes a wider team effort. Working in the inclement weather hazards out there, there are ways to be able to get around that, which allows to do our work safely."

With all the work they do, Marouf said hydro staff receive some complaints, but mostly thank yous. He said he understands why it's frustrating for customers who have been out of power for long periods to not know when it will come on.

"That's always a difficult thing to guess. It's very hard to tell customers, 'Oh, you'll be back on in a certain amount of time,' when it may take longer," he said. "That waiting period sometimes frustrates people, but there's nothing that we can do. We can just do our best effort in the meantime."

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Cameron McDougall pours wine at Queenston Vineyard, one of the local wineries that participated in Days of Wine and Chocolate this year. DARIYA BAIGUZHIEVA

Town urged to deal with phragmites and undersized culvert problems

Dariya Baiguzhiyeva
The Lake Report

Austin Kirkby was anything but shy when he appeared before NOTL council Monday night.

Kirkby, who was a Niagara-on-the-Lake council member for 15 years and used to be a chair of the irrigation and agriculture committees, made a presentation to council about funding for phragmites and culverts.

"I'm honest. I'm going to be blunt here, I'm not happy," said Kirkby.

She said she realized it was late as the budget had already been approved, but she wanted new council members to know the town has issues like undersized culverts and phragmites (invasive plants).

Kirkby said undersized culverts are a lingering problem in NOTL.

According to the 2008 NOTL Watershed Study by Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, culvert replacement was recommended to prevent upstream flooding.

Kirkby said since the report was finished 11 years ago, nothing has changed and undersized culverts and



Austin Kirkby addresses council Monday night. DARIYA BAIGUZHIEVA

floodplains prevent landowners from constructing buildings.

"It is unfair to have these (problems) identified and then not do anything about them," she told The Lake Report. "And then you're going to do these other things with the official plan. It doesn't sit well with me. There are things out there you should do first."

Kirkby said she sent a letter about the issue to the town in 2016 but didn't get a response.

Phragmites was another big issue brought up by Kirkby.

Phragmites are invasive plants that grow primarily along roadside ditches. Their seeds can be spread by the

wind and their roots release chemicals that can harm other plants. Phragmites can grow higher than five metres and when not controlled, can clog drainage tiles and ditches, causing floods.

The plant can be controlled by cutting, applying herbicides or by a combination of both.

Kirkby suggested that town apply for funding from the province and buy equipment to fight phragmites.

"If the province failed to act to control them on their roads, the province should be providing funding because this is an environmental disaster," she said. "The province is the one that created the phragmites because they didn't control them in

the first place."

Kirkby said it is unfair for landowners to pay for a problem that wasn't created by them.

She said she will continue putting motions regarding the issue to council through the agricultural and irrigation committee. She also encouraged residents to control phragmites on their property as much as they can.

Victoria Steele, the town's community engagement coordinator, said there was no estimated cost to replace or upgrade culverts.

It's difficult to provide a cost for removal of phragmites as it is done on a needed basis and every area is different, she said.

"For example... along Concession 1 Road, it may have to get it cut three to four times during irrigation season," said Steele.

"Depending on the required work, staff rent equipment and town staff complete the work or a contract company may do the work. Again, this all determined on need and availability or services and equipment, so it's extremely difficult to put a cost to it."

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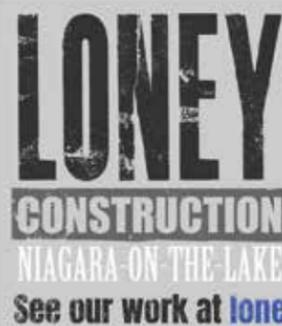


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17	18	19	20
<p>Oscar Peterson International Jazz Festival - 1 p.m. - Stratus Vineyards</p> <p>Niagara Pumphouse: Family Friendly Drop In Art Studio - 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. - Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre</p> <p>Writers' Circle: Open Mic (Theme: Love) - 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. - NOTL Public Library</p> <p>St. Mark's: Love Songs - 4 p.m. - St. Mark's Church</p> <p>Oscar Peterson International Jazz Festival: Awards Gala and Dinner - 6:30 p.m. - Stratus Vineyards</p>	<p>Family Day</p> <p>Line Dancing - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>French Conversation Group - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Seniors Fitness: Healthy Safe & Strong - 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Niagara Regional Native Centre: Community Drumming Night - 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. - Niagara Regional Native Centre</p> <p>Beer & Books: The Virgin in the Ice by Ellis - 7 p.m. - The Old Winery</p>	<p>NOTL Rotary Club - Noon - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Golden Age Club - 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Seniors Fitness: Healthy Safe & Strong - 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>The Great Canadian Historical Songbook - 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. - NOTL Public Library</p>	<p>Simpson's Seniors' a.m. to 8 p.m. - Simpson's Seniors' Centre</p> <p>St. Andrew's Lectures 225 Years - 10 a.m. - St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church</p> <p>German Conversation - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Painting Drop In - 3 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Trivia Night: Exchange (Winter League Week) - 7 p.m. - The Exchange</p>
24	25	26	27
<p>2019 Fabulicious! - Day 4 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL</p> <p>Days of Wine & Chocolate - 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. - Wineries of NOTL</p> <p>Niagara Pumphouse: Family Friendly Drop in Art Studio - 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. - Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre</p> <p>Teen Literary Alliance - 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. - NOTL Public Library</p>	<p>2019 Fabulicious! - Day 5 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL</p> <p>Line Dancing - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Famous & Infamous with Suzanne Hebert: Shah of Iran, Pt 2 - 2 p.m. - Niagara Historical Society & Museum</p> <p>French Conversation Group - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Public Meeting: Official Plan Review - 6 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Niagara Regional Native Centre: Community Drumming Night - 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. - Niagara Regional Native Centre</p>	<p>2019 Fabulicious! - Day 6 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL</p> <p>Power Off and Play - 11 a.m. to noon - NOTL Public Library</p> <p>NOTL Rotary Club - Noon - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Seniors Golden Age Club - 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>NOTL Horticultural Society Monthly Meeting - 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p>	<p>2019 Fabulicious! - Day 7 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL</p> <p>German Conversation - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Simply STEAM Story - a.m. to noon - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Painting Drop In - 3 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre</p> <p>Trivia Night: Exchange (Winter League Week) - 7 p.m. - The Exchange</p> <p>NOTL Toastmasters - 8:30 p.m. - Niagara Community Campus</p>

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	14 Valentine's Day Minecraft Club - 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. - NOTL Public Library Fish Fry at the Legion - 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. - Royal Canadian Legion Tinker Thinker Thursdays - 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. - NOTL Public Library Niagara Pumphouse: Drop in Artists' Cafe - 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. - Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre (CANCELLED)	15 P.A. Day Afternoon Movie: Up - 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. - NOTL Public Library St. Davids and District Lions Club: Friday Fish Fry - 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. - St. Davids and District Lions Club 225th Anniversary of St. Andrew's Church: Lasagna Dinner - 6 p.m. - St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church Oscar Peterson International Jazz Festival - 8 p.m. - St. Mark's Church Comedy Night with host David Green - 9 p.m. - The Exchange Brewery	16 Black History Month: Tales by Moonlight with Babarinde Williams - 11 a.m. to noon - NOTL Public Library Skating and a DJ - 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. - Wayne Gretzky Estates Winery & Distillery
20 Day - 8:30 son's Pharmacy re Series: St. Andrew's	21 2019 Fabulicious! - Day 1 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL Bridge Seniors Casual Drop-in: Bridge - 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre Seniors Fitness: Healthy Safe & Strong - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. / 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre Minecraft Club - 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. - NOTL Public Library Niagara Regional Native Centre: Community Social - 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. - Niagara Regional Native Centre	22 2019 Fabulicious! - Day 2 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL Spanish Conversation Group - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - NOTL Community Centre Days of Wine & Chocolate - 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. - Wineries of NOTL Cribbage for Seniors - 1 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre Seated Laughter Fitness: Laugh Yourself Healthier - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre Whisky Tasting at Navy Hall - 7 p.m. - Navy Hall	23 2019 Fabulicious! - Day 3 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL Tech Talk: Engine Performance Workshop - 10 a.m. to noon - Clare's Harley Davidson Artist Workshop: Exploring Colour with Robin Nisbet - 10:30 a.m. - RiverBrink Art Museum Days of Wine & Chocolate - 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. - Wineries of NOTL Skating and a DJ - 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. - Wayne Gretzky Estates Winery & Distillery
27 Day 7 - f NOTL ion Group m. - NOTL y Time - 11 Public Library 3 p.m. to 5:30 ity Centre nge Brewery ek 7) - 6:30 Brewery - 7 p.m. to College, NOTL	28 2019 Fabulicious! - Day 8 - Signature Kitchens of NOTL Short Film: C'est Mois (with Howard Davis) - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. - NOTL Public Library Seniors Fitness: Healthy Safe & Strong - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. / 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre Minecraft Club - 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. - NOTL Public Library Tinker Thinker Thursdays - 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. - NOTL Public Library	1 World Day of Prayer: Ecumenical Service - 1:30 p.m. - St. Vincent de Paul Church Pumphouse Instructors' Exhibition - 11 a.m. - Niagara Pumphouse Arts Centre Seated Laughter Fitness: Laugh Yourself Healthier - 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. - NOTL Community Centre Shaw Festival Annual Meeting - 2:30 p.m. - Shaw Festival Theatre Lobby St. Davids and District Lions Club: Friday Fish Fry - 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. - St. Davids and District Lions Club	2 St. John's Babysitting Course - 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. - NOTL Public Library Skating and a DJ - 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. - Wayne Gretzky Estates Winery & Distillery

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NOTL businesses feeling the love this Valentine's Day

Brittany Carter
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake businesses are gearing up for what they hope to be a busy Valentine's Day.

Florists, chocolate shops, wineries, tour guides and restaurants across town are anticipating a jump in business.

Local florists are already busy taking orders and preparing arrangements for the inevitable last-minute shoppers. Carole Audette-Boucock, store manager of Van Noort Florists on Four Mile Creek Road, says she tends to see a lot of them.

"It's in a very small amount of time, within a few days. Everything is last-minute — people just show up," she said, adding they do get a few people who pre-order. She estimates the business sees about a 70 per cent increase in sales during the couple of days leading up to Feb. 14. Customers tend to be mostly men, she added.

Hand-tied bouquets are the shop's best sellers, so she tries to have them pre-arranged for quick pick-up. Orders of six or a dozen roses are also popular.

Regal Florist and Garden Centre on Niagara Stone Road has noticed more advance orders this year, said the store's lead designer Lindsey Harvey.

Being in a retirement community, the bulk of their Valentine's Day business happens in the days leading up to Feb. 14, she said.

"It's not all in one day like it used to be. A lot of our clients come in a few days before. It is a quieter time of year for us, so we

definitely see the increase in business over the week leading up to and surrounding Valentine's Day."

On par with a demand for flowers, local chocolatiers are also feeling the heat of Cupid's big day.

Sandra Theal, chocolate moulder with Chocolate F/X in St. Davids, said everyone is in "full swing" making treats. This year they're focusing on fresh strawberries dipped in chocolate — a top seller around Valentine's Day.

"We help people to win the hearts of others ... If you ever want to win somebody over, it's with chocolate," Theal says.

Also specializing in chocolate-dipped strawberries, Rocky Mountain Chocolate Company is ready for Valentine's Day.

"One of the big things we do down here are strawberries. We have long-stemmed, big strawberries we bring in special for Valentine's Day. We'll dip them in our homemade milk chocolate. They'll be festive for Valentine's Day."

Manager Sean Bell, a self-proclaimed jack-of-all-trades at Rocky Mountain, said the store stays busy year-round just from the foot traffic on Queen Street, but admits Valentine's Day brings an influx of new customers.

"We're a busy location all 12 months of the year, but a little slower now. I've reached out to businesses and locals around and we've created a really good vibe in the store. We get a lot of repeat business in this location."

Bell said the shop's icewine-infused dark



Wilma Olive-Mills and Art Mills, owners of FX Chocolate. BRITTANY CARTER/THE LAKE REPORT



Sean Bell, manager at Rocky Mountain, getting ready for Valentine's Day. BRITTANY CARTER/THE LAKE REPORT

chocolate-dipped truffles, which he claims are unique to the region, are especially popular.

"It's a dark chocolate truffle centre ... infused with icewine and dipped in dark chocolate. The idea is that the dark chocolate will temper the icewine's sweetness."

He said dark chocolate is best because anything else would be too sweet, and he is proud to use locally made icewine from Pillitteri Estates Winery.

The truffles are the shop's best seller this season, Bell said.

The Wineries of NOTL are holding their Days of Wine and Chocolate event

every weekend throughout February, to combine chocolate with NOTL's famous beverage.

Richard Mell of Grape Escape Wine Tours said while the tour company doesn't offer a specific package for Valentine's Day, what's available is already appealing to customers' romantic sides.

"The Days of Wine and Chocolate is kind of what people gravitate toward for the romance side of it."

Grape Escape keeps busy with bookings throughout the month as a result, he said.

Laura Sentineal, co-owner of Sentineal Carriages, said she also usually

sees an increase in business, adding Valentine's Day is a fun time for them, bringing some unique bookings.

"We get these somewhat nervous young men calling, wanting to do something special. We try to help them and walk them through it. We'll suggest a restaurant, things like that, and help them plan a really special evening," she said.

Proposals are big this time of year as well, with many having been booked already.

Sentineal Carriages offers tours ranging from half-an-hour to an hour, recommending shorter tours during the cooler weather. While the staff are prepared

for the cold, they try to make the ride as cozy as possible.

"We have big warm blankets and invite them to bring something warm to drink along the way."

Local restaurants are expecting a high turnout for dinner, many offering special menus for the occasion.

Lori Semenach, manager of The Old Winery Restaurant on Niagara Stone Road, said the restaurant is offering a fixed-price, three-course meal. Reservations are filling up quickly, she said.

There seems to be no shortage of opportunities to celebrate Valentine's Day locally this year.

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A Canadian snow day for peewee Wolves



A snow day created the perfect opportunity to get an extra practice session in before Thursday's playoff game for the NOTL Wolves. DARIYA BAIGUZHIEVA



Dariya Baiguzhiyeva
The Lake Report

A major storm didn't stop the NOTL BB peewee Wolves from preparing for their next game.

"It's not enough snow for us to cancel the practice," joked Adam Whyte, the Niagara-on-the-Lake peewee reps' coach. The team gathered at Meridian Credit Union Arena Tuesday afternoon, despite snow and freezing rain warnings, to practise before Thursday's Ontario Minor Hockey Association quarterfi-

nal playoff game against the Lincoln Blades.

The Wolves faced the Blades Monday night, skating to a 3-1 win. NOTL is up four points to two, with a 2-1 record in the series.

"Every game you win is worth two points. The first team to six points wins," said Whyte. "It was a close game. But we pulled it out, it was pretty exciting," he said. "Lincoln Blades is a really good hockey team, too."

Games can end in a tie after a 10-minute overtime period.

This is Whyte's first year coaching the Wolves and he said he loves it.

"It's a lot of fun to be able to pass on the skill-set to the next generation of kids. I just enjoy it," he said. "The best part is seeing them having fun and getting excited, especially during the playoffs right now."

Coaching also comes with some challenges.

"When it comes to play-off time, it is trying to stay equal with (players') ice time and getting everyone involved," said Whyte.

"That's the most challenging – keeping the kids entertained, keeping them in for practices, keeping them working hard and not letting off the gas."

"I think we'll win. I hope we win."

The Wolves need one more win to advance to the semifinals and they will get that chance when they play Lincoln in Virgil on Thursday night.

Game time is 6:50 p.m. The winner of this series plays the winner of a quarterfinal between Caledonia and St. Marys.



Town to host March break camp at the community centre

Brittany Carter
The Lake Report

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is hosting a March break camp at the community centre from March 11 to 15.

The camp, for children ages 6 to 12, will run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with before and after child-care available for an additional charge.

Kevin Turcotte, manager of parks and recreation, said it's a necessary service to offer the residents.

"It's open for everyone. The majority of the time we just see locals, but if

there are people that work in town and can bring their kids in then it's an added service that we're providing."

Turcotte said the town tries to keep the camp to a ratio of one staff to every 15 kids. Right now, there are two staff scheduled to oversee the camp, putting the capacity at 30 kids. If the need increases, more staff can be brought in, he said.

"We always would like to hit the max amount of kids, but we normally see around 20-25 kids a day, which is still really good."

People can sign up for

the entire week or just a few days, depending on their need. Turcotte said he likes providing flexible options.

The camp costs \$130 per week or \$35 daily. Before and after-care is \$5 a day.

There will be themed days, with a variety of sports, games and crafts to entertain and educate kids over the break.

"We just want to let the community know, with as much promotion as we do, that it's out there and available."

Registration is required and can be done online or over the phone.





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Have some fun

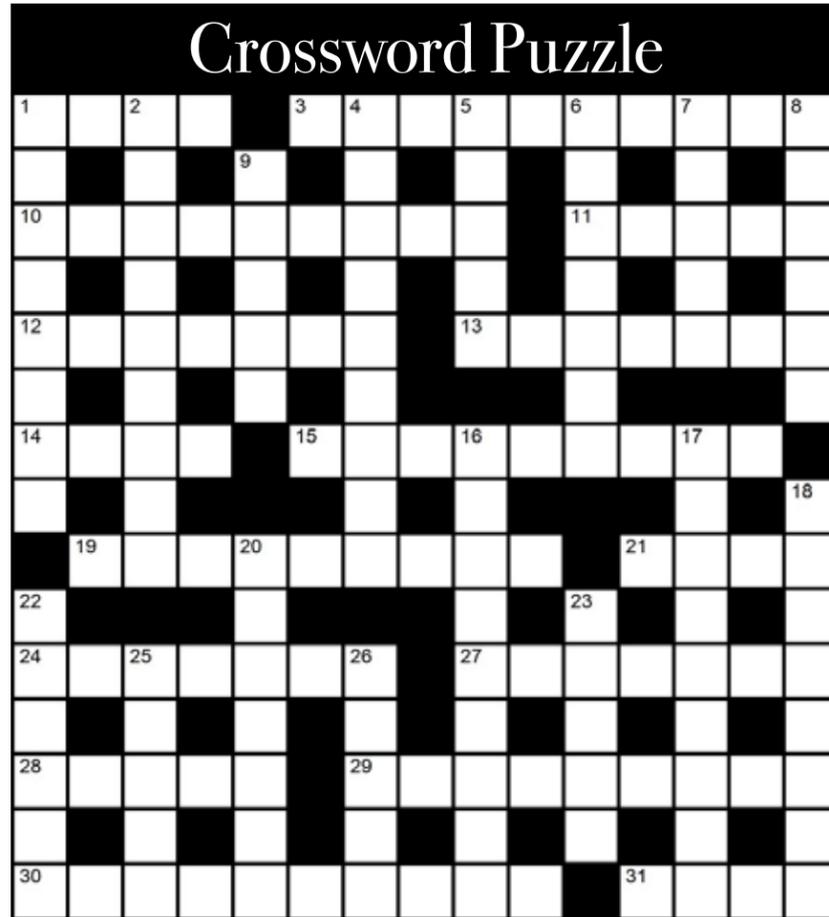
The Lake Report is looking for puzzle makers who would like to help develop this page. We are seeking both standard and cryptic crossword writers. editor@niagaranow.com

Across

- 1. US space group (1,1,1,1)
- 3. Court game (10)
- 10. Consequently (9)
- 11. Female sovereign (5)
- 12. Survive (7)
- 13. Bowling pin (7)
- 14. Skin eruption (4)
- 15. Pachyderms (9)
- 19. Sue (9)
- 21. German Mrs (4)
- 24. Passage (7)
- 27. Surrey commuter village (7)
- 28. Trembling poplar (5)
- 29. Mouth organ (9)
- 30. Science of numbers (10)
- 31. Undiluted (4)

Down

- 1. Belonging to a country (8)
- 2. Enticement (9)
- 4. Papal (9)
- 5. Leg joints (5)
- 6. Mexican liquor (7)
- 7. Proficient (5)
- 8. Beam over a door (6)
- 9. Started (5)
- 16. Medley (3-6)
- 17. Frighten, usually by violence (9)
- 18. Take away (8)
- 20. Squeeze together (7)
- 22. Las Vegas setting (6)
- 23. Racecourse (5)
- 25. Island in the Bay of Naples (5)
- 26. Resort lake in both California and twenty-two down (5)



Last issue's answers



Sudoku

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

Skating on the Niagara River in 1969

Ross Robinson
Special to the Lake Report

What fun for NOTLers fifty years ago. During some winters, the stars would align, allowing Mother Nature to create skating rinks for local fun lovers. No Zamboni, no freon tubing, no blue line, no red line. No fees to pay, to coaches, no referees.

Just cold weather and water that was still enough to freeze.

The word would go out by telephone or over the fences, by the "bush telegraph," and skaters would arrive to enjoy the winter. No one hour time slots, no helmets, no regulation equipment.

No hockey sweaters to identify the teams. Just an ever changing group of skaters, some with hockey

sticks, some without. The games ended when it got dark, or when the street lights came on. Time for dinner.

Current Old Timer hockey player Tom Elltoft, a wannabe Wallbanger, found a picture of older brother Adam skating with his Dad, Dr. David Elltoft. Their pal Jordin Neumann was a regular, and local girls would lace and up their skates and join the boys.

The name of the game was fun. No Road Trips in minivans to Welland or Niagara Falls. Not even to Virgil or Queenston or St. Davids. When there was no good ice in backyards or parks, endless games of ball hockey were played on the streets.

Recently retired NOTL Firefighter Greg Warner remembers skating on the

river, and on the natural ice rink in Queens Royal Park. His Dad Edward, the District Fire Chief, and a group of Volunteer Firefighters would create a rink using packed snow as boards, and flood the frozen, flat grass.

There were no trees in the area from the present day public washrooms to the sidewalk next to King Street.

These good people would string incandescent light bulbs between trees on the perimeter, to create their version of the Montreal Forum or Maple Leaf Gardens.

Life was simpler then. No hand held devices, no Googling factoids on computers.

Life was tough, but even then people realized how fortunate they were to live in Canada. In 1969.



When things were colder, back in about 1969, NOTLers actually skated on ice formed on the Niagara River. Seen here just in front of where the Queen's Royal Park gazebo now stands, with Fort Niagara in the background, David Elltoft and his son Adam are bundled up against the cold. Younger brother Tom came along four years later. The ice pack in the background was "the boards," and many a puck was lost, never to be seen again, after the ice and snow melted. SUPPLIED PHOTO

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FEATURED 

Exploring Photos: with Jim Smith

MILK DELIVERY



I remember through the 1940s and '50s having milk delivered to our house every day in glass quart bottles. Campbell's Dairy processed the milk on Platoff Street. Two members of the family, Elwyn and Ellen, still live in town. Seen in the picture is Campbell's horse and sleigh they used for delivery in the winter.

SUPPLIED/JIM SMITH



Creating harmony

Brian Marshall
Featured

As we explored in the last two columns, site and order establish the basic parameters for a 'good' design. Now the designer must consider balance which, pretty much like the name implies, is a design principle that, correctly applied, results in a facade where the left half has exactly the same visual weight as the right half.

Of the two common types of balance, symmetrical is the easiest to achieve. In this case, if we divide the facade into two equal parts, the left half will be a precise reflection of the right half. Symmetrical balance depends entirely on the faithful repetition of



An example of balanced composition. SUPPLIED

elements from right to left; one mistake and the facade will appear odd or worse, haphazard.

Asymmetrical balance is a great deal more challenging. Here, the designer may use mass, shape, colour, proportion, placement/location of elements, combinations of materials, and more, to create the visual impression that one

side of the house balances the weight of the other side. For example, the designer of the house in our photo used the placement, shape, size, and dark roofing material (dark values appear heavier) of the porch to create visual weight that helps to balance the projecting cross gable on the left half. Walk by this superb King Street house and see if you

can spot other balancing elements.

So here's the key, balance complements and reinforces order. A properly balanced design is approachable, understandable, and most importantly 'feels' harmonious. Be aware, when building or renovating, design balance must be respected or the result will be a train-wreck!



Species at Risk

Interested in learning more about the multispecies action plan for Niagara National Historic Sites (NNHS)? Join us for a field visit to NNHS properties and/or a public open house to discover more about species at risk in the Niagara region.

Field Visit

Tuesday, February 26, 2019.
1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.
Meet at Navy Hall, 305 Ricardo St, Niagara-on-the-Lake.
Pre-registration required, please call: 905-468-6602.

Public Open House

Navy Hall, 305 Ricardo St, Niagara-on-the-Lake.
Tuesday, February 26, 2019.
7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

For more information

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Canada 

Calling all chefs!

Local recipe book planned for 2019

The Lake Report is calling on all cooks, chefs, bakers and food enthusiasts in Niagara-on-the-Lake. We want your favourite family recipes, and the stories that go with them, to share with the community. Whether it's a special stew, soup, or salad; the best bread or muffins; or a decadent dessert, we'd like to hear from you!

We'd love it if you could include pictures of the food where possible, and of the family member who might have passed the recipe down. If there is any family folklore associated with the recipe, we'd love to hear that too. Maybe there's a certain occasion when it's always made, perhaps there's a funny or sad story to tell that relates to that particular recipe, or certain traditions that accompany it.

We will publish selected recipes regularly, and at the end of the year we'll compile all the recipes together as a book of NOTL family favourites. Proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to a local charity.

Please send your recipes, pictures and stories to: recipes@niagaranow.com

The top recipes will be published in an annual paperback book which will be available (in limited supply) to residents of Niagara-on-the-Lake at The Lake Report office. This year's book (title uncertain!) will be released in the coming months!

Did you know?

The Lake Report's printer sources 100 per cent of its paper fibre from industry leading paper mills, which use quick-growth, sustainable, renewable plots of land, rather than clear-cutting forests.

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WRITER'S CIRCLE

Chapter One from the novel, Caught Between the Walls by Sharon Frayne

Do You Believe in
Ghosts?

January 2015.

Did I see a ghost that winter night in the park? I'm still not sure, but I've spent a long time trying to find out what really happened. I live in Niagara-on-the-Lake, which some say is the most haunted town in Canada. There are many ghost tales in my town, and there are some tales that have yet to be told. I live on the edge of Rye Historic Park, and just maybe...

Most nights, as the dark settles on the streets of NOTL, professional ghost guides roam about with mysterious tales of the past. Their long black cloaks billow around them as cool breezes lift the dust off the sidewalks and streets. The tourists follow the lantern the guide holds high, shuffling along from building to building, a little bit intimidated and a little bit amused.

Usually, the tourists pause before the handsome 1847 grey stone Courthouse on Queen Street and whisper about spirits that haunt the building.

"Don't go in at night!" they're warned. Inside, there's a tiny jail cell with creepy looking stuffed figures. A few streets over, The Niagara Historical Museum has many well-researched books that document the historical background of many of these ghost tales.

One wintry afternoon in January, I was positive I'd seen the apparition of another Courthouse building offering me safe haven during a storm. Later, that same evening, I'd returned and felt the call of incorporeal beings wanting to share their stories. Is there another ghost story yet to be told?

"Is that real, or am I seeing things?" The icy wind tore the words out of my mouth. Floundering along in a raging January blizzard, I struggled toward the gloomy outline of a two-story building. It appeared in the distance, a soft



Sharon Frayne. SUPPLIED PHOTO

grey fleeting shadow that vanished behind the veil of blowing sleet.

I slogged through the knee-deep snow, attempting to cross the wind-blown field. On that day, the park was basically inaccessible. Winter had blustered in late, but finally it was bitterly cold and the snow was piled high.

"What was I thinking?" I gasped, creating hot steamy clouds that hung in the bitter air. "This is just a stupid idea. Walking through here is almost impossible. Why didn't I stick to the road instead of taking the shortcut across the park?"

I left Rye Street behind me as I tried to hike across the Rye Heritage Park. Overnight, there'd been a tremendous snowstorm that had closed schools and halted traffic.

Everything and everyone was stuck in place. At noon, I'd decided to walk from my new house on the far side of the park to get some fresh air and shake off the feeling of being imprisoned by the storm.

"Winters in Niagara-on-the-Lake are usually mild," the real estate agent had told me and "snow, when it comes, only lasts a few days."

The next-door neighbour had boasted, "I haven't

shoveled my driveway for several winters in a row." Yet, here I was, staggering through knee-deep snow in -20 C temperatures. It was a blizzard that was reminiscent of times long past.

I stopped to catch my breath and gather my energy to cross the field. Below the deep winter cover, the ground was slippery with ice. "Whoa!" I yelped as I scrambled for balance. I grabbed at a sign pole that emerged above the snow bank. As I clutched the post, I stared up at the historic plaque that appeared in front of me.

Mathieu Da Costa

Hermine Steinberg
Writer's Circle

When celebrating Black History month in Canada we often look to our southern neighbours for larger than life Black leaders and pioneers to inspire us. But one of the most fascinating and mysterious individuals in early Canadian history is Mathieu Da Costa who has been recognized as the first Black person to come to Canada.

Mathieu Da Costa was a free Black African from a Ladino Jewish heritage who was employed in the early 1600s as a translator by French and Dutch traders and explorers. Mathieu Da Costa is further proof that the Moors of Europe and West Africa were already familiar with the north-eastern corner of North America. There is growing evidence to support that the Moors of Iberia and Morocco had long established trading networks in those areas and had already made numerous voyages in the century before.

This indicates that Mathieu Da Costa was already familiar with Canada when he arrived with Champlain. He was said to be able to speak several first nations languages. According to Marc Lescabot, a French author best known for his Histoire de la Nouvelle-



Mathieu Da Costa. PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. HENRY BISHOP, BLACK CULTURAL CENTRE FOR NOVA SCOTIA.

France (1609), many of the aboriginal peoples of the Atlantic regions spoke a 'pidgin' language that was established by Black Moorish seafarers in the mid-1400s. 'Pidgin' flourished around the rim of the Atlantic, facilitating the Moors' ambitious trading enterprises. It was a blend of old Latin, Arabic, Hebrew and Portuguese, interspersed with African

and Amerindian words. Men like Mathieu Da Costa were greatly valued for their expertise.

In fact, he was so sought after by both the French and the Dutch, historical records show that the Dutch secret service kidnapped him from the French in Paris. This event was the subject of a famous Hauge trial in Europe around 1608.

Join the Writer's Circle Sunday, Feb. 17 for an open mic to celebrate love.

Anyone is welcome to participate by either reading their own work or attending to hear and support members of the local writing community.

Refreshments will be served.

The celebration will be held at the NOTL Public Library from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Pauline Reimer Gibson is an Audiologist with over 20 years of experience who loves helping people of all ages in the community. Julia Dick is the Front Office Coordinator and a longtime resident of Virgil. Call Julia today to book a free hearing test!



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Local snaps



A St. Davids resident shovels snow on Tuesday. EUNICE TANG



A wandering cat near Willowbank school. EUNICE TANG



Jason Clements snaps a shot. EUNICE TANG



David Picek takes a jog down the Niagara Parkway. EUNICE TANG

Duplicate Bridge Centre looking for new members

Brittany Carter
The Lake Report

The NOTL Duplicate Bridge Centre is seeking new members.

Helen McCallum, chair of the management committee, said the group, which meets every Tuesday and Friday at the NOTL Community Centre, is “very sociable.”

The group is going to host non-competitive fun duplicate bridge sessions to run alongside regular games in hopes of recruiting new members. The program aims to bring duplicate bridge to people who might be unsure about starting up in the organization, she said.

“We want to introduce fun and friends for people who

would like to play duplicate bridge but feel it’s a little too serious. We would like them to feel relaxed and enjoy a game a bridge.”

The club can have a bad name due to the seriousness of the game. She said she’s hoping to change that by introducing others to the positive benefits of joining. It’s a great way of meeting people, she said, as well as keeping the player’s mind sharp.

“We would like to increase our club membership. We would like to open it up to people who may feel a little intimidated by the duplicate bridge,” she said, adding that the game is “very serious.”

McCallum joined the club 18 months ago, quickly



Helen McCallum. SUPPLIED PHOTO

making her way to a place on the committee.

To bring more activity to her retired husband’s day and to improve their game, she said it was exactly what they were looking for. Her husband had just retired, she

said she thought it would be a good way to keep them both busy and meet new people. Which, she said, they have done.

“I said to him we’ve got to get out, and we’ve got to play bridge and you’ve

got to play golf.” He was reserved about it in the beginning, but she said that changed quickly. “A typical man. But over the time he’s gotten more and more interested and now he loves it.”

The NOTL Duplicate Bridge Centre is an American Contract Bridge League sanctioned club, which was started in September 2012 by Evelyn Eaton with the help of Claude and Muriel Tremblay. Growth of the club has been continuous since its inception, boasting 120 members now.

In 2017, the group successfully petitioned the ACBL to create a new unit for the Niagara area to better service local bridge players. The group focuses on offering more tournaments

and supporting clubs in development of new players.

McCallum said bridge good for keeping active and is a way of warding off dementia, adding that many of the players are “very bright.”

She is a realtor with Bowsley Real Estate, and at 70, she said she isn’t yet ready to retire.

“In real estate you can keep working until you don’t want to work anymore.”

Crediting duplicate bridge with helping in concentration, McCallum said she enjoys what she does and said she will keep working as long as she is active.

For those looking to join, email McCallum at hfmc-callum@gmail.com



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Swimmers of Lake Ontario



Denise Ascenzo
Featured

At the foot of King Street in Niagara-on-the-Lake, near the Niagara River is a huge granite stone marker listing 65 names of a very exclusive club. The marker is dedicated to the people who have successfully completed a solo swim across Lake Ontario.

This is the location, since 1975, where swimmers leave solid ground and set out across Lake Ontario with the determination to endure 20 plus hours in cold, turbulent waters to reach Marilyn Bell Park on the north shores of the lake.

The park was named after Marilyn Bell, a little unknown Canadian girl, who on September 8, 1954, at 11:07 pm, dove into the dark waters of the Niagara River to take on the lake that no one believed could be defeated.

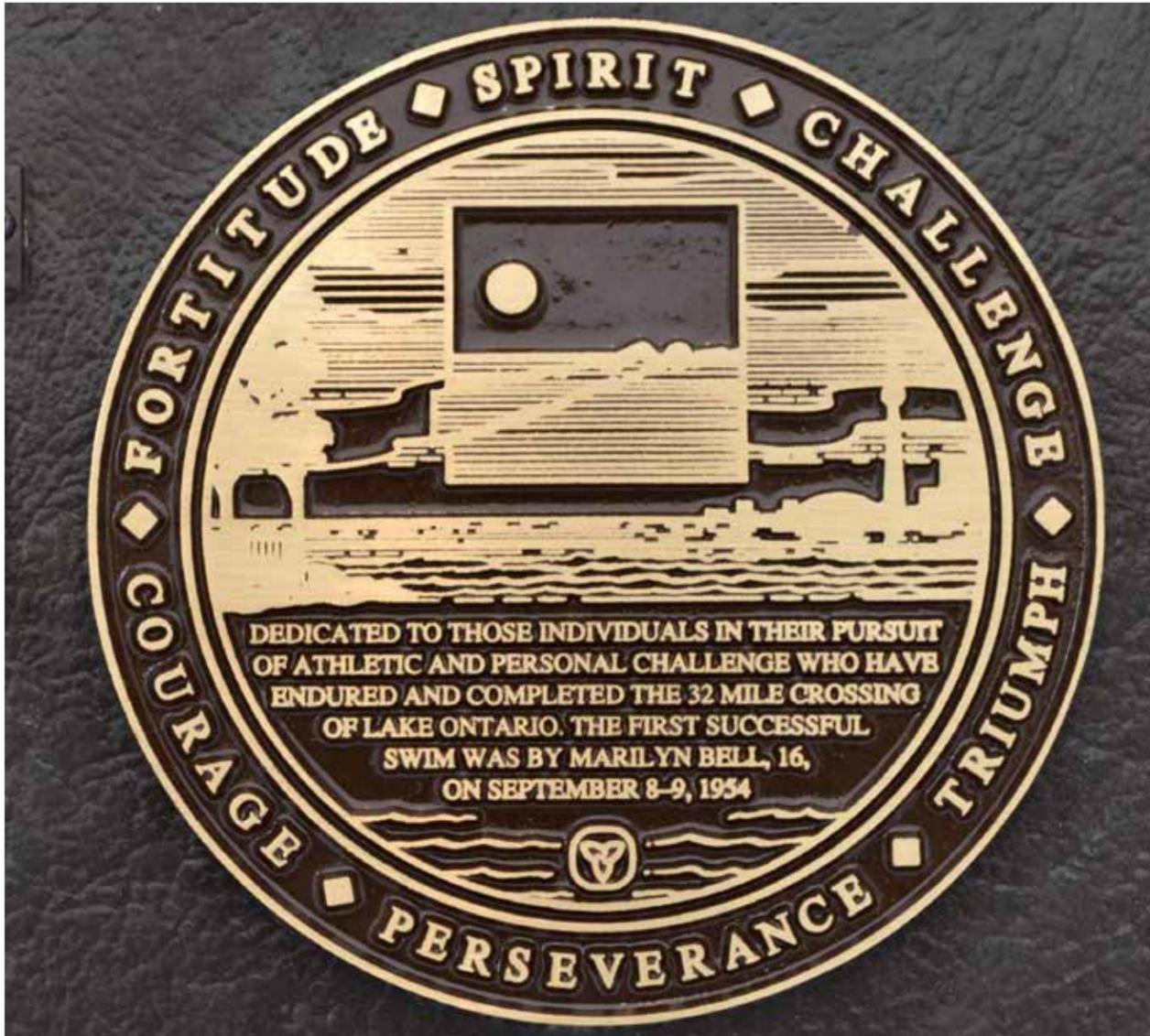
During the summer of 1954, the Canadian National Exhibition decided to sponsor a solo swim across the lake during the exhibition time. Their favourite was American swimmer Florence Chadwick, offering her \$10,000 should she complete the swim. No Canadian was given this offer.

Many people were quite miffed; one in particular was Gus Ryder, a swimming coach and founder of the Lakeshore Swim Club, who knew just the person who could swim across Lake Ontario.

Ryder convinced Bell and her father that she could do this swim and started her training as a marathon swimmer.

Although there was a great amount of publicity surrounding Chadwick's swim of the lake, no one was even aware of Bell's aspirations.

A date had been determined but the swim was delayed several times because



SUPPLIED PHOTO/NIAGARA HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND MUSEUM

of weather conditions. Then on the night of September 8, 1954, from Youngstown NY, the swim was on. Bell's father and Ryder were not around when the announcement came that the marathon swim would start. When Bell found them, they raced to their boat with Ryder telling Bell to dive into the water and get going, they would find her.

Bell dove into the Niagara River, in the dark, with all the faith and trust in the world that her father and her coach would find her. And they did.

Bell had no idea how far she had swum, she had no idea where Chadwick was; she just kept swimming. After 8 hours, Ryder received a message that Chadwick had given up. She had become very sick and her coaches pulled her from the water.

Bell continued swimming. It was daylight when

news reached Toronto that Chadwick had given up, but, an unknown swimmer was coming towards Toronto. People started asking who this could possibly be.

As Bell's boats came into view, other boats came close to support her. The radio stations soon let everyone know that a 16-year-old Canadian girl was making her way into history.

Nearing the end of the swim, it was reported that Bell was struggling to stay focused, that she wanted to call it quits. But Ryder kept urging her on, just one more stroke. Then Bell's good friend, Joan Cooke, showed up to encourage her friend to keep going. Near the end of the swim, when Bell seemed to have reached her limit, Cooke dove into the water and swam along side of Bell.

With over 250,000 people watching from the shores, at 8:06 on September 9,

1954, after 20 hours and 55 minutes, Bell touched the shore on the north side of lake. Lake Ontario had been defeated.

This was the first time that anyone had successfully swum across Lake Ontario; this was the beginning of more successful swims in coming years.

Many of the earlier swimmers started from Youngstown, New York like Bell did, while others started their swims from Jordan Harbour, Port Dalhousie and Niagara on the Lake.

Since 1975, under the Solo Swims of Ontario, Rules and Regulations, all south/north swims must start at the foot of King Street in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Starting in the south and heading north makes sense as the swimmers can use the current of the Niagara River to move them into Lake Ontario. Using a north/south route means the swimmer

is fighting the current of the Niagara River at the end of their marathon swim, when they are most tired.

We are fortunate now to have the list of names on a plaque, starting with Marilyn Bell, the first swimmer to successfully cross Lake Ontario. There are however many other notable people on this plaque, all who have taken on the challenge of the lake and succeeded.

The oldest person is Colleen Shields (Canadian), who at the age of 62, on August 8/9, 2014 completed the crossing in 21 hours and 33 minutes.

The youngest is Trinity Arsenault (Can.), 14 years 71 days, on August 3/4, 2014 who finished her swim in 22 hours and 33 minutes. Many might remember Annaleise Carr (Can.) who was also 14 years old. But her age, on completion of the swim in 2012, was 14 years and 158 days.

Many swimmers have made duplicate and even triplicate solo crossings but one swimmer has crossed the lake five times.

Canadian Vickie Keith, an amazing athlete who not only swam Lake Ontario five times but also has swum across all five Great Lakes, the English Channel, Catalina Channel and Sydney Harbour.

Keith's swims on Lake Ontario can only be noted as remarkable. Her first swim in August of 1986 was a north/south route taking 21 hours. Her second swim was in August of 1987, a north/south/north route taking 56 hours and 10 minutes (that is now 3 crossings). In 1988 Keith swam the traditional south/north route taking 23 hours and 33 minutes. Then in September of 1989 Keith swam a south/north route in 31:00 hours doing the butterfly stroke.

The majority of the swimmers to succeed in swimming Lake Ontario are from Canada - 49, with the United States at 8. Then we have swimmers from Mexico-2, Barbados-1, Australia-1, Italy-1, England-1, Argentina-1 and Egypt-1.

The earliest settlers of Niagara-on-the-Lake saw the foot of King Street as an industrial port complete with docks, customs house, taverns, blacksmiths and warehouses. I wonder what they would think now seeing the park and swimmers getting ready to swim across Lake Ontario. Probably would think they were all "mad."

More of Denise's articles about the history of Niagara-on-the-Lake are available at www.niagaranow.com.

Denise is a regular Niagara Now contributor and a respected voice in the community on historical matters.

She has dedicated countless hours to promoting and advocating for the preservation of local history. If information is disputed, please send us a message.

To get in touch or story idea, please contact editor@niagaranow.com.



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COMMUNITY

All Niagara-on-the-Lake residents and visitors are welcome to submit photos and stories for consideration in this section. Please send submissions to editor@niagaranow.com.



The NOTL Nationals



The Nationals play every Friday at the Meridian Credit Union Arena in Virgil. EUNICE TANG/THE LAKE REPORT



The Town of NOTL is advising residents to stay off thin ice. EUNICE TANG/THE LAKE REPORT



Betty & Jane: Plunger Patrol
Inspecting NOTL's bathrooms:
Zee's Grill

Zee's Grill is a modern bistro whose bathrooms were recommended to us. We checked out their great bathrooms. It had been awarded the "Best bathroom in all of Canada in 2014!" Excited to see this "bathroom besty," we were greeted by a beautiful transparent glass counter sink which made quite a "splash" with us. Each bathroom stall had it's own transparent glass door. "Privacy be gone," you say, but on further investigation the glass doors became "opaque" when you closed and locked the door. Be sure to ask the friendly hosts about the magical science that gives this bathroom a modern, almost "futuristic" vibe! You won't want to miss Zee's bathroom a 4.5 /5 Gold Plunger experience.

4.5/5 Golden Plungers



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FEATURED LOCAL STORY

Young locals take on new responsibility

Brittany Carter
The Lake Report

In the heart of Old Town, a young family is bringing a millennial perspective to a dated business model.

Sometimes a name just fits – Cheese Secrets is a boutique cheese shop tucked away on Market Street behind Old Town's main strip, like a secret yet to be discovered. Anyone who has not uncovered this clandestine storefront is missing out on the collection of creamy, buttery and earthy varieties of cheese, all available to the passerby who happens into the charming boutique.

Xavier Allard, 26, looked into acquiring the little shop of cheese after his girlfriend told him it was on the market.

The shop has been in operation since 2009 and Xavier says the previous owners, Colleen and Eugene Johnson, were set to retire. "The timing was just right."

A family of food lovers, the three people running the shop have been in the food industry for years. Xavier is officially the director of operations, with his mother, Annie Allard, as the owner. Melanie Williams, 23, also has a big role to play. She is mother to nine-month-old Ezra Carmelle Allard and the creative genius behind the alternative cheese wedding cakes the shop has put together.

"It's just our teamwork together that really has us pulling through," Xavier says of working side-by-side.

The family is serious about their desire to bring everything they have to this new venture. They took possession of the store last Sept. 1 and Xavier says it's been a lot of fun.

The couple are taking courses at George Brown College to develop an

understanding of the intricacies of cheese, and to gain a better understanding of its history and how it applies to the business.

Rushing from the store after a brief interview, being busy isn't something they have time to worry about. They say they want to beat the Toronto traffic to make it to George Brown on time, leaving young Ezra in Annie's capable hands while she prepares to close the shop for the day.

Running a business and raising a child – it really does take a village.

Annie always wanted to own a boutique cheese shop, but she says they weren't really a thing when she was younger. She says this opportunity fit in well with her current goals.

Xavier has been preparing himself for this position his whole life, he just wasn't aware of it at the time.

He started his work career in the kitchen at Marine-land as a dishwasher who dabbled in prep work. Over the next few years he transitioned to prep-cook at Queen's Landing, in between working on the family farm, Just Peachie Farms, on Hunter Road in NOTL.

Throughout his career, he worked in garde manger (French for "keeper of the food"). It is literally a cool, well-ventilated area where cold dishes are prepared. At the time he says he wasn't fond of the job, but it gave him the experience and skills he needed to succeed in this venture.

Queen's Landing is also where Melanie and Xavier met. As a pastry chef, Melanie would pull treats out of the freezer for Xavier when she knew he was going to be coming around. Looking back on their encounters, Xavier says that's when he knew he wanted to pursue a relationship with her.

Cheese shop owners feeling gouda



Xavier Allard, Melanie Williams and Ezra Carmelle Allard. BRITTANY CARTER

Young love to young family to young business owners – it's been an experience he says he's happy to be doing together.

The family is no stranger to cheese. Xavier says they raised goats on their family farm for six years. During that time, he watched Annie make cheese with the left-over milk, experimenting and teaching herself the scientific side of cheese-making. It's just another step that brought them closer to the eventual ownership of Cheese Secrets.

He says there's so much more to it than science, though.

"It's really a science, but there's an art to it too. So many steps and so many intricacies through the process that will give a different end result."

His growing passion for cheese will take the shop to the next level. He says his aim is to bring in cheese from Canadian and local sources. He cites Five Brothers from Gunn's

Hill Artisan Cheese in Woodstock, Ont., as one of his favourites, urging anyone interested to give it a try. It's delicately aged for eight months on cedar planks and has "complex and robust flavours."

He's been eager to show the artistic side of the business. To boost the shop's online presence, Xavier has been posting photos of the various cheese boards they create and he says he's been trying to use social media to promote the business.

So far, it has been working. Annie says the shop has seen a 20 per cent increase in business since they took the reins.

Xavier's ease speaking with anyone who walks in and his customer service skills are a part of what will keep people coming back, Annie says, adding that his passion for learning more about the business won't hurt.

As for what the future holds? Eventually, Xavier plans to take full ownership



A "cheese cake" by Cheese Secrets. SUPPLIED

of the store.

He also hinted at future plans. He hopes to bring in new cheeses and different methods of presenting and consuming them. Possible partnerships and pairings might also happen down the road. That's all to be seen, though – in keeping with

the name, it's a secret for now.

In the meantime, curious customers will have to head into the boutique smelling robustly of various cheeses and strike up a conversation with the always friendly and knowledgeable family sure to be on scene.

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