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Province makes early changes to police board

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Steve Cousins, the most recent chair of Stratford's police service board, has been removed as a member of the board by the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

The removal was approved and ordered on Dec. 11, made effective Dec. 31, though was only posted on Jan. 8 to the Government of Ontario's website.

The board consists of two municipal officials, currently held by Mayor Martin Ritsma and Coun. Harjinder Nijjar, one community representative, currently held by Lisa Wilde, and two provincial appointments. The latter two were formerly held by Tim Doherty and Cousins, though is now filled by Dan Mathieson and Travis Blum, according to police Chief Greg Skinner (currently, only Mathieson, Ritsma, Nijjar and Wilde are listed on the City of Stratford's website as members of the board).

"The provincial appointments are the sole purview of the province, and they have their processes for identifying and filling provincial vacancies on police service boards," Skinner said in an emailed statement when asked to comment on the change.

"The board, under the stewardship of Steve Cousins, Martin Ritsma and Harj Nijjar, has been making significant gains for the service and the community," Skinner wrote. "In addition to enhancing efficiencies ... they have taken a critical look at the strategic direction of the service in compliance with new legislation and are in the process of creating a strategic

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(AMANDA NELSON PHOTO)

Amy Halls and her dog Darbee head out for their daily walk near Findlay Avenue despite the -16°C temperatures. Halls says Darbee loves the snow — even if she's not quite as enthusiastic.

Another bright year for Lights On Stratford as 2025/26 season wraps

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

Despite inclement weather like blizzards and freezing rain, Destination Stratford's sixth annual Lights On Stratford was still a success.

Under the theme RADIANCE, the annual winter festival of lights ran from Dec. 12, 2025 to Jan. 18, 2026.

"Bringing people together in the deep dark winter to experience joy and wonder through light art is what it's all about. It's a massive undertaking to host a multi-week in-

ternational lights festival, but it's all worthwhile when there are smiles and delight coming from our patrons," Zac Gribble, Destination Stratford executive director, said to the Times.

Some of the Lights On Stratford nights were threatened, even cancelled, due to inclement weather. However, the event still drew in plenty of attendees.

"Our intrepid crews and staff persevered and we're really proud of this year's ambitious programming and light art installations that drew so many people to brave the el-

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Another bright year for Lights On Stratford

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

ements and experience our winter lights," Gribble said.

Out of the four displays, Gribble said CHRONOHARP in Market Square drew in 22,103 patrons and BIRDS OF A FEATHER on Tom Patterson Island drew in 21,307 patrons, so both installations are a near tie for most popular installations. Younger families flocked to the BIRDS OF A FEATHER installation more often.

"Even among the six birds, everyone

gravitated towards different ones, but I think that the largest of them, WHOO-DINI the Snowy Owl, was definitely the crowd favourite," he said.

Birds of a Feather was designed in partnership with Birds Canada and Nature Canada, as Stratford has been recognized as a bird-friendly city. Destination Stratford distributed 2,500 junior birder guides during the event and more than 250 people entered the bird naming contest.

The blowup birds featured in BIRDS

OF A FEATHER were WHOO-DINI the Snowy Owl, JAYSTIN PEEPER the Blue Jay, AVONDEE the Black-capped Chickadee, TOM TWEETERSON the Cardinal, SUNSHINE the Goldfinch and TAPS (Sir Taps-a-Lot) the Downey Woodpecker, will re-appear in other future Stratford events. The EVERBRIGHT installation inside the Destination Stratford Welcome Centre is also a permanent exhibition.

The silent discos were also very popular

this year, with the last taking place Jan. 17.

"This winter we featured four local DJs at eight silent disco parties and we were very pleased with how popular and well attended these events were," said Gribble. "There's something incredibly satisfying as a Canadian when we see hundreds of people bundled up in their warmest winter wear to brave the elements while silently dancing and celebrating together under the lights in Market Square and Tom Patterson Island."



(SARAH CAIRNS PHOTO)

WHOO-DINI the Snowy Owl was the most popular bird at the BIRDS OF A FEATHER Installation on Tom Patterson Island.



(SARAH CAIRNS PHOTO)

The CHRONOHARP brought many attendees down to play along with the beams and watch the changing colours and patterns of the lights.

Stratford social services helping renters bridge the gap toward home ownership with loan program

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Stratford social services department is continuing to offer financial assistance to residents of Stratford, St. Marys and Perth County, as well as prospective area residents, looking to make the jump from renting to home ownership.

The City of Stratford recently posted to its Facebook page about the social services department's affordable home-ownership loan program, a provincially funded initiative first launched in 2007 that offers loans of up to five per cent of the purchase price of a home to those with low-to-moderate income who are

currently renting and meet the program's eligibility requirements.

"There's been different pots of provincial money over the years, and then what happens is when the loans get paid back, it goes into a revolving fund that goes back out (in the form of loans)," said social services business integration manager Shannon Archer. "Right now, we're just in the revolving fund; there hasn't been any new funding in several years — probably 2017 was the last time we allocated provincial funding to home-ownership."

"The idea behind the program is to recognize the fact there are people in the rental market where their only barrier to homeownership is that downpayment. So, the idea is to provide them with a downpayment assistance loan in order to free up the rental market for those who truly can't afford homeownership."

Those loans, Archer ex-

plained, are either forgiven after 20 years if the owners remain residents of either Stratford, St. Marys or Perth County and retain that home as their sole and primary residence, or they are paid back when the home is either sold or transitioned into a rental property at five per cent of the value or sale price of the home.

One recent change to the program is the option for out-of-area renters to apply to the program with proof they have employment or an offer of employment in Stratford, St. Marys or Perth County. The program now also offers downpayment assistance loans on new builds — another recent change.

"(The program) has not been used a lot in the last several years, and I think that is more a sign of what's going on with the market and the craziness through the pandemic, but since 2007, we have extended out 90 loans totalling just over \$1.1 million," Archer said. "We have seen 41 of those repaid to us over the years, so that brought about \$650,000 back into the pot and some of that money has been

re-extended out.

"Right now, we do have a healthy chunk of money sitting there. We did three loans in 2025 and then we did two from 2020-2025 — there was a gap there when it wasn't really well used ... when homeownership wasn't affordable for anybody. And back in the early inception, it was so popular we would run out of money."

As a result of the soaring housing prices during the COVID-19 pandemic, Archer said there were a number of program participants who chose to sell their homes, which led to an influx of repaid loans and money being funnelled back into the program. Now, she said the social services department is once again promoting the program not only to free up rental housing and encourage those who work in the area to also live here, but because there is funding available now.

For more information and to review program eligibility requirements, visit www.stratford.ca/en/inside-city-hall/housing.aspx, scroll down and click the "Affordable Homeownership" option.

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(AMANDA NELSON PHOTO)

Jack Alblas clears a neighbour's driveway during the Jan. 20 snowstorm. He says looking out for one another is especially important during cold, stormy days.



(AMANDA NELSON PHOTO)

Dominique Bushfield escapes the cold with a quick stop at Balzac's before heading home during the Jan. 20 winter storm.



(AMANDA NELSON PHOTO)

Sidewalk snowplows work throughout the day in downtown Stratford as crews battle heavy snowfall during the Jan. 20 storm.



(AMANDA NELSON PHOTO)

Backroads around Stratford are barely visible as wind and heavy snowfall reduce visibility during the Jan. 20 storm.

Province makes early changes to police board

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

plan focused on the future of policing prioritizing community engagement, they have taken significant steps to restructure the police service to contain costs and enhance frontline service delivery and they have worked tirelessly on commissioning a new police HQ.

"I am confident the new board members will continue to focus on improving frontline service delivery, containing costs and ensuring that the Stratford police provides a sustainable, high performing service to the residents and visitors to Stratford, St. Marys and Perth South."

Speaking with the Times, Ritsma confirmed that the news was a surprise to

him, having only heard of the change on Jan. 14 after media reached out inquiring about it. He has yet to receive anything from the ministry officially but reached out to local MPP Matthew Rae about the move.

"And he indicated to me that it was them addressing across the province appointees at different police service boards from the province, provincial appointees," Ritsma shared. "... I know in the past, they've been slower with regards to the replacement of those individuals, where their scheduled appointment had lapsed or were about to lapse.

"... They recognize that their appointee of Steve Cousins was coming towards the

end of his mandate, and like other individuals across the province, they revoked that and moved forward on naming a new individual."

Ritsma said that while the change may be surprising to members of the public, he believes from his conversations with Rae that it was only the early execution of an ongoing process. Like Skinner, he is looking forward to a new year for the board.

"We're going to have a full complement," Ritsma said. "The board will be filled out with Lisa Wilde, who is no stranger to the community, and will add such strength from her position with the Emily Murphy Centre. I know Travis Blum as well, with regards to his com-

mitment to the business community and beyond. You know, he's been involved with things like the Chamber of Commerce, so he will bring that strength. And of course, Dan's previous work with the police services board will be an asset as well."

The Times attempted to reach Cousins for comment, though did not hear back in time for press.

According to the agenda package of the board's most recent meeting on Jan. 21 (after press time), elections for the 2026 chair and vice chair were scheduled. Details from the meeting will be published in the Times' next regular edition on Jan. 30.

Editorial

Happy Birthday to me



AMANDA NELSON

Times Reporter

I turned 40 this week, and I feel happy and sad — and not nearly as “at peace” as I once thought I’d be at this point in my life. But the older I get, the more I realize that might actually be the whole point.

How boring would life be if

we truly had it all together? How small would it feel if everything followed a neat, predictable path — if there were no wrong turns, no pivots, no heartbreak or loss, no moments where you had to pause and ask yourself, “Is this still working for me?” I wouldn’t have learned nearly as much about myself if I hadn’t been forced to rethink what stability, success and happiness actually mean.

Life at 40 carries this strange, steady feeling. Not because things are simple, but because I’ve learned that complexity is part of the deal. Life is built from false starts and recalibrations, from incredible people and difficult moments, from choices that make sense only in hindsight. When I look back now, I can see how

those chaotic moments shaped me and sharpened my instincts, softened my expectations, and taught me how to adapt. And somehow, that’s okay with me.

When I was 20, I worried constantly. I thought I’d never have enough money, never be successful enough, and that by 40 or 50 I’d finally have life figured out. I believed security came from plans, timelines and knowing exactly where I was headed. But here I am at 40, and I don’t have it figured out at all. What I do have is something I didn’t expect: trust in myself.

I have no idea where life will lead me. I don’t know exactly when I’ll retire, where my kids will settle, or what the world will look like in a few years. All of

that used to overwhelm me. Now, it doesn’t. I’ve learned that the only real safety net I have is my ability to adapt, to make thoughtful choices, and to keep going even when the path isn’t clear.

I remember looking at my parents in their 40s and thinking they had everything together. They seemed certain and secure. But now I understand something I couldn’t see then: everyone is improvising. No one really knows what’s coming. We can’t predict illness or loss or unexpected success.

And maybe this is what I’ve finally figured out at 40: life isn’t something you solve. It’s something you live. It’s something you respond to, adjust to, and sometimes sit with. And that’s

okay.

So happy birthday to me — the 40-year-old who changed direction a million times, recalibrated her expectations and learned that starting over isn’t a bad thing. Sometimes it just means choosing differently.

What I do know is that I have a big heart, work that feels meaningful, a family I’m grateful for, incredible kids, amazing friends and a healthy and reliable body.

The 40-year-old version of me isn’t failing. I’m figuring it out as I go — learning that not knowing where life will lead isn’t a weakness, it’s actually the whole point.

Have a thought or want to connect? Email me at amandajane.writer@gmail.com

The need for mandated winter-driving training in Canada



GALEN SIMMONS

Regional Editor

Driving in the winter and driv-

ing the rest of the year are two very different beasts in Canada.

While driving always comes with inherent dangers — distractions, impaired or entitled drivers, weather, road conditions and the like — the mere fact that snow and ice are pretty much ever-present on road surfaces in the winter cranks those dangers up several notches.

Stopping takes more time, visibility can reduce to almost nothing in the blink of an eye and there is no way to know if the driver behind you is experienced enough to know how to handle the sudden

appearance of break lights ahead of them. Both inexperience and overconfidence can be killers in

the winter, and in my opinion, our driver-education system falls short in preparing drivers for what they will face after the first snowfall in November.

I consider myself a fairly adept winter driver, not because I learned that set of skills while taking drivers-ed at age 16, but because I spent the first year and a half of my career in Saskatchewan.

Before I left the relatively mild winters I grew up with in Hamilton for the frigid hellscape that is Saskatchewan in the wintertime, I had the good fortune of discovering Canada’s Worst Driver, a show that aired on the Discovery Channel from 2005-2018. The show, its host, Andrew Younghusband, and its panel of driving and legal experts identified the most dangerous drivers across the country, attempted to rehabilitate them with the skills and knowledge they needed to be safe on the road, and confiscated the license of the driver who, at the end of each season, was deemed Canada’s Worst Driv-

er.

While this show taught me a lot about what not to do on Canadian roads, the most important lesson I took away from it was what do when you find yourself skidding on ice and snow. The advice I retained somewhere deep my subconscious about staying calm, easing off the gas and steering in the direction I want to go, which I then put into practice numerous times while driving the icy roads of our middle prairie province, has saved me from wrecking my car and injuring myself time and again.

But why did I have to learn that from a television show? Shouldn’t winter driving be part of the standard drivers-ed training we all receive, and not just an extra course you can pay for after becoming fully licensed? Should it not be mandatory for newcomers to Canada, especially those immigrating from much-warmer climates who are not used to Canadian winters, to learn how to skid safely and with control?

Understanding the concepts and putting them into practice are two very different things, and the first time a new driver or a driver who is new to Canadian roads puts those concepts into practice should not coincide with the first snowfall of winter. Driving and stopping on ice and snow should be practiced in a controlled setting or, at very least, with a trained driving instructor in the passenger seat.

There are many other lessons Canadian drivers need to learn, including the importance of winter tires, how to prepare your car for the colder months and what to do if you end up stuck in a ditch or a snowbank at the side of the road in the winter.

While that information is all readily available online, including on the Transport Canada website at tc.gc.ca/en/road-transportation/stay-safe-when-driving/winter-driving, we could all use a little more practice to keep ourselves and others safe on the road.

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Editorial

Someone has to stand on guard for thee ... right?



CONNOR LUCZKA

Times Editor

I don't like how little I know about Canadian history and how much I know about American history. I never have. And to be fair, I don't think I'm alone in this problematic relationship. Martin Short famously said that when Americans watch TV, they watch TV. When Canadians watch TV, they watch American TV. I guess the same can be said about our history and politics. Most Canadians walking down the street can probably name more American presidents than Canadian prime ministers, probably know more about contemporary American politics, too.

It drives me nuts, so in an effort to curb that tendency, I've been trying to do more reading and listening and learning about our own country. One of the first

books I picked up is *Song of a Nation* by Robert Harris, detailing the life of *O Canada* composer Calixa Lavallée.

Calixa Lavallée? I feel like I would have remembered a name like that. Why is it that the composer of our national anthem isn't well known amongst Canadians? Well, after reading I can probably guess why.

Lavallée was born in mid-19th century Quebec, lived in Montreal for a spell, before going to travel the United States ... as a blackface minstrel performer. While working as a musician, the American Civil War broke out and Lavallée joined the Union army, notably serving in one of the most consequential battles, the Battle of Antietam. After the war he returned to Montreal and in all likelihood opposed the idea of confederation. As a Quebecer through and through, who was born in the aftermath of the Rebellions of 1837-1838 and the xenophobic rhetoric of then Governor General Lord Durham, he feared what many Quebecers did: the end of their distinct culture and history, if they were to be part of this Confederation. In fact, Lavallée likely supported an absorption of Canada into the U.S. at this time. He wrote for a pro-U.S. newspaper at the time

which opposed confederation and knew from his travels that many French settlements in the U.S. had (at the time) been able to celebrate their culture with a flourish.

So it was that a blackface-performing, American-wannabe composed the tune which would eventually become our national anthem – and the kicker is that he wrote it for St. Jean-Baptiste Day, hardly a day that speaks to Canadian unity.

In 1866, the year before Canada became Canada, Lavallée left for the states. He came back to Montreal for a stint, but lived out his later years in Boston, where he died in 1891 and was buried, before he was exhumed and reinterred in Montreal about 40 years later.

Fast forward 90 years later and the elephant in the room is that as we speak, current U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is blatantly threatening to annex Greenland and sharing on social media an altered image of the northern hemisphere with Greenland – and Canada – absorbed into the U.S.

In November of last year, the administration produced the National Security Strategy, which suggests the restoration of "American preeminence in the

western hemisphere" – a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. I don't think I've read or seen near enough media coverage of this document (which is only 30 pages long) and I haven't read a single news article on what it means for Canada. And believe me, I've looked.

In it, when talking about the western hemisphere, the administration states it will enlist established friends and expand and cultivate new partners.

"The goal is for our partner nations to build up their domestic economies, while an economically stronger and more sophisticated western hemisphere becomes an increasingly attractive market for American commerce and investment," the strategy reads. "Strengthening critical supply chains in this hemisphere will reduce dependencies and increase American economic resilience. The linkages created between America and our partners will benefit both sides while making it harder for non-hemispheric competitors to increase their influence in the region. And even as we prioritize commercial diplomacy, we will work to strengthen our security partnerships – from weapons sales to intelligence sharing to joint exercises."

Did all that go out the window?

Canada is not mentioned when discussing "partner nations," and the U.S. is doing the opposite of strengthening its partnerships with us. It begs the question, if Canada or other NATO allies like Denmark aren't partners, then who is?

In the wake of an utterly expended relationship with the U.S., I think learning more about our national anthem's composer wasn't as patriotic as I would have liked. In fact, after finishing reading, I was stuck wondering why we even keep singing it at all, given what is going on.

When Stratford city council met for the first time in the new year they played the national anthem, as they do every meeting. Like every meeting, the gallery was filled with people singing along. It made me think of the 4 Nations Face-Off last year, when Canadians were singing the anthem loudly and booing the American anthem even louder.

It reminded me that though the anthem was composed by one and written by another, it belongs to much more than just them. In truth, though I don't think Lavallée would stand on guard for her, I know my neighbours would – perhaps that's why *O Canada* is and always will be our national anthem.

Letters to the editor: Taking a stand and helping our neighbours

Time to take a stand

It is time that Stratford takes a stand in support of Canadian sovereignty and displays only the Canadian flag in all public spaces.

This is my fifth letter regarding the subject issue, with the prior four letters sent to Mayor Ritsma. The last letter (Nov. 3, 2025) was promised to be shared with the director of community services. There has been no response to date.

In March 2025 city council discussed the issue as it related to trade hostilities and resolved that since U.S. visitors stayed longer and spent more money than other visitors to Stratford, the city would continue to fly American flags alongside our Canadian Maple Leaf. Mayor Ritsma did, however, commit to revisiting the issue if U.S. rhetoric heightened.

What has occurred in the USA since Jan. 2025 has escalated so far beyond trade hostilities and rhetoric it transcends rational

comprehension. It would take too many pages to list all the evil and cruel atrocities that have occurred in America over the past year, but the most alarming of those include:

- Use of violent paramilitary force against U.S. residents, including murder and maiming in broad daylight, then withholding emergency medical care

- Illegal deployment of U.S. military in U.S. cities

- Illegal military action against other sovereign countries and threats to overtake NATO countries

- Disregard of the rule of law and judicial decisions

- Use of Nazi/white supremacist words, phrases, slogans, images and tactics including house-to-house searches

- Ongoing election interference and assaults on voter rights

- New National Security Strategy that plays up to Russia and threatens the rules-based international order

- Harassment and abuse of the free press, especially toward women of colour

- Blatant corruption and financial market manipulation to benefit the administration and its billionaire donors, as well as the criminals who have purchased pardons

- Abusing government power to target and retaliate against political opponents

- Dismantling of reproductive health care

It is revolting to stand in the Allman Arena while singing *O Canada* and see the American flag beside the Maple Leaf. There is no longer any justification for Stratford flying the flag of that kind of country. No amount of tourism dollars can justify flying that flag. Nor does it matter if hockey players or other athletes come from the U.S.

Past alliances have been broken. America is no longer a reliable partner and cannot be trusted. Even Stephen Harper is

supporting economic movement away from the U.S. and the *Globe and Mail* editorial writes "Wake Up Canada" (Jan 9, 2026).

I have seen similar thoughts on this issue posted on social media and predictably the trolls, haters, and paid bots flock to comment with their pro-U.S. nonsense. If you love it that much, move there. What is happening down there is an abuse of basic humanity and decency. Every human should be outraged and do something.

I do my small part by attending protests, boycotting U.S. products, services and travel, and keeping informed on the daily horrors.

City council needs to stand on the side of Canadian values and principles and take down the flag of the disgrace that America has become.

Nadine Hayes,
Stratford

Helping our unhoused in Stratford

I am so aware of the unhoused community in Stratford. I will be very honest I was raised with a roof over my head and food in my belly.

I am aware the city has to keep the budget real.

I'd like to suggest the city tap into the Canadian Property Brothers. They have come to Canadian cities and built small homes 8x8 with amenities.

Beth Gleadall,
Stratford

Thank you

On Friday, Jan. 16, I was shoveling the sidewalk full of ice and snow. The young man operating the sidewalk snow plow turned around and did it for me. What a kind thing to do, thank you.

Fran Murray,
Stratford

Looking back, looking ahead, part 3: MP Nater

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

If one word could sum up 2025, it would perhaps be “uncertainty,” according to Perth-Wellington MP John Nater.

“2025 started out with a great deal of uncertainty, and that uncertainty seemed to be carried on throughout the entire year,” Nater said, citing developments throughout the year regarding trade, alliances and the economic health of Canada and the world.

“Locally, I think we have to give a huge amount of credit to local businesses and groups here in Perth-Wellington. It was not an easy year to deal with, but you have to give credit to local businesses and industries who really met the moment, who persevered, shifted and made changes where things were needed, found new suppliers where possible and really persevered throughout the year.

“Obviously, it was not an easy year, and obviously further challenges are going to be on the horizon, but you know – credit to our local industries and businesses who really did the hard work this past year.”

One of the prominent features of 2025 was the snap election called by Prime Minister Mark Carney. For Nater, the election was a mixed result: while he was re-elected to parliament, his party remained the Official Opposition.

Nater said that he is “humbled and honoured” to be chosen to represent

Perth-Wellington again. While only a few months prior, before Carney took over after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau resigned, polls indicated a Pierre Poilievre-led Conservative Party would win an election, Nater said it was another example of last year’s uncertain times.

“We came close, but close only counts in horseshoes,” Nater said. “There’s a lot of work that has to be done to reflect on what went well in the election campaign for the Conservative Party. And obviously, what needs to change for any future elections.”

Next week, the party hosts its annual convention from Jan. 29 to 31 – and will hold a leadership review on Jan. 30. As an assistant deputy speaker, Nater was not at liberty to say his preference going into the vote – given his nonpartisan role – though he did say from what he’s heard Poilievre will continue as leader with a resounding vote.

On last year’s election, Nater said that when he was knocking on doors in Perth-Wellington, the number of engaged young people was astounding. He is waiting for Elections Canada to provide official numbers but is optimistic the stats will match his experience door to door.

“It was a crazy year, but I think the highlight for me was how people responded to all the challenges and all the threats this past year,” Nater said. “Locally, we had a great year here in terms of tourism, it was a strong year in the agriculture industry. And those are really two of the industries,



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Perth-Wellington MP John Nater reflects on 2025 and looks ahead to 2026. who said that advocating for local infrastructure projects in the area is something he will be doing continually throughout 2026.

“The other thing I’m hearing a lot about is the challenges of crime, and we really do need to address some of the real factors that are playing into that, and one of them is bail reform,” Nater said. “I hear a lot locally about property crime. And unfortunately, bail has been playing a huge role into that, where repeat offenders who are on bail are committing these crimes. So we really need to tackle that. And there is legislation for the house. So ... I’m hopeful that we can see that addressed relatively early in the new year.”

Turning to 2026 and the year ahead, Nater said that the government of Canada should be keeping an eye on the economy writ large – and more specifically, hesitancy in the private sector around capital expansion. Throughout last year’s on-again, off-again tariff threats, local businesses responded with caution. This year, the government should be looking at ways to help address business owners’ hesitancy.

For all Canadians, the cost of living will be a real challenge, he added, as it has been in the near past. The rising costs due to inflation are hampering local families and the cost of food prices are rising even more than the regular rate of inflation, which is putting more of a burden on local food banks already dealing with record-high usage.

“It’s not sustainable. And in a country like ours, and in a community like ours where we have literally some of the strongest agricultural roots in the world, to have so many people who are food insecure? It’s a blight on our country.”

During the Times’ interviews with both Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma and Perth-Wellington MPP Matthew Rae, infrastructure topped the list of priorities for this year – which is also the case for Nater,

Nater wrapped up his reflection on 2025 and 2026 by highlighting an issue that perhaps has been pushed aside due to other problems in the spotlight right now: mental health.

“I think it is an issue that may not always be top of mind, may not always be at the forefront. We need to focus on mental health. We need to be aware of it in our communities and our families and our co-workers.”

“... Mental health is health, and we need to be prepared to lend that assistance and also have the resources available for folks who are struggling,” Nater said.



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Stratford Third Age Learning offering five new courses starting February

AMANDA NELSON

Times Reporter

February courses are now open to seniors looking to expand their knowledge of worldly topics, including philosophy, literature, gender identity and more.

Stratford Third Age Learning (S3AL) is an organization dedicated to providing seniors with opportunities for active learning, which can help promote cognitive resilience and longevity, says Dr. Jean Hewitt, board chair.

"Retirement doesn't mean you just sit back and think into old age. You can't. It's a whole lifetime you have left," said Hewitt. "We have this amazing opportu-

nity to learn about things that have always been on your bucket list."

S3AL is a new organization in Stratford, based on research on the aging brain and the need to keep the brain as active as possible, and also aims to connect locals on a deeper level.

"The integrated and shared learning that goes on in our courses also means that people also get to know others, form new friendships and have fun," said Hewitt.

February courses have been added to the website, including new classes focused on adult learning and growth.

"I am particularly pleased that talented people are coming forward and volunteering to lead courses," said Hewitt. "Many

people will know David Prosser from the humorous and informative talks he has given for the theatre."

Hewitt says that Prosser will teach a course called Pick a Year, in which he will share a year he thinks was pivotal in history. Members of the group will share their choice of a year that changed their lives and/or the world.

Another course offered this February is Where on Earth Have You Been, where Allan Stewart from St Marys will be leading discussions on their travels.

"This will be a great chance for people to share information about memorable places to which they have been, local or far away," says Hewitt. "Participants can

learn more about travelling as a senior, travelling solo and ways to get good deals on travel packages."

Specifically geared toward men, Doug Peterman, creator and educator, will lead a course with discussions focusing on the challenges of retirement, finding your new identity and facing the changes that come with aging.

The popular writing course and art journaling courses are currently full. Those looking for these courses are encouraged to check back at later dates.

For more information, please visit www.S3AL.ca. For course registration, please contact registrar Denise Winger at stratford3al@gmail.com.

Mayor Ritsma advocating for more provincial funding for PC Connect

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

The mayor of Stratford learned from talking to transit riders getting off the PC Connect and while on the bus himself the value of the service to the community and is hoping the provincial government takes it into consideration for future funding.

Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma met with provincial representatives on Jan. 19 to advocate for PC Connect and its importance to Stratford and surrounding area residents. Representatives from North Perth and West Perth were also in attendance. During the meeting, he told MP Hardeep Singh Grewal, the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Transporta-

tion, about his last trip on the PC Connect bus and met other riders using the service for a variety of purposes.

"There was one person on the bus coming from St. Marys to Stratford to get childcare for her daughter. There was a gentleman on that same bus coming out of London for a doctor's appointment in Stratford General. Another lady coming out of London to go to the (Stratford) Festival, so it's that varied," Ritsma said.

He also said at the meeting that the PC Connect bus also connects passengers to Stratford Transit for ridership around the city and ONEX bussing towards the Toronto Pearson International Airport.

Ritsma was pleased with how the meeting went, especially with members of provincial parliament eager to ask lots of

questions.

"I was pleased that they received the delegation and how attentive they were and to ask for follow up information and that will be shared with them, moving forward," he said.

PC Connect received initial funding from the Government of Ontario's Community Transportation Grant and has seen an increase in ridership over the years. The next step for Stratford and Perth West is applying for the Ontario Transit Investment Fund to offset the fees of PC Connect. In 2025, PC Connect ridership was more than 22,500.

"If we charge the users of the service full-rate as it would cost us without any subsidies through our

municipalities involved and/or through the provincial government, probably our ridership wouldn't be where it is," Ritsma said.

The mayor said whether it's VIA Rail, ONEX or PC Connect, he tries to ride public transit when he can. Ritsma is hopeful PC Connect is a recipient of the Ontario Transit Investment Fund.

"This is an outstanding service that we offer. It's almost one of its kind across the province and so I hold out great hope for it," he said.



Weekend Quiz

By Jake Grant

1. What is a second full moon in a month called?
2. What was Alaska called before 1867?
3. What King of England had six wives?
4. Legendary American frontiersman "Buffalo Bill" died where?
5. Eczema affects which organ of the body?
6. How many individual 1x1 squares are on a chess board?
7. What animal has the largest ears?
8. The Archipelago Sea belongs to what country?
9. What year did actor Heath Ledger die?
10. What company created Clash Royale?

This week's answers are found on pg. 23

HPPH advises public to be safe in cold temperatures

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

Cold temperatures with added wind chill values persist in Huron-Perth this week, according to Environment and Climate Change Canada. Windchill values may range from -16°C to -30°C with the coldest temperatures occurring overnight in most areas.

Huron Perth Public Health (HPPH) reminds the public that very cold temperatures can pose risks for cold-related injuries, including frostnip (mild frostbite), frostbite and hypothermia, all of which can be prevented. Additionally, cold weather can worsen existing health conditions, particularly those affecting the heart or lungs. Health risks are highest for people experiencing homelessness, older adults, infants and children, people with pre-existing health conditions such as heart or lung disease and those who work or enjoy recreation outdoors.

To prevent cold-related injuries and ensure the safety of yourself, your family,

and others from the dangers of very cold temperatures:

- Check the weather – verify conditions before going out. Keep children indoors when it's -27°C or colder (including wind chill).
- Check on others – ensure friends, family and neighbors are warm and safe, both indoors and outdoors.
- Dress appropriately – wear layers, including a hat, gloves, a scarf, warm socks and waterproof boots.
- Recognize cold injuries – be aware of frostnip, frostbite and hypothermia. Monitor vulnerable individuals for symptoms.
- Stay warm and dry – seek shelter from the cold and take breaks indoors. Change into dry clothing if you get wet and drink warm beverages (avoid alcohol and caffeine).
- Travel safely – avoid unnecessary travel. Keep an emergency kit in your vehicle.

For relief from cold temperatures locally, check with your municipality to find available warming spaces near you.

Robert Ritz holding second open house on GTR site next month

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

For those that missed local architect Robert Ritz's last presentation on his vision for the Grand Trunk renewal project, they will soon get a second chance.

Ritz will be hosting another presentation next month where he will be reminding Stratford residents how their city can, and has, punched well above its weight.

This next open house is not just a repeat of the previous meeting, though. Ritz plans to discuss costs, financing, structural integrity, affordable housing and the practicalities of solar. He also has a list of invited professionals who will speak on the finer points of the project.

The open house takes place at the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans Association on 151 Lorne Ave. East, Friday, Feb. 5 at 7 p.m.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Two Stratford churches marked the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity with a clergy exchange. Rev. Tim Elliott (Anglican) officiated at Zion Lutheran Church, Rev. Jeff Laustsen (Lutheran) officiated and preached at Avondale United Church and Rev. Keith Reynolds (United) preached at Zion Lutheran. Churches around the world have participated in this annual week of prayer for over 100 years, representatives with the churches said.

ONE CARE celebrates first accessible vehicle purchased through campaign

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

ONE CARE Home & Community Support Services is proud to announce the purchase of a new accessible vehicle, thanks to the unwavering support of the community. This vehicle has been purchased using the proceeds from their ongoing Driven to Care Campaign which aims to raise \$500,000 to purchase several much-needed new accessible vehicles for ONE CARE's transportation program.

The new vehicle will play a vital role in helping community members maintain independence and stay connected. An accessible minivan has been purchased as opposed to the larger ONE CARE buses and vans. This will offer a more cost-effective solution for single passenger rides as opposed to taking larger passenger vehicles on these routes. The vehicle will be used daily to assist clients in getting to medical appointments, grocery shopping, errands, and visits with family and friends. These services are essential to health, quality of life, and aging at home with dignity.

"Safe and Reliable. Those two words best describe my assessment of ONE CARE," said ONE CARE client Diane Pecor in a media release. "This year, because of a wide-ranging need to reach health and medical services, I have explored and used ONE CARE's EasyRide transportation service for many appointments, both in and outside Huron and Perth counties. Truly and without exception, all the support provided, from intake to delivery, have been sensitive, attentive and on-time. Not everyone has a support system and, even if one does, I believe ONE CARE is the better option for many of us. We are so fortunate to have these services available to residents of Huron and Perth counties."

As health care delivery evolves, so do transportation needs and new vehicles will help ONE CARE adapt to these changes.

More medical procedures and appointments are now being scheduled during evening and overnight hours, creating new challenges for older adults and people with health concerns who rely on safe, accessible transportation. Through Driven to Care, ONE CARE's investment in reliable, accessible vehicles ensures it can respond to these changing needs, providing rides beyond traditional daytime hours so clients can access essential care when and where it's offered. These vehicles help ensure that timing is never a barrier to treatment, recovery or peace of mind.

While this new vehicle is a significant achievement, ONE CARE's transportation needs continue to increase. More older adults and people with mobility challenges are relying on accessible transportation than ever before. To meet this rising demand, ONE CARE must continue expanding its fleet. When a vehicle breaks down or is taken out of service, ONE CARE drivers work longer hours to ensure clients continue to receive the care and support they deserve.

The Driven to Care Campaign remains active, with a goal of purchasing several more accessible vehicles to ensure no one in our community is left without a ride when they need one most.

Community support is what made this first vehicle possible, and continued support will drive the next one. You can help ONE CARE reach its next milestone by:

- Purchasing tickets for its monthly ONE CARE 50/50 draws: <https://www.rafflebox.ca/raffle/onecare>
- Making a direct donation to the Driven to Care Campaign <https://shorturl.at/bGFTR>
- Volunteer to be a driver: <https://www.onecaresupport.ca/volunteers>

Every contribution brings ONE CARE closer to purchasing the next accessible vehicle that will serve our neighbours, parents, grandparents and friends.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

ONE CARE driver Ken Millian poses in front of the organization's new van.

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STRATFORD **TIMES** SPORTS

Lincolns cruise past Warriors; Wildfong, Kipfer and Heaman attend showcase in Peterborough

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

It was an eventful week for the Stratford Hunter Steel Warriors as they renewed their "Battle of Highway 7" series with the rival St. Marys Lincolns at the William Allman Memorial Arena on Jan. 16.

But earlier in the week, three members of the Warriors participated in the 2026 GOHL Top Prospects Game in Peterborough on Jan. 13. Forwards Max Wildfong, Quinn Kipfer and equipment manager Cody Heaman were part of Team Thornton. In the second period, Wildfong made a highlight-reel goal to lead Team Thornton to a 5-3 win. Wildfong finished the game with a goal and an assist.

The following evening, after Warriors practice at the Allman Arena, Wildfong and Kipfer shared their experiences in the showcase.

"Yeah, it was a fun experience for me. This is something new to me, and it was a great experience. And it was a great event that the OHL and the GOHL put on," Wildfong said. "That's just something I was really looking forward to making that team, and I'm glad I did. And I think I showcased myself well to all the people there."

"I thought it was really good. It was a

really well-run event. It was good to have the U16 guys. They had our game, and then they had the OHL guys practicing too. It was a good event, and a lot of good players were there," Kipfer said.

In preparation for the latest entry to the "Battle of Highway 7," head coach Dave Williams, alongside Wildfong, Kipfer and Aaron Green, all agreed the game is a big one for the team as they sit two points back of St. Marys for third in the Western Conference heading into the game.

"There's a good rivalry between the two teams, given the proximity to one another, and anticipating we'll have a good crowd in here. Both teams will have a really good following."

"There's so much parity in our league when you're playing teams that are right there with the teams that are maybe a point or two ahead of you, it's important that you take care of business yourself," Williams said.

"I know we talked about that kind of looking after what we can look after, rather than maybe later in the season, looking for somebody to help us, that it's important that we control some of the things that we're able to control."

"Well, obviously, they're a good team, so we got to come ready to compete and work our hardest. We know it's not going to be easy, but it's a challenge we're willing to take on," Green said.

"It's definitely really important. Obviously, this is our only game this week. We know St. Marys will bring a lot of fans here. It's going to be a packed crowd. It's going to be high energy. So we need to pick up wing wins when we can, especially with games at hand, to continue moving up the stage," Kipfer said.

"It's huge, the preparation that goes into that. We only have one game this week, so we're just looking to leave it all out there and empty the tank against St. Marys. They're a good team. They're going to bring a good game against us in the Allman, but I think if we just stick to our game plan and work well together



(TURNER ROTH PHOTO)

Perth County EMS personnel, St Marys captain Chase McQueen-Spence and Stratford captain Haden Frayne pose for the camera during the ceremonial faceoff on Jan. 16.

with the team, I think we'll be able to get the win well," Wildfong said.

In front of 1,148 fans, the Warriors and Lincolns faced off at the Allman Arena on Jan. 16.

Before the game, the Warriors honoured emergency medical services for their dedicated work.

The Lincolns got on the board first at 6:48, but a goal by Wildfong from Evan Arnold and McQuen Haylock responded for the home side eight seconds later in the first period.

A blast from the blue line by Hayden Frayne from Drew Hodge and Coen Galbraith with 6:26 remaining in the second period gave Stratford a 2-1 lead in the middle frame. The lead didn't last long, however, as the Lincolns tied the game with 3:33 left in the period.

St. Marys took control of the game at the early stage of the third period with two goals in the first 91 seconds of the period and led the game 4-2. Powerplay goal by Kipfer from Colin Slattery and Hodge

at the 3:12 mark cut the deficit to 4-3, but St. Marys responded 90 seconds later and restored their two-goal lead.

Following the goal, Warriors netminder Noah Bender was relieved by Gage Hurst. Bender had another tough game against the Lincolns, allowing five goals in 15 shots. Hurst stopped all five shots in relief and kept the Warriors within striking distance for a potential late-game comeback.

The Warriors attempted the comeback at the 6:01 mark when Kipfer scored his second goal of the game, 11th of the season, from Slattery and Hodge to put the Warriors to within a goal.

Despite the efforts late in the period, the Warriors couldn't find the equalizer, and the Lincolns sealed the win with an empty net goal with 45 seconds remaining.

Despite the defensive miscues leading to the loss, Williams liked how the team battled.

"I mean, I thought it was kind of a back-and-forth game up until the end of the second. We make a couple of mistakes, and they score quickly to start the third, and again, against a team of that quality," Williams said.

"You can't be making some of those mistakes that we did. But what I really liked about the group is that we kept battling back. There were lots of push-backs to get back into that game. We just couldn't find that tying goal."

When asked about the decision to switch goaltenders early in the third period, Williams says it was to change strategy and stage a possible comeback for the Warriors.

"Yeah, I just thought a couple of those goals that maybe he would typically have, and he's been good throughout the

CONTINUED TO PAGE II

Stratford Warriors						
2025-26 Stats						
(as of January 19, 2026)						
Player	Pos	GP	G	A	PTS	
Jonas Schmidt	F	26	16	14	30	
Max Wildfong	F	33	17	9	26	
Quinn Kipfer	F	30	11	14	25	
Coen Galbraith	F	31	10	14	24	
Colin Slattery	F	29	7	15	22	
Lucas Minard	F	32	11	9	20	
Joseph Curtin	D	32	4	12	16	
Evan Arnold	F	24	9	6	15	
Dax Vader	F	31	4	11	15	
Will Coward	D	31	1	14	15	
Dominic Marshall	F	33	9	4	13	
Aaron Green	D	26	5	8	13	
McQuen Haylock	F	31	2	9	11	
Drew Hodge	D	32	1	10	11	
Grady Murphy	F	28	6	4	10	
Rhyse Brown	F	30	3	7	10	
Haden Frayne	D	30	2	8	10	
Jaxon Broda	D	6	1	6	7	
Mateo Craievich	D	22	0	5	5	
Cruz Ferguson	F	1	0	0	0	
Goalies	Record	GAA	SV-%			
Noah Bender	13-6-0-1	2.65	9.093			
Gage Hurst	8-0-1-1	1.94	9.014			

GOHL Western Conference Standings							
(as of January 13, 2026)							
Team	W	L	OTL	SOL	PTS	GF	GA
Chatham Maroons	25	7	1	3	54	165	107
Elmira Sugar Kings	25	5	2	0	52	149	78
St Marys Lincolns	24	6	2	0	50	135	70
Stratford Warriors	22	6	2	2	48	122	83
London Nationals	24	10	0	0	48	156	105
Waterloo Siskins	15	12	4	2	36	107	100
St. Thomas Stars	16	14	2	1	35	122	117
LaSalle Vipers	16	18	3	0	35	127	142
Strathroy Rockets	16	15	2	0	34	127	124
Listowel Cyclones	13	18	1	1	28	91	110
Komoka Kings	11	20	2	1	25	115	142
Sarnia Legionnaires	0	34	0	0	0	53	230

Irish get blitzed in tough loss on home ice

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Stratford Irish resumed NPHL regular-season play as they hosted the Orangeville Blitz at the William Allman Memorial Arena on Jan. 17. This is the first of the final three-game homestand.

Stratford opened the scoring 52 seconds into the game by Mathieu Henderson. Orangeville tied the game 3:55 into

the period, but Brett Thorne responded for the Irish midway through the opening frame and had a 2-1 lead heading into the second period.

Orangeville took over the game with four unanswered goals in the second period and had a commanding 5-2 lead through 40 minutes of play. The Irish began to claw back from goals by Nick Giunta, Henderson and the unassisted game-tying marker by Thomas Hernan-

dez.

But the Blitz responded with two goals in a 53-second span, putting the visitors up 7-5. Cole Thiessen put the Irish back to within a goal, but the visitors sealed the game with an empty-net goal with 20 seconds left to win the wild game 8-6.

Giunta led the Irish with three points, and four Irish had two points. In total, nine members of the Irish registered at least a point in the loss. Irish netminder

Zachery Weir allowed eight goals in 37 shots and was awarded the loss.

With the defeat, the Irish are 4-6 in the last 10, can finish no higher than third place in the Gateway Division of the Metropolitan League, and are one point ahead of the last-place Tilbury Bluebirds.

Stratford continues their final homestand of the regular season against Tilbury on Jan. 24.

Lakers compete at Winter Showcase, four Lakers attend the U16 Challenge in Peterborough, clip the RedHawks

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

It was a busy week for the U16 AAA Huron-Perth Lakers.

Four members of the Lakers competed at the OHL U16 Challenge in Peterborough on Jan. 13 and 14.

In a showcase tournament that featured four teams consisting of players from different leagues in the U16 AAA system, Rylan Da Costa (Team Tavares), Declan McCotter (Team McDavid), Colten Van Geffen (Team Suzuki) and Ethan Bridges (Team Suzuki) represented the Lakers in the two-day event.

In preparation for the busy week of games, Wyatt Finch, Owen Jarmuth and Mathieu Lepan shared what it means to be part of the Lakers.

"It means a lot. We're a good team, and I've been here for a couple of years, and it's an honour to be able to play on this team. Got a good group of boys, good coaching staff means a lot," Finch said.

"It is a lot, you know, like coming to practice games every day means a lot playing for that logo, wearing it with pride," Jarmuth said.

"Yeah, it's awesome. We got a great team. I'm really glad to be part of the team. It means a lot," Lepan said.

On Jan. 16 and 17, the Lakers participated in the 2026 Winter Showcase at Upper Canada College in Toronto. Head coach Jason Brooks likes the team competing in the event.

"Well, I think it's a pretty cool environment at Upper Canada College; it's their winter fest weekend, so like the school, they'll have a whole bunch of school members in attendance on Friday night. So it's going to be a boisterous, loud arena, which is going to be fun for the boys," Brooks said.

"UCC is a very, very good hockey team, so it's going to be a challenging weekend. But, you know, I think that's encouraging for us to play – play a good team like UCC, continue to work at our game, con-

tinue to develop our game, and hopefully, good things come to us because we play well."

The Lakers played both of their games against the host Upper Canada College Cyclones in the tournament.

In the first game on Jan. 16, the Cyclones opened the scoring with over eight minutes left in the first period. Evan Miller responded for the Lakers with 4:26 left, but the Cyclones scored twice in the late stages of the opening frame to lead 3-1 heading into the second period.

In the second period, the Lakers came back with goals from Sullivan Kipfer and Blake Moore to tie the game early in the middle frame. But the Cyclones retook the lead for good with a late goal in the period, followed by a pair in the third period to pull away with the 6-3 win.

The two teams returned to the ice for their second game on Jan. 17, with the visitors getting swept by the host Cyclones in the two-game encounter by the score of 4-1.

Upper Canada opened the scoring early in the first period, but Moore scored for the Lakers to tie the game heading into the second period. But the Cyclones retook the lead in the second period en route to the win.

Moore and Miller led the Lakers with three points each in the event.

The Lakers capped off their busy week by returning to ALLIANCE regular-season play against the Cambridge RedHawks on Jan. 18.

McCotter opened the scoring halfway through the first period, followed by a last-minute goal from Fisher to put the Lakers ahead 2-0. In the second period, the RedHawks cut the deficit in half, but Luke McLean replied for the Lakers 18 seconds later to put up 3-1. The Lakers iced the game 32 seconds into the third period with the goal from Moore.

The Lakers head to Leamington to play the Sun County Panthers on Jan. 24, and to Windsor to play the Windsor Jr. Spitfires on Jan. 25.

Lincolns cruise past Warriors, trio heads to showcase



(TURNER ROTH PHOTO)

Warriors F Quinn Kipfer scored his second goal of the game in the third period against the St. Marys Lincolns on Jan. 16.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

year, and he's going to have nights no different than other guys, where he's maybe not as consistent as he would like to be, just a harder position to play when you're the last line of defense, everybody seems to notice it a bit more than if you're at a different position," Williams said.

"So it's at that point it might be something that would potentially rally the group a little bit and help us dig in and try and get back into the game."

Kipfer reflected on his contribution to keep the Warriors within striking distance in the third period but acknowledged the defensive miscues.

"I thought the team battled hard. We kind of had a couple of times there when we got slow and tired, and they came at us and responded. They capitalized on the chances we gave

them," Kipfer said.

"But I think overall, it was a good, hard battle by the team. Obviously, two goals are nice to get any night, get that offence going, and get the confidence for myself. So overall, hard fought, but sucks to lose."

The Warriors resume action next week, traveling to Sarnia on Jan. 22 and back home at the Allman against the Strathroy Rockets on Jan. 23.

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St. Paul's Anglican Church celebrates 120 years of services as it amalgamates with three other area churches

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

Established in 1905, the first church service celebrated at St. Paul's Anglican Church was held Jan. 14, 1906. This beautiful neighbourhood church has been home to families of Stratford for 120 years with active outreach within the community.

Prior to establishing the church residents know of today, there was a board and batten church constructed in 1875 at the corner of West Gore and Home Street. The congregation flourished thanks to the Grand Trunk Railway's locomotive shops in town and the decision was made to build St. Paul's Anglican Church at 9 Douro St.

"We have beautiful stained-glass windows in the church. These windows were donated by parishioners in memory of loved ones, some of whom were killed in world wars. Especially beautiful is the nativity window facing west onto Waterloo Street which is lit up from the inside in the evening," said Rosalie Edwards, parishioner of over 85 years.

Edwards was baptised, confirmed and married in St. Paul's where she had her wedding dinner in the newly constructed parish hall in 1959. At 12 years of age, she was confirmed along with 65 other young people and adults from the church. This was the largest class ever confirmed in the Diocese of Huron. Now, she is one of eight remaining parishioners who grew up at St. Paul's.

Some of her earliest memories of coming to St. Paul's are of traipsing to church on Sunday mornings, because everyone walked, and taking up a whole pew because there were six of them attending.

"Sunday school was big. All the downstairs was filled with classes. At one time,

Sunday school was held at 2 p.m. Classes took place all over the basement of the church. Back in those days we also had evening prayer service at 7 p.m. so we attended three times on a Sunday, and everybody did," said Edwards.

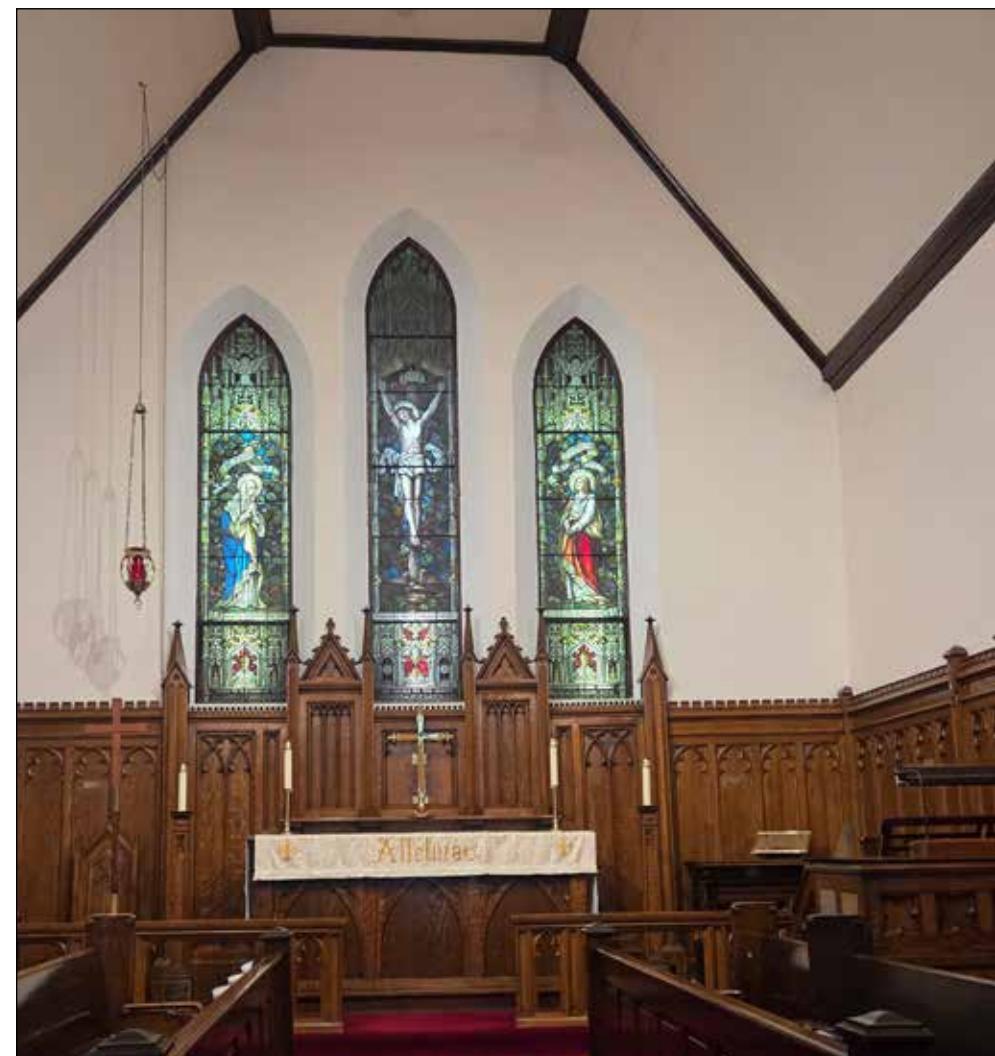
St. Paul's congregation has always had a very strong sense of community. There were so many families and children.

"We've always been a very active church with many different groups involved. I especially remember the Mother's Union group because mothers didn't work outside the home at that time and all the little children that weren't yet in school gathered in the Hope Bowra Hall for meetings and social time," said Edwards.

At Christmas time, Santa Claus (a.k.a. Spence Doherty) would visit, and every child would be given a gift and a bag of candy. Doherty would raise a great deal of money for the church during the season by going all over the city.

"I remember as a little kid coming to the Christmas concert which was downstairs in the Hope Bowra Hall, and it would be packed with families of parents and their kids who were so excited Santa would come in. That was a highlight of my Christmas," said Val Ford, another of the remaining eight Parishioners that grew up in the Church.

The sense of community of St. Paul's has remained steadfast. Significant outreach through the Stratford Connection Centre, the warming centre, breakfast club, food bank, 12 step groups and community meals has made St. Paul's a beacon. What has changed is stores now stay open on Sunday, kids' sports are on Sundays, both parents work all week and Sunday is the only day to catch up. The congregation has aged and not many young people attend. And now, after 120 years, St. Paul's will amalgamate with St



St. Paul's Anglican Church celebrates its 120-year anniversary with a final service Jan. 18. James' and St. Stephen's to form a new congregation.

"I am going to miss our beautiful organ music and the chimes we have been so lucky to have. These chimes were given by long time members Rita and Spencer Doherty on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary. So many things

have been given to the church in memory of loved ones," said Edwards.

The last service of St. Paul's Anglican Church was held Jan. 18, though this is not the end of their outreach. Programs in place will continue to operate out of the church uninterrupted for the foreseeable future.

Owners of new barbershop relay their hopeful – and harrowing – journey to Stratford

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

If men or women in Stratford need a fresh look, look no further.

ROJ Barbershop is located at 804 Ontario St. in Stratford, just

behind the A&W parking lot across from the Stratford Legion.

Owners Gokmen and Gertrude Posokhova's journey was anything but straightforward, coming all the way to the Festival City from war-torn Ukraine. But, as Gokmen said, the journey began far earlier.

Gokmen was born in Diyarbakir, in southeastern Turkey, and was the second of seven siblings. His father was a traditional farmer, but Gokmen was different: silent, thoughtful and curious about the world beyond their village. He worked as a shepherd and growing up as a Kurd in Turkey, he never felt he truly belonged to the system, which planted questions in his young mind. He often wondered why people in his country were always ready to hurt each other. He also wondered why they couldn't understand one another, even when they spoke the same language.

Watching his uncle cut hair for the village men on weekends sparked Gokmen's interest in barbering, though it would be awhile yet before he would take up the profession.

After high school, Gokmen attempted law school, but couldn't score high enough among the other 2.5 million competing students. He enrolled in a jurisdiction college program while working to support himself.

Realizing the world was bigger than Turkey, he began learning English in 2018 and eventually decided to study law in the Ukraine, where a friend was already studying dentistry in Odessa. In late 2021, Gokmen met his future wife Gertrude in Kharkiv but travelled back to Turkey, so his wife could meet his family.

Despite warnings from classmates and teachers about growing tensions in the Ukraine, Gertrude still missed her country, so Gokmen sold his phone to buy tickets for a February 2022 trip. They flew to Kyiv and took a train to Odessa, where friends warned them that war was imminent.

Gokmen relayed that everyone started running for their lives and he knew they had to move from the hostel they were staying in. They knew they had no time to waste.

The couple walked three hours to the Kharkiv bus station, hearing bombs falling in the distance, and when Gertrude asked a bus driver about seats to Kyiv, he said everything was sold online.

With no other options, they waited four desperate hours as the sun set and they heard an engine start, and they rushed to the bus. Miraculously some passengers never arrived, and they

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Young Stratford racer keeps piling up trophies

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

A young teenager in Stratford who has been kart racing on the circuit in Hamilton is proving he's not just a one hit wonder.

For the last five years, Aristeides (Ari) Theodoropoulos has raced competitively and brought home the championship trophy ever year. He is the first one to ever accomplish this feat in the history of racing in his class at Hamilton.

Last year was one of his most proud accomplishments, when he raced and won the Rotax-Junior Hamilton Regional Kart Club Championship (HRKC).

The young champion says that the regional club in Hamilton is always where he has raced, and will continue to do so, to try and compete, to bring home a sixth championship.

Theodoropoulos says he's also taken on a role at the track coaching other young drivers and working two-day race camps to introduce younger people to the sport.

Not only he is a winner, but his parents Stephanie and Tony won mechanics of the year for the club. He says their family also won the community recognition award for their involvement at the track. He said his mother organizes a "Mom-mechanics" course, to educate women new to the sport, who "wrench" for their kids, partners or themselves.

They also help organize annual food and toy drives for underprivileged families, where they have raised thousands of dollars on race day while Theodoropoulos also helps to coach younger drivers, and give them hints on how to become champions.

His list of championships over the last 5 years include:

- 2021: Briggs Cadet Hamilton Regional Kart Club (HRKC) Champion.
- 2022: Briggs Junior Lite HRKC Champion.
- 2022: Junior Lite Canadian Carting National Champion.
- 2023: Briggs Junior HRKC Champion.

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(GARY WEST PHOTO)

Young Ari Theodoropoulos is pictured here after his first two years of kart racing. The dining table in his parents' house had to be extended to hold all his racing trophies.

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Harry Ten Shilling hosts Dolly Parton Afternoon Tea ahead of singer's 80th birthday

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

Dolly Parton turned 80-years-old on Jan. 19 and a tea room nearby Stratford celebrated the occasion with an afternoon tea, complete with birthday napkins.

Shakespeare tea room Harry Ten Shilling held their third annual Dolly Parton Afternoon Tea on Jan. 17 and 18. The event features a variety of teas named after her hit songs like "9 to 5" and "Jolene" and treats either inspired by Parton's favourite goodies like banana pudding or her recipes like blueberry scones.

Along with treating themselves to a pink mirrorball decorated tea tray filled with desserts and sandwiches, guests also listened to Parton's music and made charm bracelets with pink cowgirl hats, guitars, music notes and all things Dolly.

"The Dolly Parton has always been super fun to do because the clientele we get with Dolly Parton are always big Dolly Parton fans, so it is just super exciting and (a) fun atmosphere in here," said Mikaela Meijer, owner of Harry Ten Shilling.

The tearoom was packed with some of the guests coming and going either wearing cowboy hats, pink and/or themed t-shirts. Meijer, sporting a pink Parton sweater, said that everything about the country music legend is why she has a loyal fanbase.

"The pink, the girly, the disco, the cowgirl," she said. "Just everything about Dolly I would say brings in so many amazing things and it just fits so well with our tearoom too and all the pink and the colours and the charms."

Harry Ten Shilling's regular season runs from May to October, but the tearoom holds some winter events, including the Dolly Parton Afternoon Tea. Former owner and Meijer's mother Lynn Barber said she was looking through a calendar in the kitchen a few years ago and Parton's birthday was marked on the calendar.

"It wasn't a Dolly Parton calendar, so it's just like 'That's a pretty important birthday if it can just be on a regular calendar,'" Barber said.

Harry Ten Shilling will have a Valentine's afternoon tea with more details to be announced.



(EMILY STEWART PHOTO)

Focusing on Southern comfort, the Dolly Parton Afternoon tea featured banana pudding, bubble-gum macarons, coconut cake, strawberry shortcake, cinnamon bread, and blueberry scones. All of the teas part of the menu were named after her songs.



(Left to right) Geri C. and Missy T. made charm bracelets at the Dolly Parton afternoon tea.



(Left to right) Tracy Johnston, Stephanie Johnston-Teodorof, and Mary Beth Mariani enjoy some desserts.

Owners of new barbershop relay their hopeful – and harrowing – journey to Stratford

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

luckily got seats, and were crossing into Poland away from the bombing and feeling as lucky as they could.

From Poland, they moved to the Czech Republic, where friends had promised help, but instead misled them about housing and support.

A kind Czech family offered them a small apartment for free for eight months, but life remained incredibly difficult for the couple. The language barrier made finding work and accessing basic services nearly impossible.

Despite their own dire financial situation, Gokmen gave free haircuts to Ukrainian refugee children, and they still gave whatever they could back to help the Ukrainian army.

They eventually applied for Canadian visas, but Gokmen

struggled to obtain the necessary documents from Czech authorities.

Through 10 months of hardship, they held onto hope, and in early 2023 their Canadian visas were approved. In May of that year Gokmen and Gertrude arrived in Canada, where Mennonite and Amish families welcomed them with open arms, providing shelter at their farm and helping them rebuild their lives.

They now live near Gadshill, thanks to area Mennonites, and have been meeting many from the area and can't believe how courteous and helpful everyone has been.

They thank God everyday for Canadians and Canada, saying they now know why everyone says Canada and its people, are the best in the world.

Young Stratford racer keeps piling up trophies

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

- 2024: Briggs Junior HRKC Champion.

- 2025: Rotax Junior HRKC Champion.

This young champion also has a North Easthope connection. He is the grandson of Jackie and Jack Hyde. All the locals remember Jack Hyde as a winner in Grand Bend,

in his dark green Chevy Biscayne, known as "Jack and the Green Stock."

Jack, who has worked on many racing engines, also has attended many of Ari's races, and he will say, "the excitement still runs through his veins when watching his grandson compete and race on race day."

SWFF bringing free family fun and an Indie Film Day for first weekend of festival

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

The Stratford Winter Film Festival (SWFF) has expanded into two weekends this year thanks in part to sponsorship from TD Bank and support from the community. This first weekend, Jan. 30 and 31, will prove to be something for everyone beginning the Friday night with the free screening of *Time Bandits* at 7 p.m. in the Stratford City Hall auditorium.

This 1981 classic family film stars John Cleese, Shelley Duval and Sean Connery and is about a boy that accidentally joins a group of time travellers who jump from era to era looking for treasure to steal.

"It's from some of the creators of *Monty Python* so it's good silly fun," said SWFF co-founder Bruce MacInnis.

This is a free event as an effort to bring the community together and introduce themselves to those that may not have heard about the winter film festival or may not have been able to bring the whole family out to the annual festival.

"We understand buying tickets for a family of four to a festival can add up so this is just something to give back to the community and will allow whole families to come out and see what we are about and meet us," MacInnis said.

"Us" would be the trio of founders, MacInnis, Craig Sangster and Leslie Marsh. Together, in addition to this prelude weekend, they are presenting the third annual Stratford Winter Film Festival beginning Feb. 6.

The target audience for *Time Bandits* is families of all ages from four and up. "It's family friendly but it has humour that is suitable for the adults as well. It has broad appeal. There won't be people who don't know the film even though it's been around a long time, it has a lot of fans and is almost cult like," said MacInnis.

"It hasn't been overplayed. *Time Bandits* is fresh enough in some of the parents and it has adult interest so they can get through it. It's a good film on its own terms with broad appeal. It's exciting, it's adventure, it's time travel," added Marsh.

On Saturday, Jan. 31, there will be the

first ever SWFF Canadian Indie Day featuring 13 independent films to be screened at 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. that were submitted from across Canada. The films vary in length from the shortest coming in at three minutes to the longest at 45 minutes.

For continuity, the theme for the Independent Film Day is the same as the SWFF main event: Friends, Foes and Strangers. This aided in the selections made from the films submitted. Other criteria considered were that they wanted Canadian films. Additionally, they judge each film based on story, the flow of the film, visual presentation and the sound.

"There was a multi-step process so we did a submission process through an online forum then we vetted the films for local range. We tried to ensure everything was homegrown from Canada so there were a few international submissions that unfortunately we weren't able to accept. From there, the films are viewed and we narrowed it down to a selection of 13," said Robert Crowley Smith, technical director for the Indie Film Day.

Be on the lookout for a local film called *Death at a Picnic* by producer/director Josh Cooper and filmed in Stratford. From the first year of SWFF, the founders have been asked by independent filmmakers whether they could have their film screened at the annual festival.

"So we figured it was kind of a thing to do, to devote some time to independent films. This is part of our growth, thanks in part to our partnership with TD, and certainly the community. This is us trying to grow as a festival and become more conventional in terms of what people expect a film festival to be," said MacInnis.

Audience takeaway should be simple enjoyment.

"We hope they enjoy every film from a different angle. Hopefully they take away something from each film that they get to see and they just enjoy the evening enough to come back next year," concluded Crowley Smith.

For more information or to buy tickets to the Indie Film Day, visit stratfordwinterfilmfestival.ca

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INNERchamber's 'Typeface: A Concert of Characters' to explore the history of typeface inventors and designers

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

When it comes to history, there is no shortage of niche areas of interest to explore and appreciate, offering those who do a glimpse into how just one piece of the world we live in today has come to be.

On Feb. 1, INNERchamber's ensemble of musicians will put one of those unlikely historical rabbit holes to music as they join typographer and design instructor Christopher Moorehead for "Typeface: A Concert of Characters," a musical and historical exploration into the inventors and designers who created the many diverse typefaces that have become so ubiquitous in our modern world.

"I started as an engineer. I graduated from Queen's (University) and worked in a number of sectors – automotive, manufacturing, aerospace – but even in that time, I was interested in typography and the art of letter forms," Moorehead said. "I would do, as a hobby, calligraphy. I remember, even when I was at school, I would do things like design concert posters for shows and hand-lettered wedding invitations.

"So, I always had this fascination for type and then I started reading up on it just for my own amusement. And there came this time when, all of a sudden, I would look at, say, a sign and look at a piece of type and I would be able to identify it and I would analyze it. Even then, it was going around in my head; 'Is this the correct thing? Is this not correct?' And I got to the point where I couldn't get out of that mode."

Ultimately, Moorehead realized he had found an unlikely passion and decided to complete a degree in graphic design at the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD) with typography as his focus. He went on to teach every level of typography at OCAD over the course of 13 years before moving to Stratford, where he now teaches at the Stratford campus of the University of Waterloo.



Typeface: A Concert of Characters will take place at Factory 163 on Feb. 1 beginning at 7 p.m.

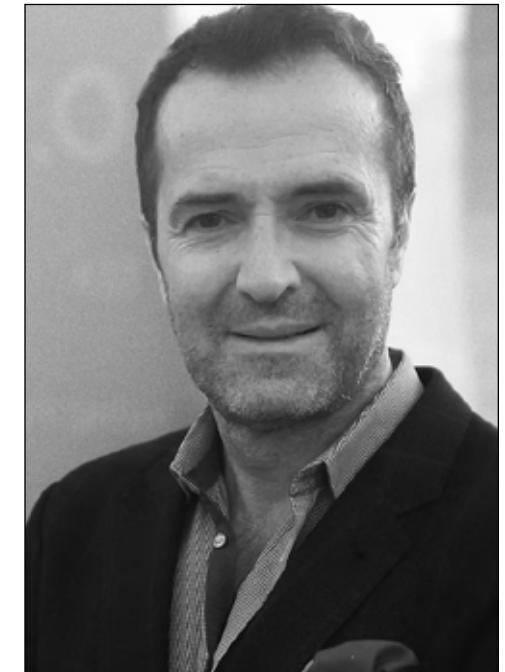
While attending a dinner party two years ago, Moorehead met a fellow Queen's University engineering grad and the artistic director of INNERchamber, Andrew Chung. As the two were talking, the topic of typography inevitably came up, and they realized there is a unique overlap between their two passions – typography and music.

Not only did they discover an alignment between the classifications of typography and eras of music history, but they also found there are similarities between musical composition and typographic form – not to mention both written music and type exist to communicate content in a specific way and share it with the wider world – ultimately leading to the creation of INNERchamber's next concert concept.

"Type exists to honour content," Moorehead said, quoting from Canadian typographer Robert Bringhurst's book, *Elements of Typographic Style*. "Ultimately, what is the thing that's being said and how

can you say it more effectively, depending on your choice of how you have set it typographically, your choice of type base, your choice of various little elements? How long are your lines, the space between lines, how do you make it as readable as possible, how do you make people want to continue reading it? But ultimately, it is the content that matters."

"I have a great respect for anything that has a depth of beauty in something like type," Chung added. "I can immediately see there are a lot of details that go into it, and in speaking with Chris, that became very, very apparent. ... Chris made it clear there's great layers of depth in the story of type. When we're looking for ways to bring music to our audiences, sometimes it's nice to get a hook, but here, I just think this is a lot of fun. We can all learn something about what Chris has dedicated his life to learning, and we can all just exit this concert with this greater awareness that type is everywhere, just like music is everywhere."



Christopher Moorehead will narrate the concert, taking attendees through the history and design of typography.

Narrated by Moorehead, who plans to share the interesting and entertaining stories from the history and development of type, the concert will feature performances of music composed by some of the greats during the high points of typographic history. INNERchamber ensemble musicians Anna Ronai on piano, Ben Bolt-Martin on cello and Chung on violin will perform classic pieces by Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven among others, as well as more contemporary compositions by artists including Leonard Bernstein and Rebecca Clarke.

At \$53 each, tickets are available at www.innerchamber.ca and they include a dinner by Boutique Catering at 5:45 p.m., ahead of the concert at 7 p.m. Tickets must be purchased by 5:30 p.m. Jan. 30 for the dinner to be included, however they will be available after that date at the same price without the dinner. Student and arts-worker discounts are available.

STRATFORD TIMES

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Opinions

As I See It From America: Our friends and pals



PATRICK D. BURK

Times Columnist

There comes a time after the holidays when we all think about the next few weeks and wonder when will spring arrive, at least that is what I wonder. I read that this is the most depressing week of the year. It has something to do with the drain from the holidays, the realization that there is a long way to go before there is another celebration and the weather, cold and grey skies. As of this writing, I am struggling with tons of falling snow – no end in sight – and the real fact that much that I need and want to accomplish will not be happening because of the non-stop snow. It is even covering over some of our windows. A bright wall of white over which I can

hear the intense gusts of wind.

With all the woes of the winter season upon us, this is the time when I am the most creative. It's almost like there is not much else you can do, so you think. You look at the blank slate of white and the inches of snow, if not feet, on top of your car and realize that things are not quite so bad. You are home, it is warm, there is food and you can think. I actually started a new and very intense crime novel that really delves into the crime scene preparation and lab work. You must find something that really lights a fire in you, it might just as well be a good novel. I work on set and costume design and listen to soundtracks and music from the four musicals we are doing this year. I work on creative ways of raising money for our theatre and try to recruit some more talent. Last year 137 people appeared on our stage, from the age of three to 87. That's a lot of talent and it takes a lot of recruiting.

At the Main St. 56 Theater we held our successful Opening Gala the second Saturday in January. What is amazing at our little theatre is that we produce 12 shows a season, have three in production at once and only

close from the fourth week in December to the second week in January. It is less than four weeks off. During the off time, our first production does go into rehearsal and there is a ton of planning being done by all the volunteers. The place is spruced up for the Opening Gala, and we all jump in and do what must be done for another successful season. That is the beauty of community theatre.

During this time, I frequently chat with our theatre and non-theatre friends up in Stratford. It is amazing that we keep up conversations and such, and yes, we even talk about the weather. It seems you get what we get a day earlier, and I can look forward to the good and the bad. This year, it seems to be more coping with the snow, winds and whiteouts that are happening on a somewhat regular basis. It's fantastic to commiserate with our friend at Arden Park or one of our theatre pals. It makes you think that the whole world is connected, even if it is by bad weather. Remember this is the most depressing week of the year, what better way than to cure depression? The kindness and commiserating with friends.

My wife and I have started

looking at the Stratford Festival program book that came in the mail and work towards other excursions and events that we may want to attend. We plan our April opening week tour, when we bring a group of New York theatre friends to have a Stratford experience. This year it looks like our group is going to see *Guys and Dolls* in April. They are going to love it and I must say, it was always one of my favorites to watch and to perform. Such a joyous show and once and for all proving that "love conquers all."

In the past years, we have spent some wintertime in Stratford. That might happen again this year, if we can swing it. It is always so nice to come and visit and go to the shops and restaurants during the non-busy season. It allows us to pick up our favourite coffee and some wonderful food items at the Wild Hog and your other fine shops. Bookstores are always open and inviting and we can catch up with all the local happenings at the coffee shops. There are many things available there that are just a bit better than in the states and we don't mind taking the trip to our beautiful home away from home to accomplish some shop-

ping. Our children do this occasionally as well.

So, it happens annually. The most depressing week of the year. We yearn for spring; wish we had something to celebrate and smirk at the gas prices and how much things are costing. There are no parties, our U.S. football season ended without the finality that we wanted (the Buffalo Bills lost) and we wait. The wall of white comes in and we wonder if it could get any windier. We see our garbage cans blowing down the street and we wave at them and hope that they will live to see another day. But we are content. Our beautiful home away from home is still there. Our friends confirm that all may be white, but all is well. Our festival friends are returning the theatre to create and amaze and even I get super excited and creative here at the Main St. 56 Theater.

And we realize that spring will come, the buds will soon bloom, the sun will come out and we all will be able to hug the warmth of our friends and pals in your little corner of the world, Stratford.

Please let me know how you feel about this article. Contact me at burr.patrick1956@gmail.com.

Christmas comes but once a year

JULIA SCHNEIDER

Times Columnist

It's now January – no more Christmas cards to get or send!

What is it about Christmas cards, anyway? Are they still a "thing?" Looking at all the left-overs on Boxing Day shelves around town, I had to wonder.

What is their history? Google tells us they originated in England in the 1840s and had something to do with the postal service there; of course, we know how critical this is for cards following our last few years with Canada Post!

I don't know much about their history, but I do know the place they had in our family when I was growing up. Every year my mother would take out her list of card recipients and go through it, checking addresses for corrections and other changes, before she set to work on the great writing task. This was before the days of word processing and photocopying, so each message had to be carefully handwritten on the card. It would vary according to the recipient, so the ones to family were different

from those to friends, and friends from professional acquaintances. It always said what had happened to the family during the year just ending, asked how it went with the recipient, and wished everyone well for the coming year.

By this time, she would already have purchased her cards. I remember them all having the traditional Merry Christmas and Happy New Year greeting and a variously cheery, or solemn, winter scene. The cards ready to go, she would make sure they were mailed in time for the postie to deliver them to their destination before the big day.

Thinking about this recently, it struck me that my mother may have found all this an energy drain at an unusually hectic time of year, but also that the returns made up for the toil for her. She enjoyed keeping in touch with her wartime friends in the U.K., and friends and family in the U.S. and Canada, and this was in many ways the ideal time of year to do so.

This is history, but what about cards now? What place do they have in my life and that of others?

Every year I come up with a list, like my mother's, but each year it gets smaller: at one time there were 40 names on it; now it is far fewer.

As with other forms of mail, I generally send emails rather than cards to those in other countries, but find myself discouraged by the frequency of this substitution in those close by. I am, I realize, the product of a generation for whom physical mail was important and especially meaningful.

One change, on my part, is a reluctance to send anything with the traditional Merry Christmas and Happy New Year message. Would I be offending someone by doing so, I ask myself. Can one presume that the celebration at this time of year is Christmas or that someone views the New Year as potentially happy? Peace has replaced both in my Christmas lexicon.

All this said, I know some very notable Christmas card senders.

A friend from university each year sends me a card with pictures of her family on it, and has done so for decades. What started with people all our age has evolved into

a record of her five children and their families; she recused herself from the panel a while ago. It is a joy to go back and look at her cards from the past, a virtual photographic record of her personal history.

A neighbour used to deliver an embroidered miniature felt stocking each year from his family and made by his wife; this ceased when he died, but I still have the stockings hanging around the house, a reminder of happy times past.

Perhaps the most inventive cards I receive come from my sister. She and her husband make the rounds of gift shops early in the season to choose their card of the year. They send them to 38 people, and have to have sufficient cards, and enough time, to give the cards their signature feature – a miniature of the two of them staring out, smiling, from some portal on the card.

In recent years their faces have been seen in the windows of houses, trailers and other moving vehicles. This year they were there, smiling brightly, and hilariously

ridiculous, above the dashboard of a pick-up truck coming right at the viewer, unsecured parcels up top, and snow in front.

My sister tells me they commanded the dining room table for the assembly task, which involved cutting and glueing, and that the card was small enough not to require extra postage. I hope everyone appreciated the effort they made as much as I.

Thinking back on my mother and her cards, I remember her consternation one year when she received a card from someone she hadn't received one from the year before and therefore had struck off her list. I wonder: do people understand the importance for some people of receiving cards? Is sending them still an important way to connect with friends, family and acquaintances?

I like to think that it is. At a time in history when a sense of community, shared experiences and communication are often lacking, cards at this time of year are still an accessible and timely way to make an important, and hoped-for, annual connection.

Opinions

WEB-CRAWLING THROUGH WETLANDS DAY, FEB. 2



SHEILA CLARKE

Times Columnist

"The damage is already done," he said. "Once a wetland is destroyed, you can't really undo that."

That quote is from the Narwhal, Dec. 10, 2025. Matt Thomson is a furniture maker in Severn Township. The wetland he is talking about is a provincially significant wetland near his home. A pathway – that is really far more like a road – has been built through the wetland between lakes Couchiching and Simcoe and Georgian Bay. Developer LIV Communities and its partner Bosseini Living cut a trail through the wetland, clearing trees and catching the community off-guard. The trail connects a private beachside park with an approximately 180-home subdivision the developers are building.

The trail was done before anyone realized its size, and although there are penalties within conservation areas, the trail is just beyond their borders. Regardless, the wetland cannot be restored at this point.

Locals are worried, especially with regard to flood control. Wetlands are the first line of defense for flooding. They're like sponges and soak up the



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

A photo of a local wetland. Feb. 2 is International Wetlands Day, recognizing the importance of wetlands all over the planet.

excess water that would otherwise spread to roads and basements. They're much more than that. Wetlands are incredible habitats for thousands of species of wildlife that enable us to maintain biodiversity – which keeps us alive too. Millions of migrating birds depend on wetlands. Wetlands also purify water, maintaining clean water for consumption.

Wetlands in southern Ontario also store 1.3 billion tonnes of carbon, about eight times as much as Ontario's 2023 greenhouse gas emissions. However, disturbing wetlands releases this carbon. Wetland loss in southern Ontario may have released 700 million tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere. Healthy wetlands keep green-

house gases out of the atmosphere, reducing the intensity of climate change.

We have a problem in Ontario. The province no longer values wetlands. The conservation authorities know how important they are for flood control. Hurricane Hazel taught us that! They are experts in flood control, habitat preservation and water purity. They are no longer allowed to advise municipalities on building plans, and they are currently being threatened with Bill 68, the Conservation Authority Amalgamation Bill.

Southern Ontario has already lost over 70 per cent of its original wetland areas. About 18,000 hectares disappeared from that part of the province from 2000 to 2020 – over 10 times the size of downtown Toronto or more than 114,000 NHL hockey rinks (according to Ontario Nature).

Major changes to Ontario's wetland regulations took effect April 1, 2024, primarily through Ontario Regulation 41/24, standardizing rules and reducing protection of wetlands by shrinking the regulated area around wetlands to a 30-metre buffer (from 120 metres for provincially significant wetlands). "Pollution" and "conservation of land" were removed as permit review criteria, and "watercourse" was redefined to exclude streams without clear banks, which enabled development to proceed on many wetlands.

Amendments to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System (OWES) now allow for the re-evaluation of wetland complexes, reducing species migration through a chain of wetlands, and making it easier to remove the significance of an entire wetland complex. Because their size is no longer taken into consideration, this also enables the destruction of

wetland complexes.

As in the redefinition of endangered species habitat in Bill 5, wetlands are lacking definition according to ecology and environmental science. We are destroying the very fragile ecosystem that protects us in so many ways – from flooding to carbon storage to water purification to species habitat.

Feb. 2 is International Wetlands Day, recognizing the importance of wetlands all over the planet. Take a moment to send a note to the premier and to your MPP to underline the importance of wetlands. Celebrate our wetlands by speaking up for them – they need you.

UPDATES:

1) Carbon parts per million (ppm) in the atmosphere as of Jan. 1, 2026: 430.51 ppm, which indicates a continued rapid increase in greenhouse gas concentrations.

2) The Xerces Society, an organization which promotes invertebrates (insects), has come up with a list of New Year's resolutions. I'll be sharing them in UPDATES in 2026.

a. Plant 50 native flowers. Restoring regionally-native flora provides habitat for native invertebrates. Source pollinator-safe plants to provide the best habitat. You could plant on your property or on friends' or local property with permission.

b. Convert 10 per cent of your lawn square footage to native flora. Sacrifice some of your turf grass to native habitat restoration. Regionally-native plants will restore the homes and food sources of native wildlife.

3) Stratford is now a bird city! Guess what a bird city needs: more native plants and insects to sustain the birds!

Sheila Clarke is a Stratford advocate for the environment, of our community and of our planet. She is a member of CFUW Stratford, Stratford Climate Momentum, and the Perth County Sustainability Hub.

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Send in your sports reports

Coaches and/or parents are invited to send in your sports reports and pictures to the Stratford Times to let Stratford and area know how your teams are doing throughout the new 2025-26 season (and to create some great scrapbook material to be reflected upon in future years).

Game reports should be kept to a

maximum of 100 words. Please include a brief description of what happened during your games, including the names of those who scored and any special efforts made by your players.

Please have all reports and pictures in by the end of the month by emailing stratfordtimes@gmail.com.

COMING EVENTS

Email to inquire stratfordtimes@gmail.com

STRATFORD SCRABBLE CLUB

Anne Hathaway Residence 480 Downie St., Stratford
Meets every Wednesday evening at 7 p.m. for 3 games.
Check our website for further details stratfordscrabble.ca

CROCKINOLE

Every Tuesday at the Agriplex in the Ritsma Room from 1-4 p.m. No cost. Ladies and gentlemen, fingers or sticks. For more information call Oliver Davidson 519-508-5664

STRATFORD ASTRONOMY GROUP MEETINGS

St. Michael Catholic Secondary School, 240 Oakdale Avenue, Stratford

Rear parking lot off Matilda. Room # 1104 - 1st Tuesday of each month from September to June. 7-9 p.m.

We are night sky enthusiasts. Everyone is welcome to attend. See our website at [https://stratfordastronomy.com/](http://stratfordastronomy.com/) or call 519-275-4472 for more information

CLIMATE CHANGE - What Can We Do to Help?

Wednesday January 21, 2026; 7pm

Stratford City Hall

Come and find out about new initiatives and how you can help.

FRIDAY NIGHT EUCHRE

Friday, January 23, 2026; 6 p.m.

Royal Canadian Legion, 804 Ontario St B1, Stratford

Register your team of 2 for \$20. We play about 9 games. Prizes for 1st, 2nd and 3 place. Join in the fun. Plus, future game dates of Feb. 20, Mar. 27, and April 24. Register by calling Anne 519-301-0914, Dave 519-703-6544, Legion 519-271-4540 or register online.

POUTINE & DRAFT BEER NIGHT

Friday, January 30, 2026; 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Royal Canadian Legion, 804 Ontario St B1, Stratford

Generous portions, tickets are \$20, children 12 and under \$10. Help us meet our goal of serving 100 meals. For tickets: Legion office @519-271-4540, Dave Hartney @ 519-703-6544

STRATFORD WINTER FILM FESTIVAL

Friday, January 30, 2026; 7:00 p.m.

Stratford City Hall Auditorium

Join us for a free community showing of the classic family film TIME BANDITS, a thoroughly entertaining experience for kids of all ages — 9 to 90 plus.

This is a free event — seats on a first-come-first-serve basis. Doors open at 6:30pm.

Wheel chair accessible via doors and lift from the Market

Square side of City Hall.

<https://stratfordwinterfilmfestival.ca>

GARDEN STRATFORD GENERAL MEETING

Monday February 2, 2026, 7:15 – 9:00 p.m.

Army Navy Hall, 151 Lorne Ave. E., Stratford

Featured Presentation: "Managing Rainwater: capturing stormwater to benefit the garden and environment", Vanni Azzano, Supervisor of Community Education, Upper Thames River Conservation Authority

Meeting Open to Everyone; Free Admission.

OXFORD PHILATELIC SOCIETY OXPEX & OTEX

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March 21; 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

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- The Community Calendar is for non-profit organizations to promote their free admission events at no charge. Event listings can include your event name, date, time and location as well as a phone number, email address or website.
- If your event is not free admission or you would like to include more details than stated above, you have the following options:
 - Coming Events Word Ad in Classified section (50 word max.) - \$10 + hst
 - Coming Events Boxed Word Ad in Classified section (50 word max.) - \$15 + hst
 - Display Ad - Sizes begin at a classified business card size for \$35 + hst

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Stratford Mazda
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The Urban Barber
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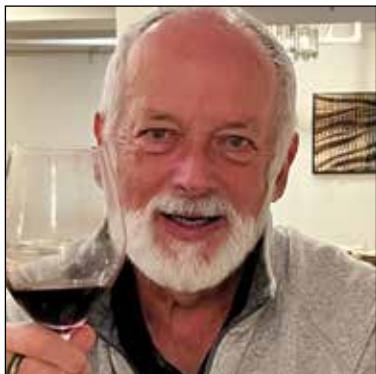
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Town Crier Marketing
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Pick Up Locations

OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: Enjoying a tropical destination in the centre of Canada



PAUL KNOWLES

Times Columnist

As we enter the heart of our beloved Canadian winter, a lot of us are dreaming about visiting tropical destinations; places like Barbados, Cuba, Costa Rica or ... Winnipeg.

Winnipeg?

Okay, I admit Manitoba's capital city is better known for what Randy Bachman highlighted in his song, "Prairie Town." "Portage and Main, 50 below," he sang. But a few months ago, I discovered a tropical paradise in the heart of Winnipeg. It's called the Leaf and while you might not want to travel to this prairie city in January or February, the Leaf is definitely a must-see in Winnipeg in the warmer months.

The attraction offers one more excellent reason to visit Assiniboine Park, also home to the Assiniboine Park Zoo and in the wonderful district that includes the Forks shopping and dining area, the Canadian Museum of Human Rights and the Children's Museum.

In locating all of these attractions in the same area, at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers, Winnipeg has definitively demonstrated the right way for a city to create public spaces that are compelling destinations yet also provide opportunities for leisure and relaxation. Visitors to Winnipeg will inevitably find their way here and they



The \$130-million the Leaf opened in Winnipeg in December, 2022.

(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTOS)

will be mingling with many, many local residents, for whom the area is a perfect getaway. Personally, I love it there.

The Leaf is the latest addition to this district—and "latest" may be the operative word, here. The \$130-million attraction had a lengthy growth period; it finally opened two years behind schedule in December 2022.

And what is the Leaf, exactly? It's best understood as two distinct parts. The heart of the attraction is the soaring, swirling, steel and glass building that houses four distinct "biomes" which are home to plants and trees from around the world.

And outdoors, all around the building, are many hectares of unique gardens as well.

Let's start indoors – an area that is open all year round.

The unique, individual spaces in the Leaf building include a tropical biome, a Mediterranean biome, a

"display house" and a butterfly garden.

The tropical biome – officially the "Hartley and Heather Richardson Tropical Biome" – is the most dramatic, in part because it features a six-storey indoor waterfall that plays a role in keeping this space at the right level of humidity – "right" meaning "really high."

The "welcome" sign posted near the waterfall says a lot about the multiple aims of the Leaf. "Welcome" is stated in three languages – English, Cree and Ojibwe, reflecting both Manitoba's heritage and the province's current multi-cultural reality. There is an educational note about the tropics: "The tropics cover a large part of the world and include a variety of environments such as rainforests, seasonal forests, grasslands, savannas and more." The sign points out everyday products we consume

that come from the tropics like coffee, tea, spices and fruits. And the welcome also makes the point that "many recent immigrants to Winnipeg come from tropical regions, including Central America, the Caribbean, Africa, parts of the Middle East and Asia." I quote this information at some length because I think this "welcome" tells us a lot about the intentions of the people who planned and built "the Leaf." It's more than an educational institution, it's an inclusive, welcoming space.

We strolled around the tropical biome, marvelling at the beauty of the flowers and foliage, and quite impressed with the size of the plants that soared over our heads. We learned that many of them were full-size when they were transported to the Leaf.

We moved on into the Mediterranean biome, where eager docents

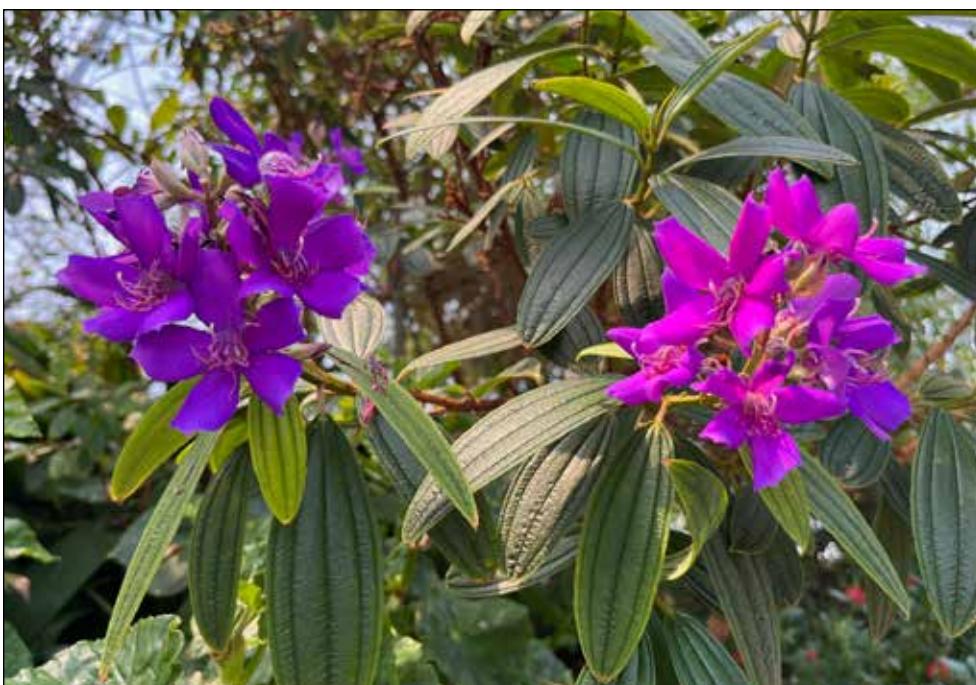
are happy to tell visitors all about the plants, including "Dinosaur Trees" – actually Wollemi Pines from Australia, prehistoric conifers which were thought to be extinct until they were discovered in Australia in 1994. Today, offspring of those rare, ancient trees are growing right here in Winnipeg.

Everyone loves an enclosed butterfly garden, and the "Shirley Richardson Butterfly Garden" at the Leaf is no exception. Children and adults alike enjoy watching the many tropical butterflies, and everyone, of course, hopes a flying friend would come to rest on their shoulder.

The Leaf does not end at the exit from the impressive building. Outdoors, there are six gardens to explore, including the Indigenous Peoples Garden, a Kitchen Garden, a Sensory Garden, the Performance Garden, the Seasonal Garden and "The Grove." Some of the outdoor gardens are open 24/7, others from 9 a.m. to dusk, and all the outdoor spaces are of charge. Admission to the biomes is \$17.20 for adults, \$9.40 for kids three to 17, and \$14.90 for seniors. You can save a buck or two in each category by buying in advance online. And there is another advantage to buying online because admission to the Leaf is by timed tickets, so having tickets in advance guarantees prompt entry.

Do you want to visit Winnipeg when it's 50 below at Portage and Main? Maybe not – although if you do, the biomes will feel like paradise. But in the warmer months, the Leaf and all of its neighbours in Assiniboine Park and the Forks will make for a day full of delight.

Paul Knowles is an author and travel writer, and past-president of the Travel Media Association of Canada. To contact Paul about travel, his books, or speaking engagements, email pknowles@golden.net.



The biomes are replete with tropical blooms.



Prehistoric "dinosaur trees", once thought extinct, are now carefully tended at the Leaf.

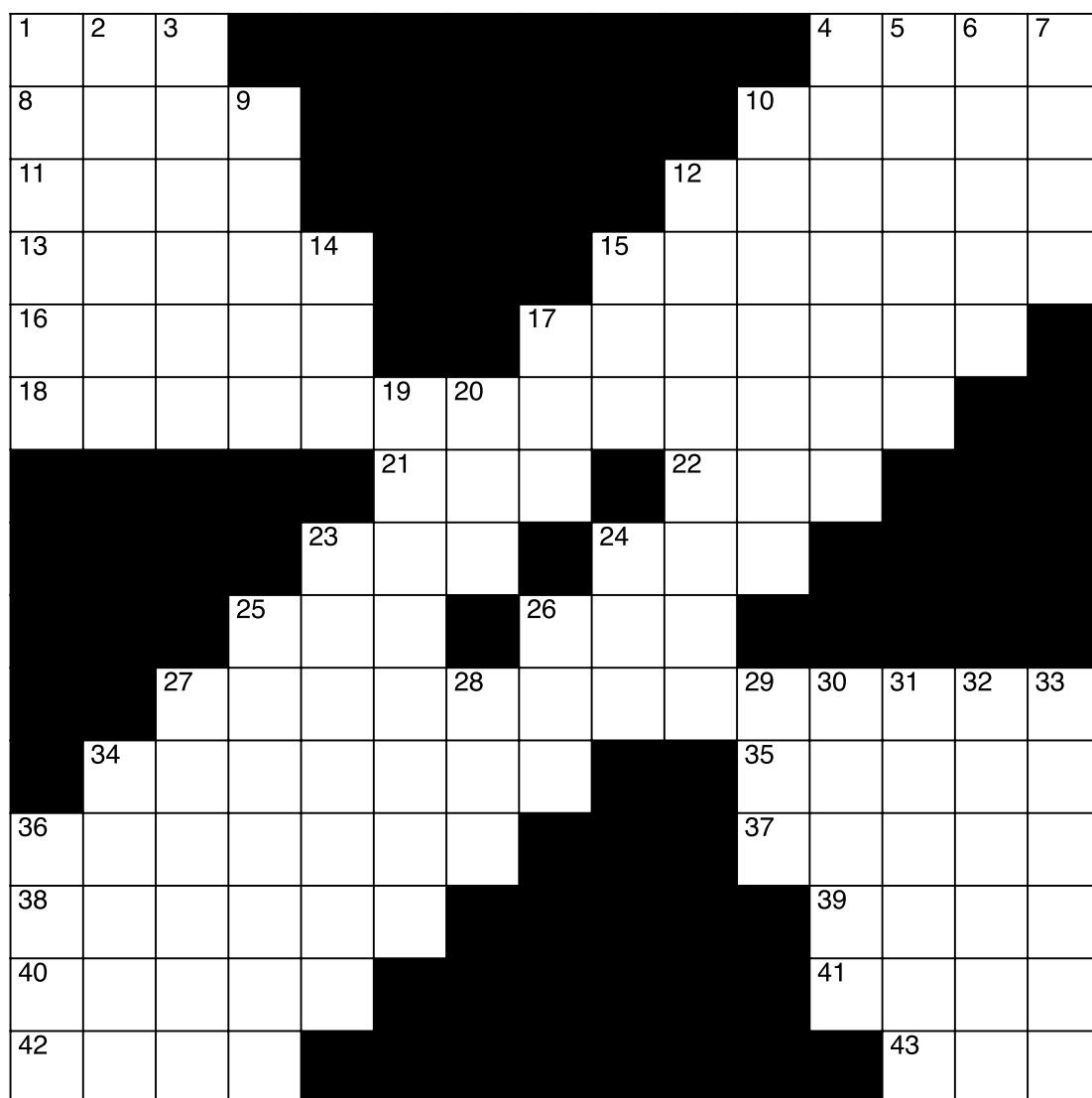
Crossword

CLUES ACROSS

- Racket sport pros
- Make tea
- City South of Moscow
- Spanish bullfighting term
- Egg-shaped
- Could not remember
- French modernist painter
- Persons
- Painful intestinal obstruction
- Professions
- Is up to the task
- Wood or metal bolt
- Tax collector
- A way to save for the future
- Georgia rockers
- Midway between north and north-east
- High schoolers' test
- Does not accept responsibility
- One who prepares
- Gout-indicative deposits
- Place to play games
- Book of Genesis character
- Cleans oneself
- Unloaded for money
- Genus of flowering plants
- Take a puff
- Congressmen
- God of battle in Scandinavian mythology

CLUES DOWN

- Type of bomb
- South Pacific islands
- Celestial body
- Negotiates
- Consider in a specified way
- Type of group in organic chemistry
- Buddhist monasteries
- Inhabitant of Bering Sea island
- Body part
- Milestone birthday
- Thyroid-stimulating hormone
- More (Spanish)
- Chicago ballplayer
- Leaves a place
- Cannot be found
- One's internal body parts
- Tell on
- North American peoples of southwest
- Soviet Socialist Republic
- Extract used for jams and jellies
- Greek goddess of the dawn
- Old English letter
- A way to exaggerate
- Get up and leave
- "Boardwalk Empire" character
- More generous
- Hanging cloth used as a blind
- Ancient Greek sophist



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

Solutions on page 23

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A Message from Canada's news publishers

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Canada's news publishers



SOURCES

¹Annual Report on Government of Canada Advertising Activities 2023-2024, combined with proprietary industry data.

²Totum Research Canada, January 2025. Canadians 18+, n=2418.; Pollara for the Dais. 2025 Survey of Online Harms, Canadians 16+, n=2502.

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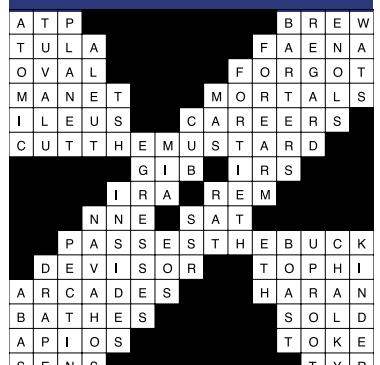
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9	2	4	3	7	5	6	8	1
8	1	6	4	9	2	7	3	5
3	5	7	8	1	6	4	9	2
1	3	8	7	5	4	9	2	6
5	7	9	6	2	3	1	4	8
6	4	2	9	8	1	5	7	3

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