

STRATFORD TIMES

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Measles outbreak grows across Ontario: Over 1,400 cases reported

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Ontario continues to experience a significant measles outbreak, with 1,440 outbreak-related cases and an additional 25 travel-related cases as of May 6, as noted in the Huron Perth Public Health (HPPH) board of health meeting on May 9.

This is an increase of 197 cases over the previous week and is occurring at 17 public health units across Ontario, said Medical Officer of Health Dr. Miriam Klassen.

“For context, in Ontario between 2013 and 2023, there were 101 cases altogether over that 10-year period. And last year, in 2024, there were 64 cases,” said Klassen.

The outbreak has now been deemed stable but concerning, with 76.4 per cent of cases affecting infants, children, and adolescents, and 87 per cent of cases being unimmunized. Klassen said this number is expected to be much higher, as Public Health Ontario predicts several cases are not being appropriately reported to public health.

The outbreak pattern at this point is said to be stable but seems to be hopping from one region to the next, passing through unvaccinated communities, Klassen told the board at the recent meeting.

“Right now, we’re not seeing the same ‘up and down’ pattern, but rather the disease hopping from one community to the next,” she said.

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Stratford police Chief Greg Skinner, accessibility advocate Diane Sims, and Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma gleefully cut the ribbon for the police station's new accessibility ramp. The ramp and accompanying barrier-free front entrance means that the station finally has a zero-threshold entrance after nearly 20 years of petitioning from the city's advisory committee. (CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

After nearly 20 years of petitioning, Stratford Police HQ finally has barrier-free access

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

It's been nearly 20 years since the accessibility advisory committee (AAC) first identified the Stratford Police Service (SPS)'s headquarters as inaccessible – but now the George Street building finally has a barrier-free entrance.

On May 7, the ramp was officially unveiled with a ribbon cutting done by Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma, police Chief Greg Skinner, and Diane Sims, an accessibility advocate and co-chair of the AAC.

As Skinner said, a lot of work and a lot of people were involved in making the entrance and ramp a reality – but it was Sims' advocacy that made it possible.

“Diane was the catalyst and she never let go of it,” Skinner said about Sims' dedication to the project. “When I think about some of the stories that I've heard of people trying to access the building who had accessibility issues, it was heart wrenching to know what they had to go through to be able to access the police. So this solution,

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After nearly 20 years of petitioning, Stratford Police HQ finally has barrier-free access

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

while it may not be perfect, is a lot better than we had and it will allow those members of the public that need to access our service have a free flow and movement to do that.”

The idea for the ramp is nearly 20 years old. The AAC, a group of accessibility-minded citizens who advise the City of Stratford in making the city as barrier-free (zero-threshold) as possible, made a motion in 2007 that identified the entrance to the police station as inaccessible, and directed the city to make it accessible.

The issue, however, remained untouched until 2022 when Sims wanted to go into the building on a rainy day to drop off some papers. Not being able to use the front steps off of George Street with her wheelchair, Sims went around the back and tried to use the elevator in the vestibule off of the St. Patrick Street entrance, only to be told that the elevator was only for the Ontario Court of Justice office (which shares the building with police).

“(They) told me that the elevator is only for the judicial side of the building and there’s no way to get in the station with a wheelchair,” Sims said. “Well I went home and I called Greg.”

Since that time, Sims successfully petitioned both Skinner and Ritsma in getting the issue into the 2024 budget. The headquarters has other issues, such as a lack of



The City of Stratford's accessibility advisory committee (AAC) poses on the ramp. There is still more work to be done to make the city as accessible as possible and the group meets monthly to assist in that endeavour. (CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

space and extensive maintenance needs, that necessitate a new building in the near future; however, staff, city council, and the AAC came to the ramp as the best solution.

As a semi-permanent structure, the ramp can be used at another location if or when a new headquarters for police is sourced. Additionally, being a metal structure rather than poured concrete saved taxpayer

money in the long run. Along with the accompanying barrier-free front door and labour costs, the total project was billed as \$200,000 in the 2024 budget – compared to the \$275,000 price tag it would have had if it was concrete.

During the unveiling, both Skinner and Ritsma praised Sims for her staunch advocacy and the AAC's continued work – while acknowledging that there is much

more still to do. Police headquarters is still not fully accessible, with some internal work still to be done, and there are many more city-owned properties that need additional work to be fully accessible.

“We know we have lots of work to do within this building or a future build with regards to accessibility ... and so we will continue to work on that,” Ritsma said after cutting the ribbon. “This is the first step of, I think, many more steps for accessibility, specifically around police services.”

The only thing which disappointed Sims about the project was the timeline. The ramp was supposed to be installed prior to Jan. 1, 2025, the deadline for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), provincial legislation which made it law for all public buildings to be made accessible; however, the work was severely snagged due to issues with the contractor and was only completed in early May.

Sims shared with the Times that now that the ramp has been installed, she is on the hunt for her next project. As the AODA deadline came and went this year with still much more to be done to make Stratford, Ontario, and Canada more accessible, there is a lot for her to choose from.

“I’ve got a few projects of my own on the go,” Sims smiled. “So I’m not sure what I’m going to tackle in the city – but it will be something.”

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Measles outbreak grows across Ontario: Over 1,400 cases reported

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

A total of 101 hospitalizations have occurred, including eight in the ICU. Among hospitalizations, 80 cases were unimmunized, including 63 children, which Klassen says is very concerning.

“That’s a lot of hospitalizations, and this is not a trivial illness,” she continued.

“Public health nurses from the Anabaptist, immunization, and infectious disease teams have been supporting local families in our Anabaptist communities by providing MMR vaccinations and consulting with community leaders to contain the spread of measles in the communities,” read the report presented to the board at the May 9 meeting.

The immunization team at HPPH has now completed six measles clinics – three in-house and three in the community. Some of these clinics also offered additional vaccinations where clients were eligible.

Due to the significantly increased demand for the MMR vaccine, the immunization team is also supporting mother and young child clinics.

Vaccination remains the best strategy, as the disease is generally milder in vaccinated individuals. Primary care actively encourages immunization, and additional clinics have been launched to address the outbreak.

“What we continue to see is that (those who are vaccinated), on the whole, the disease is much milder and doesn’t tend to cause onward transmission. So, vaccination is still the best strategy,” noted Klassen.

“We continue to work away at it, assessing where risk might be, where we can add additional actions,” said Klassen. “If someone wants the measles immunization, they can still be immunized (by HPPH) or by reaching out to their primary care team.”



Huron Perth
Public Health

Accessibility round-up: What is still inaccessible in Stratford?

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The recent installation of the police station accessibility ramp is a huge accomplishment for the City of Stratford; however, the George Street headquarters is by no means the only public building in Stratford with accessibility issues.

In 2005, the Province of Ontario implemented the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) which, among other things, required that the province be made fully accessible in 20 years time, with all levels of government, private sectors, and non-profits complying with said legislation to do so.

The deadline for the AODA was Jan. 1 2025 and that goal was not achieved.

Roger Koert, chair of the accessibility advisory committee (AAC), told the Times that overall, the City of Stratford has made good strides in meeting AODA compliance.

“However, AODA compliance isn't optional. It's law,” Koert said in a written statement. “We need access now, to facilities, to resources, to services. ... We don't need accessibility allies, we need accessibility accomplices who will do something to create a better today.”

To that end, he shared some of the locations on the AAC's radar.

The Stratford Education Recreation Centre (SERC) track does not meet the guidelines for outdoor facilities. It is stone dust and does not include any ramped locations to zero-threshold access. Therefore, in addition to the track not being accessible, neither is the soccer or rugby field in the middle of the track for participants or spectators.

Koert indicated that the AAC has a motion to renovate and bring the facility up to standards of modern track and field venues.

The design of the accessible walking path that navigates through the Packham Road Sports Complex soccer fields was endorsed by the AAC in 2018. It was to be stone dust, and although that material is not as good as pavement, it is still considered an accessible surface for outdoor trails.

Koert said that at some point after this endorsement, the trail was installed with crushed asphalt which is an explicit barrier and not what the AAC originally approved. The track has been a barrier in the community ever since and no one from the city or soccer club has been held accountable for that decision, he said.

Likewise, Koert said that the AAC has a motion to renovate the track to be accessible as first designed.

The slope of the bridge to Tom Patterson Island does not comply with the AODA, nor the facility accessibility design manual (FADM) which the AAC and city developed a number of years ago. This oversight prevents residents and tourists with accessibility needs from accessing the annual attractions that the island is used for throughout the year.

The AAC has a motion to replace the bridge with one that meets the AODA and FADM standards; however, at the most recent AAC meeting on May 6, Coun. Bonnie Henderson informed the committee that the city will revisit the bridge and make it accessible in 10 or 12 years when the existing bridge reaches end of life and must be replaced or repaired.

“But we, the AAC, are telling the city the bridge is end of life because it doesn't meet the accessibility laws of today,” Koert said. “Unfortunately, it feels like we are being taken as seriously as the AAC from 2007 who made the original motion for a ramp at the police station.”

As noted, the ramp was finally installed just this week, nearly 20 years after that 2007 motion.

Koert also indicated that the city does not currently have an accessibility coordinator on staff nor is there a job posting for the position on the city's recruitment portal. Koert called this omission a “missed opportunity.”

Tim Wolfe, director of community services with the city, said that there are always locations that the city will work towards addressing accessibility with the AAC. He indicated the city has started work at National Stadium to install accessible bathrooms and started work at the SERC site, though did not further elaborate on how many buildings or spaces still need work to be AODA compliant.

Under the AODA, every municipality must publish yearly reports on the implementation of accessibility standards. On the city's website numerous accomplishments from last year are listed, including the installation of a wheelchair ramp for a modular stage at the Stratford Rotary Complex and the purchase of “mobi mats” which assist in making outdoor events accessible.

To see the complete list of accomplishments, visit <https://www.stratford.ca/en/inside-city-hall/annual-accessibility-status-update.aspx#Design-of-Public-Spaces-Standard>.

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Editorial

The art of listening: How one quote changed my perspective

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Years ago, I came across a quote by public speaker and optimist Simon Sinek: “Listening is not the act of hearing the words that are spoken; it is the art of understanding the meaning behind those words.”

At the time, I was working as a nurse. I always believed I connected well with my patients, but this one quote transformed how I showed up for them and, ultimately, how I approach my work as a reporter now.

I consider myself a good listener; I love hearing stories and learning from others. The more people I speak with – across different ages, backgrounds, religions, and perspectives – the more I learn and connect with people I might never have known otherwise.

Sinek's words came at a time when the world was rapidly changing, and opposing views in my family and friendships began to surface. I've always considered myself a passionate believer in acceptance, and that conviction remains unshaken. But listening – truly listening – became the bridge that kept me connected to people I could have easily distanced myself from over conflicting beliefs.

Inspired by Sinek's TED Talks and books, I began to

understand that creating an environment where others feel genuinely heard is a skill that can be developed over time. I set out to do just that.

In my nursing practice, this meant listening to my patients' perspectives: how they saw the world, how they showed up in it, and what mattered to them. It made me a better nurse, a more empathetic person, and, I believe, someone people wanted to be around.

Sinek argues that listening is a learnable and practicable skill – one that improves with time and attention. Over two years, I cared for more than 300 patients, and the experience solidified this belief. I replaced judgment with curiosity and made an effort to understand why someone held a different viewpoint. Even when I disagreed or had knowledge that could challenge their perspective, I prioritized listening – not just to respond, but to understand.

Studies show that when we hear something we disagree with, our instinct is often to defend, litigate, or interrupt. We want to point out flaws in logic, but that reaction only builds walls. It's the opposite of what we want from meaningful conversation.

Sinek suggests that leading with an open mind and truly understanding someone's thoughts and feelings can transform interactions. He advises using three sim-

ple phrases: "Go on," "Tell me more," and "What else?" These prompts encourage deeper exploration and signal genuine interest.

He also emphasizes that effective conversations don't require both parties to be open-minded – just one person willing to create space for real dialogue. That person can be you.

Listening is the foundation of trust. It's how we find common ground amid opposition. As a reporter, I've realized that this is the ultimate goal. Whether covering small-town news, global events, or interviewing celebrities, the mission is the same: listen with an open mind, understand without judgment, and the person you're speaking with will walk away feeling truly heard and understood.

Hearing someone out doesn't mean you agree with them. It simply means you value their perspective enough to understand it. And sometimes, even if you don't change their mind – or your own – you've built a bridge instead of a wall. Maintaining relationships despite differing views isn't always easy, but I've found that the power of listening has allowed me to hold onto connections that might have otherwise been lost.

“Listening is one of the most remarkable skills anyone can learn; the power to truly listen.” – *Simon Sinek*

Letter to Editor

Celebrate National Accessibility Week May 25-31

To the people of Perth County,

We invite you to celebrate with us this National Accessibility Week, taking place May 25-31.

What are we celebrating? Well, those extraordinary organizations and people who foster accessibility throughout our county. For example, the Alzheimer Society of Huron-Perth, which helps persons with dementia to live without barriers, or the former chair of our joint accessibility advisory committee, Dennis Manarey, who, for over 15 years, worked tirelessly to guide businesses and property owners on making our built environments more accessibility for persons of all disabilities.

“How do I celebrate?” you might ask yourself. It takes as little as a few minutes to remember those people helping to make an accessible county. They are your friends, they are your neighbours, they are your family. They might even be you. Remember them this week especially, and perhaps drop them a note of thanks. It's that simple. And then think of one small way you can make the places around you more accessible. If you are looking for ideas, just look to the many amazing organizations that support and advocate for individuals with disabilities.

One of those groups is your Perth County joint accessibility advisory committee, of which I am chair. Our members come from across the county, representing all of the lower tiers, and bring a wealth of knowledge and experience on accessibility issues. We invite you to reach out to us with any questions, comments or concerns with

regards to accessibility. You can contact the committee through the county by phone at 519-271-0531, via email at info@perthcounty.ca or by mail at 1 Huron St., Stratford, Ontario, N5A 5S4. Please note in your communication that it is in regards to the joint accessibility advisory committee (JAAC).

As you move about the county during National Accessibility Week, take a few minutes to think about the places we work, live and visit, and ask yourself how could we promote accessibility for everyone.

Happy National Accessibility Week!

In gratitude,

Mike Doan,
chair, on behalf of the Perth County joint accessibility
advisory committee

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Stratford named one of Canada's top travel destinations by CBC's The Current

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

With tension rising between Canada and the U.S., many locals are planning to stay put this summer. To help boost local tourism, CBC's The Current has put together a list of the top 10 travel destinations in Canada – and Stratford made the list.

With more than 2,000 locations sent in by listeners, The Current shortlisted 20 destinations in March and gave Canadians a chance to vote for their favourite travel spots until the end of April. Suggestions ranged from towns and national parks to rivers and specific roadways.

On May 1, the top 10 destinations were announced on the broadcast. Alongside Cape Breton Island, N.S., and Tofino, B.C., Stratford was chosen by voters across Canada as one of the most beautiful places to visit in the country.

The article, published by CBC, praised Stratford for its charm: "Besides its dedication to the arts, Stratford has a quaint downtown filled with historic storefronts, parks, and gardens ... it's surrounded by beautiful farmland and agriculture – all making it a must on any travel bucket list."

Zac Gribble, executive director of Destination Stratford and festival director of Lights On Stratford, is deeply involved in the city's tourism industry and says he's

thrilled with the recent recognition.

"Destination Stratford is glowing with pride that our community made it to the top 10 Canadian travel bucket list from CBC Radio's The Current," he said. "It's especially rewarding given the national audience and scope, and that it was CBC listeners who, with almost 50,000 votes, decided which 20 locations to nominate and then which destinations made the list."

He added that this kind of recognition is instrumental in drawing people to Stratford and showcasing everything the city has to offer.

"This type of authentic recognition from our visitors and community is absolutely treasured, and we take immense pleasure in sharing this achievement far and wide."

Gribble highlighted Stratford's many attractions, noting it's no wonder the city made the list.

"From world-class theatre and a vibrant culinary scene to charming shops, gardens, culinary trails, and year-round events hosted in a walkable heritage downtown, Stratford continues to shine as one of the top cultural destinations in Canada.

"What makes our community truly special is the generosity, creativity and hospitality of the people that live and work here. We can't wait to host all those who have Stratford on their travel bucket list!"



Stratford proudly claims a spot on CBC Radio's The Current Top 10 Canadian travel bucket list. Pictured is a blue heron enjoying a quiet moment on the Avon River—a familiar sight for those who know Stratford's charm. (AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

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McHappy Day meal



Madeline Hobson, 4, and her sister Mackenzie Hobson, 6, enjoy Chicken McNuggets at McDonald's on Ontario Street in Stratford during McHappy Day, May 8. A portion of proceeds from every food and beverage item sold on McHappy Day supports families with seriously ill children at Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC) chapters across Canada. Last year, McHappy Day raised more than \$1 million for RMHC Toronto — the equivalent of 5,721 nights of comfort for families.

(AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

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STRATFORD NISSAN



Do municipalities have legal authority to fight strong mayor powers? Not according to experts

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

As reported in the May 2 edition of the Stratford Times, at the April 28 Stratford city council meeting Coun. Mark Hunter asserted that from his reading of Canada's Constitution local governments do not have the legal authority to push back on provincial mandates – even controversial legislation such as the strong mayor powers recently disseminated to 169 Ontario municipalities including the City of Stratford.

Hunter, according to a few experts at Western University's Local Government Program, is exactly right.

Zack Taylor, a professor at the program and editor-in-chief of the Territory, Politics, and Governance journal, told the Times that under the constitution municipalities fall entirely under provincial jurisdiction and “the province can legislate whatever it likes and there is nothing a municipal council can do about it.”

Martin Horak, another professor with the program, agreed in part. He explained that municipalities don't have any legal authority to push back on strong mayor powers and indeed are just creatures of the province. As an example, he cited the 2018 court case between the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario where

the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the province was able to reduce the size of city council without consulting with said council.

That being said, local councils do have some options.

“It's not like provinces can just kind of do anything they want willy nilly with no consequences, because at the very least there are political consequences,” Horak said. “When Ford cut the council, drawn council in half, there was a huge uproar. It had implications for his popularity in Toronto and so on. So legally, the province can do anything it wants. Politically? Not always. So this means that I think if a whole bunch of mayors and councils and a whole bunch of smaller municipalities that got strong mayor powers right now organized ... maybe the province will reconsider.”

During the 2025 budget deliberations last year, councillors expressed concern with the current system and the increasing download of responsibilities onto local governments. Many thought that the province wasn't doing its part in funding its responsibilities.

During the deliberations Mayor Martin Ritsma indicated that at a recent Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) meeting, that was a sentiment shared by

representatives across Ontario. There was talk at the meeting of needing a new relationship which captures modern needs and doesn't unfairly burden local government.

When asked how likely a new relationship is if municipalities don't have legal authority, Horak said it comes down to political leverage.

“In order to get leverage, they need to be politically smart about it and work together with each other, be it through AMO or in smaller groups and municipalities, and make really strong arguments in the public sphere and in the media about ... ‘This is what we need and this is why we need it and this is how we want this relationship to be different,’” Horak said. “Because then, from a political perspective, maybe the province will pay attention. But really, it's about collective action and it's about effective messaging from the municipal level.”

Another issue discussed by Stratford council in relation to the powers was the politicization of funding streams. There was a worry that if council publicly opposes the province's actions, that the city's chances of securing vital capital funding from the province would drop in the future.

Horak said that he was unaware of any data-driven evidence of the politicization

of grants and that such a thing would be difficult to track statistically.

“I'm not saying it's never happened, but I don't see that as a kind of prominent practice,” he said.

What is an issue, Horak indicated, was the “Pandora's box” consequences down the line. The powers were not expressly instituted to advance housing starts, but to advance “provincial priorities.” While housing is a priority today, it may not always be. Horak warned that if the strong mayor powers were to stay in place as they are now – and that is likely since institutional changes like these are difficult to reverse – then a future government could come to power and implement a provincial priority which emboldens the powers.

“The strong mayor powers haven't been particularly effective at meeting the province's goal of getting more housing built, but they've had all kinds of other implications,” Horak said. “So it's kind of a case of a lot of unintended consequences and not many of the intended ones. It does make me wonder retrospectively ... was the provincial government over optimistic?”

When asked to discuss the powers and some of the concerns raised by local councillors in Stratford and abroad, Rob Flack, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, declined an interview.

Hospital foundation surpasses \$30 million fundraising goal

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

After 10 years of quiet and public fundraising, the Stratford General Hospital Foundation's ambitious \$30 million capital goal has been not only met but exceeded.

The foundation announced the success of the In Our Hands Capital Campaign on May 6, and that a grand total of \$31,428,674.40 was raised in cash and pledges.

Launched in the quiet phase in 2015 and publicly announced in 2022, the milestone marks a transformative moment in local health care, with funds raised supporting a wide range of critical priorities – from the creation of a new cancer and medical care clinic with a co-located pharmacy, to the purchase of essential medical equipment, and investments in staff training.

“The foundation launched this campaign with a vision to build a healthier future – one where the latest tools, technologies, and spaces are available right here at home,” said Cheryl Hunt, executive director of the Stratford General Hospital Foundation, in a media release. “Surpassing our \$30 million goal is a testament to what our community can achieve together.”

The same release notes that the Stratford General Hospital site of the Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance (HPHA) is fortunate to receive strong operational support from the Province of Ontario. However, provin-

cial funding does not cover the cost of new and replacement medical equipment, vital infrastructure upgrades, or many of the innovations that enhance patient care.

That's where community support becomes essential.

The In Our Hands Capital Campaign was launched to bridge this funding gap, ensuring that care teams have the tools, spaces, and training they need to continue delivering exceptional care. Campaign investment priorities include the aforementioned cancer and medical care clinic with co-located pharmacy, new and replacement medical equipment, laboratory improvements, transformation initiatives for mental health and dementia care, and staff training.

“These investments are already making a tangible difference for patients and care teams across the hospital,” said Andrew Williams, president and CEO of the HPHA. “From state-of-the-art equipment to thoughtfully designed spaces, this campaign has enhanced access and helped us continue to deliver safe, efficient, and compassionate care.”

Thousands of individuals, families, businesses, service clubs, HPHA team members, and local municipalities stepped forward to give. In total, more than 27,000 gifts were made by over 7,500 donors. Among the many highlights of the campaign were two transformational gifts of

\$5 million – the largest of the campaign – from the Van Nes family, in memory of Jack and Teresa Van Nes, and from the City of Stratford. These extraordinary contributions reflect a shared commitment to strengthening local healthcare for the benefit of the entire community.

“This campaign was about more than just hitting a target – it was about investing in our future,” said Rick Orr, campaign co-chair. “We're incredibly grateful to everyone who donated, shared their story, or encouraged others to support our hospital.”

With construction of the new cancer and medical care clinic complete, and improvements underway across multiple de-

partments, patients are already feeling the lasting impact of this historic campaign.

While the \$30 million goal has been exceeded, the foundation emphasizes that continued community support will always be essential as health care needs evolve.

“We are celebrating today – but we're also looking forward,” added Paul Roulston, campaign co-chair. “Because of this community's generosity, we've built something incredible together. And with your continued support, we'll keep moving healthcare forward.”

To learn more or find out how you can continue to support local healthcare, please visit www.sghfoundation.org

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Roads continue to be one of Stratford’s most underfunded assets

CONNOR LUCZKA
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

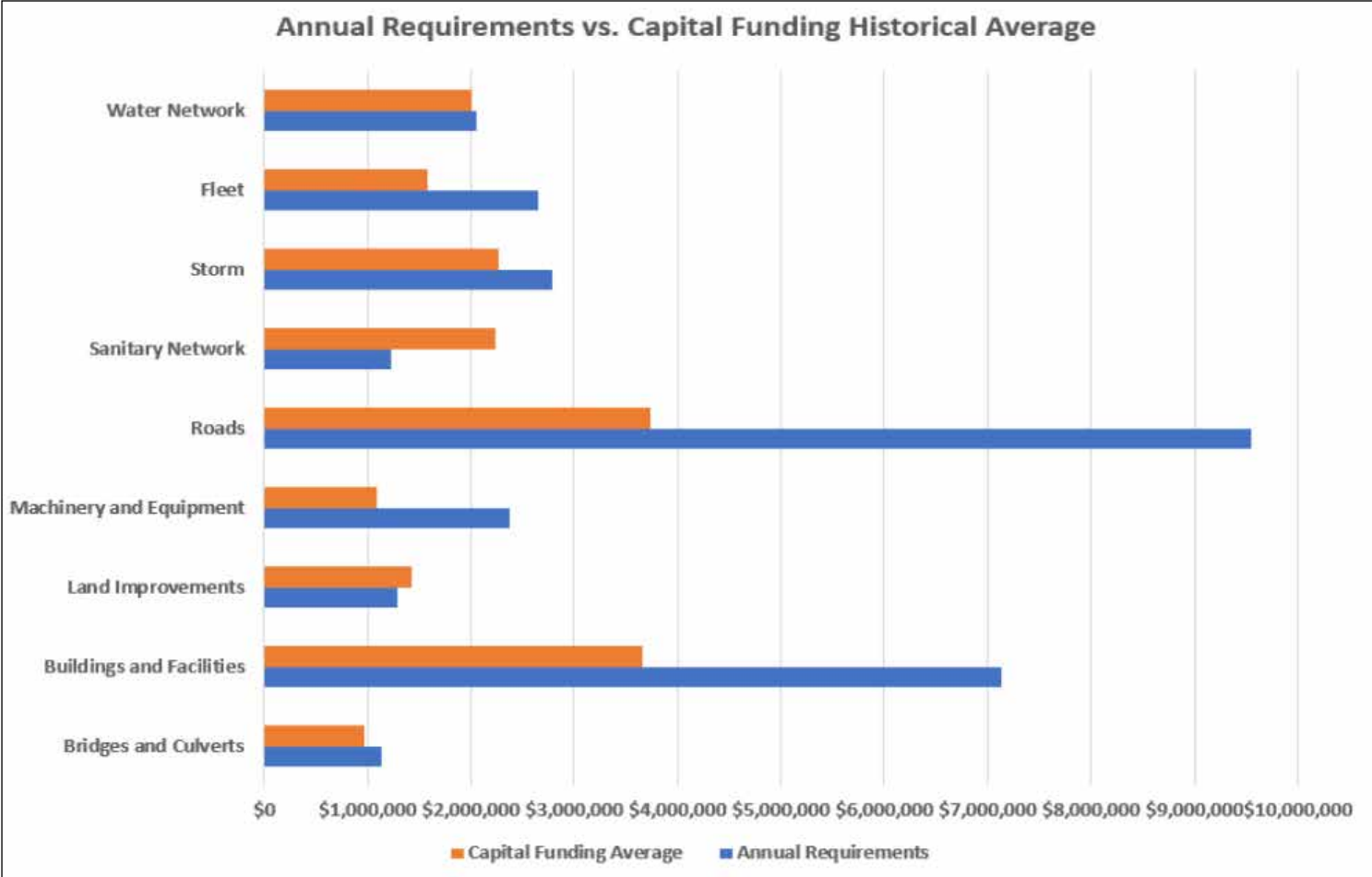
Across 35,000 assets that equal out to a value of over \$1 billion, the City of Stratford’s roads continue to be its most underfunded piece of infrastructure.

That fact is according to the asset management plan (AMP) update presented to city council at its meeting on May 12.

According to the update, nearly half of the road network, which has a total replacement cost of \$299.5 million, is assessed as “very poor” (48 per cent). Nine per cent is in “poor” condition, 15 per cent is in “fair” condition, 12 per cent is in “good” condition, and 16 per cent is in “very good condition.”

The report suggests that an average capital budget of over \$30 million is needed towards the city’s infrastructure in order to maintain; however, the city averages about \$18.7 million, leaving a \$11.5 million gap.

Roads are the hardest hit of the city’s asset categories. They require an average annual requirement of \$9.5 million and received a historical average of \$3.7 million. That is a \$5.8 million deficit each year.



The above graph shows the \$5.8 million funding deficit for roads, the most underfunded of Stratford’s infrastructure, as well as the deficits for all other categories. Other than the city’s water, there is a funding deficit for all of its infrastructure assets. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Put in terms of a yearly budget, roads and all other infrastructure categories require a 17 per cent budget increase.

Johnny Bowes, the city’s manager of asset management, noted in his presentation of the update that the goal of the AMP being presented that evening is to identify problems. The next phase of the review (to be completed later this year) will include a comprehensive sustainable financial strategy to be endorsed by council.

Though a dire picture of the infrastructure-gap in the city, having such a thor-

ough plan will be beneficial for the city not only in terms of identifying problems, but in terms of fixing said problems.

“Asset management plans are directly linked to federal and provincial funding,” Bowes said. “Over the course of the last few years, one of the first things that is asked on pretty much all grants and funding stream applications: “Do you have an asset management plan approved by council? Is it in effect?” So if we do not have an updated asset management plan and continue this program that the province is regulating, then it will affect our annual funding. ... We need these funding streams, like every other municipality, because they play a huge part in our capital projects, our capital programs.”

From 2026 and beyond, the AMP will be reviewed annually and its associated policy will be updated every five years, in accordance with provincial direction.

The 147-page plan, which covers all of the city’s core and non-core assets, can be found in the May 12 council meeting agenda, found here: <https://tinyurl.com/53hmypsk>

Council has not had any closed meeting infractions for the past two years: report

CONNOR LUCZKA
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

From May 31, 2023 to Sept. 9, 2024, there were only a handful of improper items voted on by Stratford city council, according to the May 12 report by the City of Stratford’s closed meeting investigator.

Moreover, the improper items dated back nearly two years ago.

Over the course of 25 closed meetings across those 16 months, Tony Fleming of Cunningham, Swan, Carty, Little & Bonham LLP found only three individual agenda items that were improperly handled in closed meetings.

To put that figure into context, in 2024

Fleming investigated five years’ worth or closed meetings and found 135 improper votes – prompting an in-depth investigation and review by staff that resulted in a policy change and training.

In rare praise, Fleming wrote in his report that “council and staff have made considerable efforts to improve practices, and that this has paid off.”

Mike Sullivan, resident and council watchdog, also congratulated council on its efforts to curb improper actions that evening, though cautioned that council should amend the closed meeting protocol further. He argued that the protocol allows council to decide whether to litigate a matter in closed session, yet as he understands the rules no substantive decisions can be made in closed session.

“It’s clearly a substantive decision,” he said. “Not a procedural matter.”

Fleming’s report also notes that council should use caution to separate out negotiating instructions from substantive next steps and should familiarize itself with the distinctions as to when such matters can be addressed.

The first of the three infractions occurred on July 10, when council voted on a motion to start issuing tenders for expanding the city-owned Wright Business Park – a substantive decision that should have been made in open session.

The second and third infraction oc-

curred on Oct. 10. In discussion of the sale of certain lands, council correctly provided instructions with respect to negotiating positions; however, it also directed staff on what should be done with the proceeds of sale.

Then, council voted to increase the salary for non-union staff commiserate to the increase union staff would receive once union negotiations completed. Fleming argued that the discussion of the wage increase was properly held in closed, but the subsequent vote should have occurred in open session.

Council voted unanimously to accept the report and to continue to commit to education and training.

Council approves two fast-charging EV stations at Rotary Complex

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

After shooting down the opportunity to install four electric vehicle (EV) fast-charging stations at the Stratford Rotary Complex in March, council has decided on a “good balance” and approved the installation of two instead.

The decision was made at the May 12 meeting after staff came back with a revised proposal. In their original pitch to council, staff explained that they were successful in securing \$200,000 in federal funding for the installation of four level three EV charging stations at the Rotary Complex.

The March motion to accept the funding was defeated with Coun. Mark Hunter expressing concern over the lack of usage of the charging ports the City of Stratford already has and the significant cost of the four new stations – expected to cost \$515,700.

This time around, Coun. Cody Sebben said the installation of two stations was a “good balance” – a point reiterated by Coun. Lesley Biehn.

Hunter, early in the discussion, raised the same points he made in March. Despite the federal funding, the stations still have

a hefty price tag. The total cost is expected to be \$269,690. With \$100,000 coming from the feds, that makes the city’s contribution to the project nearly \$170,000.

Additionally, residents are just not using the stations they currently have.

“The data we have is that the average port – we have 23 ports in the city – the average port is used 173 times last year, which is roughly every other day,” Hunter said. “And the average session is two hours per charging session ... An hour of a day per charger is what we’re currently using. ... It’s tough. The cost of this is not insignificant. I think our portion is \$160,000 and when we’re not fully using what we already have, to me, I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves.”

Coun. Jo-Dee Burbach disagreed in part with Hunter’s analysis.

“All of the data is from level two (charges). Many of them are new,” Burbach said. “They’ve been around less than a year. And when we compare the usage of the level two stations in Stratford with ones that have been operational further in other municipalities – the first-year data is actually pretty good. People don’t necessarily know that they’re there, and now, as people are getting to know that we have them, they’re going to be used more.”

That point was taken by Hunter, who later made a motion in the new business portion of the meeting to have more fulsome investigations on the data of the city’s charging stations when the item comes up again in the future, saying that more detailed data would help him (and council) make more thorough decisions.

Mike Sullivan, resident and advocate in Stratford, delegated at the meeting. He urged council to approve the project, particularly highlighting the difference between level two and level three charging stations. At a level two station, EV drivers can be fully charged from empty in about 11 to 15 hours. Level three stations can take an EV from empty to 80 per cent full in an hour. As a tourist town, Sullivan argued that level three stations are vital to attracting visitors with EVs.

Also, given the city’s declaration of a climate emergency and the federal and provincial governments’ focus on developing green technologies and moving towards EVs in the near future, Sullivan said it is paramount that the city continues doing the necessary work to prepare for that future.

“I fear that the city, given its unwillingness to spend money on even a small handful of stations, does not realize the

enormity of the task and is willing to put that decision off to future councillors and future taxpayers,” Sullivan said. “... I urge the council to accept the generosity of the federal government and install as many chargers as they can.”

After spirited discussion, the decision to accept the funding and move forward with the installation of the stations passed unanimously – with a spurt of applause from a handful of residents in the gallery.

Further into the meeting, council also directed staff to look at the parking restrictions for EV charging stations, with a number of councillors expressing support to allowing 24-hour parking at level two stations, to increase usage.

Additionally, deputy clerk Amy Pascual said that the clerk’s office is investigating user fees for the use of the level three charging stations. Currently, the parking rates for level two stations are enough to recoup the costs of operating the stations, but level three stations cost much more to operate and will need some fee structure to make the service revenue-neutral for the city.

With this decision, the city will operate eleven level two stations and three level three stations (one at the Erie Street parking lot and two at the Rotary Complex).

Monthly family food bill increased to more than \$1,300 for residents of Huron-Perth in 2024

GALEN SIMMONS

Regional Editor

According to research into local food insecurity last year conducted by Huron Perth Public Health (HPPH), a family of four, on average, spent \$309 per week or \$1,338 monthly on groceries.

Just released by the local public-health agency, *The Real Cost of Eating: Food Insecurity in Huron and Perth 2024* shows that a family of four receiving Ontario Works would need to allocate 46 per cent of their income to meet Canada’s food guide recommendations. This underscores the growing challenge of food affordability and a broader trend of increasing household food insecurity. Between 2021 and 2023 (the most recent data available), nearly 18 per cent of households in Huron-Perth experienced food insecurity.

“We know that Huron-Perth residents are all feeling the impact of the increase to food costs that are happening right now, but it really has the biggest impact on those at the lowest incomes,” said HPPH public-health dietitian Amy MacDonald. “Every time we do this food-costing, we find that individuals and families living on social assistance and living on minimum wage simply do not have enough income to purchase adequate food to meet their needs.”

Those who can’t afford to meet the food-guide nutrition guidelines tend to rely on food banks and low-cost options at more affordable grocery stores. These types

of food, MacDonald explained, are often shelf-stable with higher amounts of sugar, fat, salt and preservatives, and less nutritional value in them.

“Whether it be, at the lowest level, where you’re just worrying about not having enough money for food, or where you’re having to decrease the quality or eventually even decrease the quantity and going hungry, food insecurity has really negative impacts on health outcomes,” MacDonald said.

“It results in increased health conditions like heart disease, hypertension, arthritis, pain; it also results in poorer mental health, and it can even result in increased issues with healthy growth and development for children, and with infectious disease as well. If you’re not meeting your (nutritional) needs, it’s hard to keep yourself healthy.”

From this report, the HPPH is emphasizing the critical link between income and food insecurity. As area residents with lower incomes and those who rely on social supports continue to make difficult choices between paying utility bills and going to the grocery store, MacDonald says the most effective way to address food insecurity is by making poverty reduction a priority at all levels.

“Our goal is to ensure that local leaders, local residents understand that food insecurity is an issue of inadequate income and is really best addressed by income-based policies,” MacDonald said. “That means

we want to see increased support for things like basic income, making sure we’ve got adequate old-age pensions, looking at working-age supplements or adequate Canada Disability Benefit, lower income tax rates for lowest-income households, and making sure we’ve got good standards for working conditions, especially for precarious work and low-wage jobs.

“And, in the Province of Ontario, making sure our social-assistance rates are adequate because we know in Ontario right now, Ontario Works and ODSP are not adequate for people to be able to afford enough food. We need to look at how we can address those things.”

Individuals and local business leaders can also help forge a path forward in addressing food insecurity by writing to their provincial and federal representatives to advocate for these income-based policies, and by supporting or joining Ontario’s Living Wage Network, thereby ensuring local workers can make enough to live in Huron and Perth counties.

To learn more about why

income solutions are needed to reduce food insecurity, read *The Real Cost of Eating: Food Insecurity in Huron and Perth 2024* in its entirety at www.hpph.ca/reports.

Optimist Club of Downie Inc.

OPTI-CASH CALENDAR DRAW

May 04 Adrian Baldwin, Woodstock	\$50.00
May 05 Jackie Quipp, Stratford	\$50.00
May 06 Scott & Jessie Nyenhuis, Durham	\$50.00
May 07 Bowen Koert, St. Pauls	\$50.00
May 08 Marg Illman, Stratford	\$50.00
May 09 Anne Van Niekerk, New Hamburg	\$50.00
May 10 Tracey & Jared Hope, St. Davids	\$200.00
May 11 D. Sweete, St. Marys	\$50.00
May 12 Melisa Clark, St. Marys	\$50.00
May 13 Mary Ash c/o Paula Taylor, St. Pauls	\$50.00
May 14 Mike & Janet Whaling, St. Pauls	\$50.00
May 15 Amber Lavkka, St. Marys	\$50.00
May 16 Judy & Cory Phillips, Stratford	\$50.00
May 17 Pauline Linton, Mitchell	\$200.00



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AMDSB launches I AM Here campaign to encourage regular attendance at school

GALEN SIMMONS

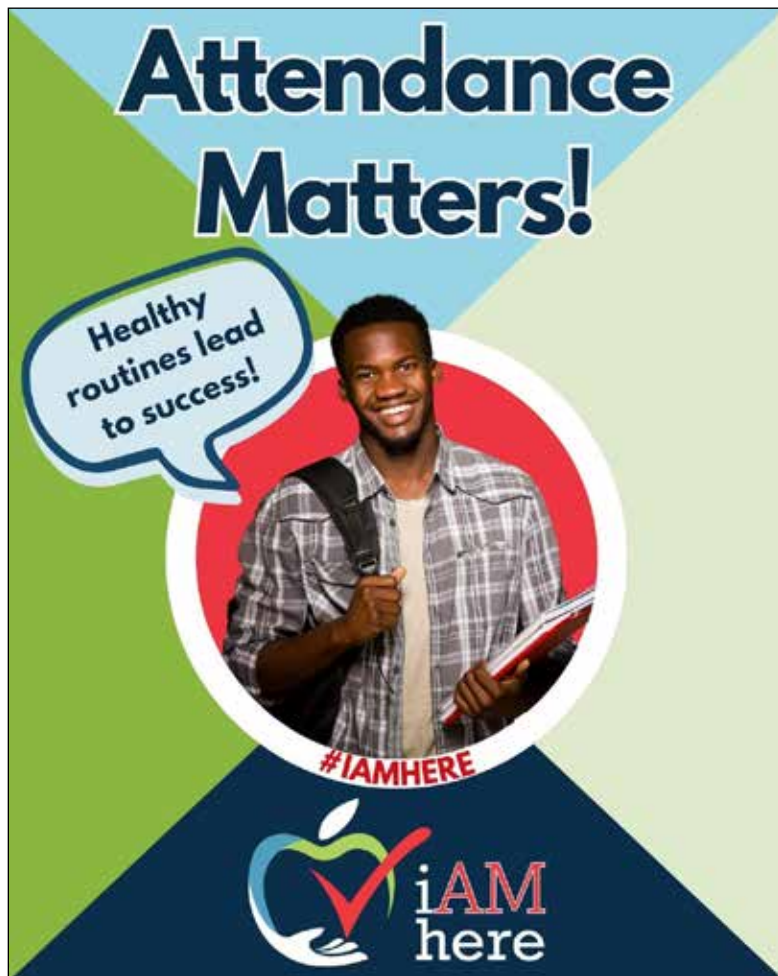
Regional Editor

As the end of the school year approaches and students' minds turn to summer vacation and summer jobs, the Avon Maitland District School Board (AMDSB) has launched a new campaign aimed at underscoring the importance of regular attendance at school.

This new campaign, called I AM Here, is targeted at students, school staff, parents and caregivers, and the wider community, all of whom have a role to play in encouraging and supporting regular attendance. According to a press release from the school board, research shows that missing just 10 per cent of school, or two days a month, has a notable impact on student academic success.

"It's always something that's in the forefront of our minds," said Ed Havenga, systems principal of student success and pathways with AMDSB. "Coming out of COVID, it's now kind of in the rearview mirror and we just want to make sure we are engaging with our families and ensuring we have our students in classrooms so the teachers are delivering and the students are there to work with the teacher and to support the learning that's in the classroom. In order for that to happen, we need our students there."

The I AM Here campaign aims to raise awareness about



An example of the positive messaging to be shared on social media as part of the Avon Maitland District School Board's I AM Here campaign. (AMDSB PHOTO)

the importance of regular daily attendance and to provide staff, students and parents/caregivers with the necessary tools to bolster attendance across Huron and Perth.

The campaign has four areas of focus:

- For students: I AM Here means they are present, on time and ready to learn each day.

- For school staff: I AM Here means that they stand with their students. They are reliable, dependable, caring adults who facilitate a safe, welcoming

classroom environment and are invested in each student's success.

- For parents/caregivers: I AM Here means they are engaged in encouraging their child's education and are ready to connect with school staff when necessary.

- For the community: I AM Here means the wider community supports and encourages children and youth by offering support – financial, physical, emotional, social – to ensure students can attend school regularly.

Regular student attendance will be supported by a team of professionals. AMDSB attendance counsellors work collaboratively, as needed, with the school board's mental health and wellbeing team, Indigenous education team, school administrators and community partners.

Trained staff provide students with techniques to reduce anxiety and stress through the use of healthy coping strategies. If necessary, they can also support referrals to alternative programming or to community resources. Working with parents and caregivers, they can support the development of a plan that encourages a full return to academic learning. Students and parents or caregivers should contact their school principal to access the support of an attendance counsellor.

"Attendance is one of the pillars of the ministry's stu-

dent-achievement plan," Havenga said. "We are constantly looking at our data for our attendance, so we're looking at students who have greater than or equal to 90 per-cent attendance, so that's one of our metrics that, as a school board, we're always looking to increase. We've actually created an attendance advisory council, so that council is just now collecting best practices from various schools in the district, and then we're going to share those ideas with all schools."

Part of the campaign, Havenga explained, is sharing positive messaging about the importance of regular attendance both in school and on social media through the school board and each individual school's social-media platforms. He said sharing the positive spinoffs of regular attendance has been proven more effective than trying to scare students into attending school with the potential impacts low attendance can have on learning and their future career paths.

While the program is rolling out now as a sort of pilot before school lets out for the summer, Havenga said board staff will take whatever lessons are learned and the date collected to continue expanding on and improving the program going into the next school year and beyond.

For more information on the I AM Here campaign, visit amdsb.ca/iamhere.

Resident makes case for Uber to come to Festival City

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Although some Stratford residents may have seen a few cars driving around town with "Uber" stickers in their windows, by and large the American ride sharing platform isn't in Stratford yet.

Tia Petrie, a Stratford resident, means to change that.

At the April 30 infrastructure, transportation, and safety committee meeting, Petrie petitioned the committee and council to do two things.

"Separate taxi licensing from ride-share licensing," Petrie said. "They are two different things that can work to serve our community in tandem. Secondly, two councillors (one to move, one to second) put forth a motion to have staff explore the obligations of the municipality to welcome ride share programs to Stratford and implement those programs immediately."

Petrie argued that the city's current taxi companies, which are mandated by the Stratford Police Service's board to charge only a flat fee no matter how short or long a trip is (currently the cost is \$14 for a standard fare), are not an economical option for many residents and that ride share apps like Uber are a much better option.

Furthermore, given the city's reliance on tourism, the platform would be a boon to tourists who likely already have the app on their phone.

Currently, there is some confusion around whether or not ride sharing would be allowed to operate in the city under the current taxi licensing bylaw. While Petrie claimed that ride sharing may not be included in the bylaw, and thus not able to be licenced, ride share drivers have "an absolute legal definition in Canada" and should be allowed to operate in the city.

When Coun. Harjinder Nijjar inquired with the clerk and deputy clerk after

Petrie's presentation, deputy clerk Amy Pascual indicated that staff are currently looking at the legal definitions for what the bylaw says and that they had no additional information for the committee at that time.

During her presentation, Petrie also said that her petition that day was necessitated due to being banned from all three of Stratford's taxi companies, allegedly for advocating for Uber on Facebook community groups.

While representatives from Aunt Gail's Taxi and Radio Cab did not respond to a request for comment, Brad Rickert of Stratford City Cabs confirmed that Petrie was banned from their businesses, though claimed that she was banned for past behaviour well before she made any Facebook post about Uber.

Moreover, Rickert said he wasn't worried about Uber coming to Stratford at all.

"Uber is never going to happen," Rickert said. "There's not enough business within

the city to make it make sense. The situation doesn't work because the price they charge, there's no profit to the driver, so no one's going to stick around to do it. ... I'm not as worried about it, because the business model doesn't work in something of our size."

After Petrie's presentation, the committee passed a motion to investigate the City of Stratford's current bylaw to possibly allow for Uber or other ridesharing platforms in the city.

The matter will come back to council at a later date for further discussion.

Coincidentally, the taxi licensing bylaw is set for review in the near future as well. With increasing cost pressures, representatives from all three companies successfully petitioned the police board to work with the city to create a more equitable and sustainable licensing and fare system, though no update has been made since the board made a motion last year.

Avondale and House of Blessing team up for community food drive

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

An upcoming food drive run by Avondale United Church and Stratford House of Blessing will ensure that those facing hunger and food insecurity are still fed during the summer months.

Avondale United Church and Stratford House of Blessing will host a community food drive on June 7 from 8:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Representatives from both the House of Blessing and Avondale will be in the church's parking lot receiving food item and cash donations to support the House of Blessing's food bank and Avondale's food shelf.

Avondale's food shelf began as a shelf inside the Sunday school of St. John's United Church in 2009. The church's food shelf is run by 12 volunteers and is open every Friday from 1-2:30 p.m. Avondale has a full room just for the food shelf including two freezers, two fridges, and lots of shelves.

House of Blessing's food bank runs from Tuesday to Thursday between 10 a.m.-12 p.m. and 1-3 p.m., with food delivery service on Tuesdays, as well as Wednesday and Thursday mornings. For 40 years, House of Blessing helps Stratford and area residents in need with initiatives like back-to-school smiling, Christmas toy program, and new baby welcome.

Both Avondale and House of Blessing are always looking to stock their shelves with cereal, jam, peanut butter, instant coffee, and canned fruits and vegetables. Hot dogs and pop will also be available to purchase by donation at the food drive.

Aaron Balzer, resource coordinator for the Stratford



(POSTER DESIGNED BY AARON BALZER, SUBMITTED BY ALEAH GRAFF)

House of Blessing, said that following the fall food drives for Thanksgiving and Christmas, as well as a spring food drive, summer is typically a slower month for donations. "People in the summer are going on vacation. Their

routines are a little bit different, so they're not necessarily remembering that there's still hungry people in our community, so it does tend to be a bit of a slower time for donations," Balzer said.

The community food drive's spirit is to ensure that everyone works together so that those facing hunger are fed. There's been lots of teamwork and collaboration already with House of Blessing and Avondale, with Balzer designing the poster for the event.

"Part of collaborating is also recognizing each other's talents and what we offer each other. Where one organization may need some help the other organization may be more equipped to help deal with certain situations," said Aleah Graff, Avondale's community engagement coordinator.

Balzer added that collaboration between the two organizations, among others, will help those in need at any time -even if it's outside of the House of Blessing's hours.

"There are times where our food bank isn't open, or people are asking 'Can I come in tomorrow?' Well, no. We're not open tomorrow. But Avondale has these hours, or Salvation Army has these hours," he said. "So, we're working at different times in different ways and we're able to send people to Avondale at certain times so ultimately, we're all working together to keep our community fed."

Balzer said that if anyone is donating items from their own homes, to check the expiry dates before bringing it to the food drive.

Anyone looking to participate in the community food drive is asked to enter via Huntington Avenue.

Stratford city council briefs: Pride Flag will fly for whole month of June, with occasional breaks as needed

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the May 12 Stratford city council meeting, council approved the flying of the Pride Flag in front of city hall for the whole month of June – and to proclaim the month as Pride Month as a show of support for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Though, as Mayor Martin Ritsma noted, there will be more community groups and organizations wishing to fly their flags during that month. He noted that the city will change out the flag for a day or two to acknowledge other groups' contributions and significant events, as needed.

Construction of new transit office approved for \$400,000

For nearly 20 years, the city's transit office has been located in a trailer at 60 Corcoran St., though not for much longer.

Council approved the award of a tender to Complete Building Systems Inc. to the tune of \$400,020, for the design and build of a new office.

The new building will be built for a similar footprint to the old building and, notably, the design and build will be funded entirely through a grant from the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP) and the remaining city portion of the provincial gas tax funds. There will be no levy impact.

Inverness Park upgrade comes in slightly over budget

During the 2025 budget deliberations, the replacement of the Inverness Park playground was approved at an estimated cost of \$110,000.

The replacement will include the installation of a new accessible playground, including a woodchip base, and the installation of an accessible pathway to said playground.

Council awarded the tender to S.F. Scott Mfg. Co. Ltd. O/A Blue Imp, referred to in the staff report as "Blue-Imp," which was the highest scoring bidder when it came to play value and safety, accessibility, appearance and novelty, quality and durability, warranty, service, and maintenance, and price.

The project was approved at \$116,557.24, though after an HST rebate it is expected to cost \$104,963.40.

CAO authorized to amend terms of conditions of the sale of 105 Wright Blvd.

After a committee of the whole in-camera session, council convened with a motion to authorize the interim chief administrative officer (CAO) amending agreement with the buyer of 105 Wright Blvd., a property in the city-owned Wright Business Park.

The motion noted the CAO would amend "certain terms and conditions" related to the sale; however, no further details were listed.

HAVE A SPECIAL EVENT COMING UP?

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Contact: stratfordtimes@gmail.com or call 519-655-2341

Weekend Quiz

By Jake Grant

1. How far is a klick in military terms?
2. The region of Transylvania is located in what country?
3. How many popes have there been?
4. What is a male swan called?
5. The sport of two people engaging in combat with swords is?
6. Vitamin B12 helps your body to form what?
7. Cryogenics is the study of what?
8. Jack Daniel's whisky is produced in what U.S. state?
9. Who was the first winner on *The Masked Singer*?
10. What is the only mammal capable of true flight?

This week's answers are found on pg. 34

**SUBMIT YOUR LETTER TO THE EDITOR TO US!
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Deputy Chief Gerry Foster to retire from Stratford Police Service after 35 years of service

GALEN SIMMONS

Regional Editor

After more than three decades of public service in both military and civilian policing, Deputy Chief Gerry Foster has announced his retirement from the Stratford Police Service.

Foster began his career in law enforcement with the Canadian Armed Forces, serving five years as a military police officer before transitioning to civilian policing in April 1995. Over the next 30 years, he rose through the ranks in Stratford, holding supervisory roles in uniform patrol, criminal investigations, the emergency response unit, and the training unit. He was appointed deputy chief in 2018.

During his tenure as deputy chief, Foster played a key role in expanding Stratford

Police Service coverage to St. Marys and Perth South. He also led the modernization of the service, with a focus on integrating technology into police investigations, and acted as the point person for the rollout of the Next Generation 911 dispatch system, scheduled to launch this October.

"Gerry is a respected member of the Ontario policing profession and has demonstrated exemplary leadership for the members of the Stratford Police Service," said Chief Greg Skinner in a press release. "After 35 years in law enforcement, Gerry takes with him a wealth of expertise and corporate memory that will be difficult to replace. On behalf of the service and the community, I wish Gerry a long, happy and healthy retirement with his family and friends, and thank him for his service."

The Stratford Police Services Board will begin a national search for Foster's successor once a selection committee is formed.

Local leaders offered their thanks and congratulations to Foster on his retirement.

Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma described Foster's "quiet leadership" as firm, fair and consistent.

"He went about his job with professionalism and took the responsibilities that came with it very seriously," Ritsma said. "He had the challenging position of serving both the staff and officers of the Stratford Police Association and the residents of Stratford, St. Marys and Perth South. I certainly wish to thank Deputy Chief Gerry Foster and wish him much health and happiness in his retirement."

Perth South Mayor Sue Orr called Foster "approachable and attentive," especially during his time on the Perth South Police Services Board.

"He was open to questions, followed up when needed and was capable of stepping in when the chief couldn't attend," she said. "We thank him for his excellent service and dedication to Perth South."

St. Marys Mayor Al Strathdee echoed those sentiments.

"My experiences with Deputy Chief Foster were always positive," he said. "He was an accommodating and loyal public servant who showed compassion and care for our communities. We were lucky to have him and wish him the very best in retirement."

Foster's final day with the Stratford Police Service has not yet been announced.

School boards across southwestern Ontario ditch X amid privacy and safety concerns

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Several school boards in southwestern Ontario are stepping away from X, formerly known as Twitter, citing concerns over platform safety, artificial intelligence and shifting communication strategies.

In a recent report by heyData, a source often used to understand the role of AI on social media platforms, researchers raised concerns about privacy and the collection of personal data without informed consent – especially when it comes to students. The report also highlights how the widespread use of AI on platforms like X can lead to the spread of misinformation, potentially influencing real-world events.

The Avon Maitland District School Board (AMDSB) announced last month it will be leaving the platform as of June 30. The board and all associated accounts will no longer be using X to reach their audience, and families have been encouraged

to follow along on other platforms instead.

The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) followed suit, releasing a statement in April explaining its decision to step away from the platform. The board cited evolving policies, changes to safety features and the growing use of artificial intelligence as key reasons.

"Our top priority remains the safety and wellbeing of our community. While the WRDSB X/Twitter account will remain temporarily active to help guide users to our website, no new content will be shared," read an April media release.

The board is now encouraging its community to stay connected through its website, other social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Threads and YouTube) and email subscriptions to school and board websites.

"Through these platforms, we will work to maintain accessible, transparent and safe communication with students, families and staff," the statement continued.

Catholic boards across the region are making similar changes. The Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) recently announced it will also stop posting on X.

"Our priority is to share updates in a space that fosters respectful and trustworthy engagement while ensuring our online presence reflects our values of faith, inclusion and respect," said the board.

Moving forward, updates will be shared on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. All official WCDSB X accounts have pinned posts directing followers to their new Instagram accounts, where updates will continue. These accounts will remain active for now to help families adjust to the change.

The Huron Perth Catholic District School Board (HPCDSB) said it is also evaluating the situation, and families in the region will find out its stance closer to the summer.

"Similar to other school boards, we have

reviewed our social media platforms and communication strategy in general, as well as looking at particular platforms, including X (formerly Twitter). Our curriculum and IT team have reviewed current platforms and usage to determine what best aligns with our strategic priorities. This will inform our plans moving forward, which are currently still in development," the HPCDSB said in a statement.

While they have not published anything yet, the board will update its social media plan before September 2025, and communication will go out before summer break.

As more boards re-evaluate how they communicate online, many are choosing platforms that better reflect their values and offer a safer space for school communities to stay connected.

For a better understanding of local schools, families are encouraged to check school websites and news releases for more information on how to stay connected.

CORRECTION: On page 11 of the May 2 edition of the Stratford Times, Brittany Meadows was incorrectly credited for the Shelf Help review of *No Fault: A Memoir of Romance and Divorce*. Emma Brommer of the Stratford Public Library was the author. The Times regrets any confusion this error may have caused.



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Queer Book of the Month

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First Year Out: A Transition Story by Sabrina Symington

@SPL GN FIC Symin

First Year Out is an adult graphic novel that follows the character of Lily as she transitions to living as a woman. We follow the highs and lows of Lily's life right up to her sex reassignment surgery.

A memoir, based on the author's own experiences, *First Year Out* is an unflinching and positive account of what it means to be trans. Not only does it reassure individuals who are considering this life changing step, but it serves as a guide to both trans and cis-gendered people



on the challenges a person is likely to encounter once they have decided to transition.

Symington's text and quirky, colourful art work give an insight into the sometimes-daunting procedures Lily has to go through, but all the time with a hope that Lily will come through her journey successfully and become her true self - from laser hair removal, to dating, to learning to modify her voice, and finally to surgery.

Not only is *First Year Out* a candid and graphic look at what it means in practical terms to transition, but it's also a wonderful celebration of gender diversity and acceptance.

HOME IMPROVEMENTS 2025

C & A Kitchen Refinishing: A refreshed kitchen without the full-renovation price tag

GALEN SIMMONS

Regional Editor

Sometimes, a kitchen that feels outdated and in need of a refresh doesn't require a full renovation with the enormous price tag and weeks of disruption that comes with it.

Instead of paying tens of thousands of dollars more than you have to while losing access to your kitchen for weeks during renovations, husband-and-wife team Cody and Andie Hanna of C & A Kitchen Refinishing are offering an affordable alternative that will leave your kitchen looking bright and new in as little as one week.

"We really take pride in being able to save customers money," said Cody Hanna. "If you're looking at gutting a kitchen, depending on the size of the kitchen, you could potentially be spending \$40,000 to \$50,000 easy on a new kitchen, whereas we can come in, take a look at what you need and we could potentially brighten it up and make it look a lot newer, and add value to it without you breaking the bank."

"We cost about a quarter of the amount that a brand-new kitchen would cost – probably not even a quarter if we're talking \$40,000 or \$50,000. We like to be able to offer that to our customers. We also provide new hardware for the kitchen – new hinges, new handles – and anything to help make your kitchen feel modernized."

For almost three years now, C & A Kitchen Refinishing has been improving kitchens for clients throughout nearby Wilmot Township. With the success they've had there and an abundance of positive feedback, the business is ready to help residents of Stratford achieve their home-improvement dreams at an affordable price.

C & A Kitchen Refinishing is a family-owned business that focuses on kitchen refinishing and refacing rather than renovations. Refinishing existing cupboard doors is a more affordable option and less disruptive, yet the end result offers a new look. Refacing involves removing existing doors and replacing them with new ones. This is a

smart solution if the original cabinet design has lost its appeal over the years.

Kitchen refinishing is the fastest, most economical way to bring a more modern look to a kitchen space. By changing the colour, the desired look can be achieved with minimal disruption and maximum appeal.

"If your doors are a little too beaten up or if I feel like they are not going to get more than five years out of their current doors, I'll normally offer to reface their doors, meaning brand-new doors," Cody Hanna said. "Otherwise, Andie and I are good at making older doors – especially natural doors like oak or pine – look brand new again. ... Sometimes we run into kitchens where you might need new cabinet boxes and, if that's the case, we normally contract that out to another family member who builds cabinet boxes. So, we have connections to other services when needed."

"We have a backsplash guy, we have countertop connections. By this time, we've been working together for three years, we've been doing the job for about six years, so my wife and I have enough connections that we feel comfortable helping out with all your kitchen needs."

And the process couldn't be simpler for their clients. Compared to a traditional renovation that could put a kitchen out of commission for several weeks, Cody Hanna says he and his wife can determine what needs to be done during their initial visit, do most of the refinishing work offsite at their workshop and return a week later to install the finished product, leaving your kitchen looking brand new.

In some cases, he says homeowners don't even need to remove anything from their cupboards before the work begins.

"I think most people are going to be very happy with the job that we do in terms of making their kitchen feel new and feel brighter," Cody Hanna said.

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Home Improvement 2025

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Did you know?

Homeowners with an eye on home improvement projects should know that kitchens and bathrooms tend to be the most costly rooms to renovate. An affiliate of the National Kitchen and Bath Association told Architectural Digest in 2023 that kitchens and bathrooms require the most labour-intensive renovations,

which contributes significantly to the high costs of such projects. Labour is indeed a significant cost when renovating a home, as the Construction Labor Market Analyzer indicates labour cost percentages in construction are between 20 and 40 percent of the total budget of a given project. The final cost of any renovation project will depend on a host of variables unique to each home, including the square footage of the room being remodeled and the materials homeowners choose. However, homeowners looking for less costly renovations may want to consider revamping their dining rooms and closets, each of which are projects that can make a difference and tend to require a less significant financial commitment than projects like kitchen and bath remodels.



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Celebrating 30 years: Bickell's Flooring remains Stratford and area's go-to for home improvement

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This year marks a major milestone for Bickell's Flooring & Complete Decorating Centre- 30 years of helping Stratford homeowners bring their spaces to life. Since opening its doors in 1995, this family-owned business has built a reputation for quality craftsmanship, personalized service, and deep community roots. What began as a local flooring shop has grown into a full-service decorating centre offering everything from hardwood and luxury vinyl to Benjamin Moore paints, blinds, countertops, lighting, ceramic tiles, and wallpaper.

But beyond the product range, it's the care and experience the Bickell's team brings to every project that sets them apart. Whether you are renovating or building a new home, walk into their showroom on Lorne Avenue East and you'll find more than shelves of samples. You'll meet people who care about your vision and

have the expertise to help you get there.

Bickell's offers in-house design consultations and manages installation with their skilled team-ensuring each job is done right from start to finish. Their longstanding relationships with top-tier manufacturers also mean customers get premium materials at competitive prices.

What hasn't changed in 30 years is their commitment to Stratford and the surrounding communities. From supporting youth sports and school programs to contributing to local events, Bickell's remains proudly rooted in the place it calls home.

With a second location now in Mitchell, their reach has grown, but their values haven't wavered. Whether you're planning a simple refresh or a full renovation, Bickell's Flooring is more than a smart choice- it's a trusted neighbour, three decades strong, and still going. Here's to the next 30 years of making houses feel like home.

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More than 130 women from across Stratford gathered for the 2025 Business LeadHERship Summit earlier this month

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Kerry Ramsay, founder of Fresh Idea Collective, a movement designed to create connections for women entrepreneurs, hosted the annual Business LeadHERship Summit at the Stratford Country Club this year.

Women from diverse backgrounds and business sectors connected and listened to speakers discuss everything from embracing leadership roles to strategies for successful business ownership.

The event focused on equipping and empowering women entrepreneurs to recognize their roles as leaders and ex-

plore how leadership can transform businesses across the region.

Local leadership consultant Leisse Wilcox opened the event, speaking about how to "own the room and lead with confidence." She captivated the audience by sharing her struggles with impostor syndrome and finding her place in a world where she often felt she didn't belong.

Wilcox emphasized the importance of activating your voice, speaking up for what you want, elevating your presence, and cultivating emotional intelligence.

Each talk was followed by a break and table discussions, where attendees shared personal challenges and strategies to overcome them, offering mutual support

and connection through shared experiences in entrepreneurship.

Cranla Warren spoke next about the importance of self-awareness, calling it the foundation of leadership. She discussed how identifying personal strengths and values is crucial for business success.

Warren highlighted that leadership isn't about proving yourself but living your own experience and being authentic. Her message resonated with the audience, sparking conversations about personal leadership styles during the next table discussion.

Lunch, provided by the Stratford Country Club, was followed by a talk from leadership coach Michelle Martin, who

discussed how personal strengths can serve as "superpowers" in amplifying business success.

Finally, Ramsay took the stage to speak about identifying barriers, overcoming obstacles, and building small habits that drive business growth.

The event wrapped up with table discussions where participants shared habits, exchanged ideas, and explored ways to conquer their fears in business.

Women entrepreneurs make up more than half of all business owners in Stratford. Fresh Idea Collective aims to connect these women and foster support and resilience through the highs and lows of business ownership.

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Expect the exceptional under new management at Papa John's Pizza

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

Things have changed at Stratford's Papa John's Pizza, located at 1060 Ontario St. Under the leadership of Preetham Pari, a high-quality team is being put together to provide exceptional customer service. His pizza dough is created to perfection and the new sauce, combined with fresh ingredients, makes for a meal that you won't soon forget.

Pari found a passion for pizza making and customer service when he started an entry level job at Domino's pizza. He was always the sort to be committed to his work, whatever it was, and was quickly recognized and promoted to assistant manager. From there, he started managing two stores and excelled, climbing the ranks of management at Domino's until he was covering York region. But he lost touch with the customer base in those positions, which proved unfulfilling.

"I tried the Papa John's product and was mind blown with the quality they had. I wanted to grow, and they had an opportunity for me so I took an active role as an investor. My first store was in Burlington. I had so many customers that were coming just for me, and employees all worked for me for a really long time. They didn't leave," said Pari.

Such loyalty wasn't easily earned. He worked hard to ensure he treated each



Preetham Pari stands at the ready to greet customers and make the best pizza with great dough and new sauce.

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

customer, each employee, as an important human being deserving of the best service and food. Today, Pari is the sole owner of the Stratford location, a responsibility he relishes.

"I'm making sure the customers are really satisfied, everything is in place, employees are treated well and am putting in a lot of effort taking care of the business," said Pari. "I always like being in front, talking to the customers."

He found that there was a difference in how he treated the dough and that he could very well have a superior product.

This was motivating to him, that he could make a pizza that stands out, and thought he should be sharing it with other people.

"I thought, if I came in and started making my pizza, people would like it. I want to make sure that you are treated like family when you come in. Every dollar spent counts. I'm here almost seven days so this is my home. When you come into my home I treat you like family. It's about making the experience more personal," said Pari.

Pari had been away for several months due to an accident abroad, and is now trying to recover not only physically, but also

to regain the regulars that have strayed away in his absence. Now that he's back, it is his mission to serve both old and new customers with his own pizza.

His food is being well accepted by his customers, and they are talking about it online. He takes this as an opportunity to showcase his customer service skills and that he is winning them over.

"We've been making some noise in Stratford lately, and yes, a few heads are turning. That's usually a good sign you're doing something right. We've even noticed a couple of suspicious comments online, likely from folks who aren't too happy with the positive change we are bringing. But hey, that's part of the game. Don't let the noise fool you, come try the pizza for yourself, feel the difference and see why we're making waves. The crust doesn't lie," said Pari.

To prove his commitment to exceptional product and customer service, Papa John's Stratford is offering to price match any pizza deals from Stratford and deliver the best quality pizza. On Mondays, they offer 50 per cent off all regular priced menu items and on Tuesday and Wednesday, they offer "buy-one-get-one" on all pizzas at regular price.

Call 226-779-4235 to order and have Papa John's deliver to your door using their own drivers for the best service. Alternatively, they are also on Skip the Dishes, DoorDash and Uber Eats.

Stratford's Knox Wig Room to host Mad Hatter Dance Party fundraiser

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

Stratford's Knox Wig Room is celebrating its 21 years supporting local cancer patients with a trip down the rabbit hole.

The wig room is hosting a Mad Hatter Dance Party on May 30 from 6-11 p.m. in the Knox Banquet Hall at Copperlight (142 Ontario St., Stratford). The event will feature live music from Stratford band Upside of Maybe and a variety of beverages including tea, lemonade and Distinctly Tea's iced tea to accompany the three-course tea-party meal featuring March Hare vegetables, Mad Hatter sandwiches and Queen of Heart's desserts.

The Mad Hatter Dance Party will also feature a prize for the best costume and other games such as croquet for a chance to win a stay-cation at the Lot 44 Inn and

other locally made goodies. The fundraiser also features a wine-cork pull. Those who purchase a cork will be entered in a draw for a chance to win a donated bottle of wine.

"In this atmosphere currently, where a lot of the things in this world seem to be a little bit wild, we decided we wanted to turn that energy into an opportunity for people to just lighten up and have fun and just be playful and jovial and have a chance to dance," said Knox Wig Room member Cathy Bachner.

The Care Wig Room, based out of the church formally known as Knox Presbyterian, now known as Copperlight, offers wigs and headwear such as beanie hats to cancer patients at no cost. Over the past 21 years, volunteer hairdressers have styled more than 1,000 clients from across southwestern Ontario, including from St.

Marys, Stratford, Goderich, Tavistock, Listowel and Mitchell.

The Mad Hatter Dance Party is the first fundraising event Knox Cancer Care will host since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowing the price of wigs has increased over the years with the cost of living, the organization wants to continue providing free wigs and accessories to patients undergoing cancer treatment at any stage.

"They're at various stages, whether they are just starting their treatment or they're in the middle of the treatment, so they have lost all their hair," said Nancy Rothwell, wig room member. "So, they're coming to us vulnerable and not knowing what they're going to look like, or they already know that they're bald."

The wig room's volunteer hairdressers work with the clients from the minute they sit in the salon chair. The hairdresser and

the client decide on the wig style, whether it's close to their hairstyle before treatment or a different length, and then they make adjustments such as bang trims.

"Most go home wearing it and with their new look. It's like going to the hairdressers to get a whole new look and it makes them feel a whole lot better," Rothwell said.

The organization is looking for wine-bottle donations to be used during the wine-cork pull. Bottles of wine worth at least \$20 can be dropped off in Stratford at AJ's Hair and Aesthetic Studio's second floor, Festival Square at 10 Downie St., or at St. Marys' Sensations Salon and Day Spa at 36 Water St. S.

Tickets are \$65 each, or \$500 for a table of eight. To purchase tickets, either call 519-271-0373, email knoxcancercare@gmail.com or visit <https://tinyurl.com/knox-mad-hatter>.

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The Stratford U22 Nationals began preparations for the 2025 season at National Stadium

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

With a provincial championship to defend and new faces in the roster, Stratford U22 Nationals manager Brian Hawley says they are eager to get into the stadium.

"We've got a lot of new players in and a lot of players have moved on from last year for various amounts of reasons. So we're looking forward to getting this group together and getting them to gel. We've got a provincial championship to defend, which we intend to do," Hawley said.

"We've got a couple of players that carried and helped carried us through the tournament last year. We're going to count on some other guys to step up and be leaders this year."

Spencer Eidt is entering his final year as a member of the Nationals. Eidt wants to continue improving his skill set and finish his career with the program on a winning note.

"My focus to improve from last year would probably be fielding for me. Personally, I want to be a better fielder out there. I want to be a good leader for this team, and I want to be lead by example," Eidt said.

"For the team, I think we just need to improve on how fluid we kind of move together, how we play ball together, and how we communicate more in the field."

Another member of the Nationals squad entering his last year is Nole Mussleman.



U22 Nationals Manager Brian Hawley chats with the players prior to the practice.

Mussleman feels optimistic about the team's chances this season but is aware of what is needed to overcome the issues the team experienced during the season.

"We know that we play like a lot of good teams this year, so you know, just staying competitive, staying active at the plate, hoping not to strike out as much as we did last year over the course of the regular season, and then we're really hoping to defend this championship," Mussleman said.

"We have a lot of new guys coming in and lot of guys that have shown some promise. We have some good pitching this

year. You know, hopefully looking to keep everything tight and square, so that we can make a run."

Stratford opens the Inter County Baseball Association (ICBA) regular season on the road against the Hamilton Jr. Cardinals on May 12. The home opener at Memorial Stadium is on May 15 against the 2024 ICBA champion Guelph Silvercreeks.

Hawley is anticipating a stronger challenge from the Cardinals and the other squads in the division this season.

"The thing about the inter county league inside, it's the highest, just about the highest level of ball at this level, in the U22 in Ontario, for the last five teams to go to (Canadian) Nationals. We're from this league. Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, and Cambridge will be really strong. Hamilton will be back strong again. London Bad-

gers. Everybody in our division is really good, so we use those games to help build for the tournaments that we go in."

Stratford will play its first tournament in Mississauga from May 30 to June 1. It will also compete in the other in-season tournaments in Mitchell (June), Innisfil (July), and the Ontario Baseball Association U22 provincial tournament in Listowel (August), where the Nationals are the defending champions.

Hawley expects the team to be competitive in both the regular season and the tournaments Stratford will be competing in.

"That'll be our primary focus this year. I expect to do very well in the tournaments that we're going to and then eventually we'll be going to list will for provincials to defend our title."

(MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY PHOTO)

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Spencer Eidt throws the pitch in the bullpen as manager Brian Hawley looks on during practice.

The Stratford U22 Nationals began preparations for the 2025 season at National Stadium



Above: Ball Boy extraordinaire David Baker enters his fourth year with the Nationals.
Top Left: Carter Koch flashes the glove behind the bullpen home plate during practice.
Left: Sun shines on the diamond as the season draws closer.

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Needles and Beattie partner again for new thriller

ALLAN DICKIE

Times Contributor

Following a 15-year hiatus, playwright Dan Needles and Stratford actor Rod Beattie are introducing a new play in June.

Marsh Marigolds: An Agricultural Thriller premieres at the Stratford Perth Museum with three performances. It is a spinoff of the enormously successful Wingfield plays created by the two and produced and directed by Beattie's brother Doug.

"It's essentially a crime and detection story," says Beattie. "Sort of a Wingfield noir, in Persephone Township. Mystery, danger and romance."

Persephone Township is the fictional location of Walt Wingfield's farm. Wingfield is a Toronto stockbroker turned gentleman farmer, and a cast of memorable local characters aid him through his farming misadventures. Beattie gives voice to them all. The stories are laced with the

sharp humour characteristic of the work of Needles, a winner of the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour.

The format for *Marsh Marigolds* follows the Wingfield portfolio that has captivated audiences for more than 40 years. The numbers are staggering. Thousands of theatre-goers from Halifax to Vancouver and more than 4,500 performances for Beattie in the one-man shows. Beattie and Needles have both been inducted in the Order of Canada in part for contributing to the growth of theatre in rural communities across the country.

Work began on *Marsh Marigolds* about 18 months ago. "Dan started it," says Beattie. "I think he had in mind something for me to work on." Needles came with material for Beattie to arrange in what Needles calls "the clothesline."

What they've come up with is a story where organized crime makes a foray into Persephone Township. Ed, the crusty editor and his weekly newspaper – The

Free Press and Economist – are unwitting dupes in a mob-led money laundering scheme.

Audiences last met Hope Wingfield when she was not yet two years old, in the final play *Wingfield Lost and Found* 15 years ago. In *Marsh Marigolds*, she is in her mid-twenties and in an off-again, on-again romantic relationship with a young local man, Ray. Both have left their rural roots and work in government offices in Toronto. They play key roles in the unraveling of the money laundering scheme.

As he did in all the Wingfield plays, Beattie gives voice and life to every character in the new play. As usual, with a Needles' script, there are plenty of laughs along the way.

And what of the title? As Walt and Hope go for a walk, Hope sees the marigolds as symbols of spring and renewal of life, and Walt guesses the marigolds don't know what's coming.

"The marigolds are a metaphor both on

the natural beauty of the farmland and its fate under the screwed-up values of industrial agriculture," says Beattie.

It's a recurring theme in Needles' writing, including his latest book *Finding Larkspur: A Return to Village Life*. Needles is a farmer as well as a renowned writer and still works the 40-acre farm he bought in 1978. He laments the fact that family farms are disappearing across the country as large corporate farms take over. A generational way of life is lost as young people leave for the cities.

For their part, Needles, Beattie and Doug continue to do what they've been doing for the last four decades, providing Canadian content for Canadians in an unabashedly Canadian fashion.

Tickets for the three showings of *Marsh Marigolds: An Agricultural Thriller* can be obtained from the Stratford Perth Museum. It's slated for the outdoor venue June 20-22 but will move inside if the weather does not co-operate.

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Stratford Summer Music hits 25 years of bringing the community together

ALEX HUNT

Times Correspondent

Stratford's largest music event returns for year-round programming, along with exciting new and familiar musical talents.

On May 8, Stratford Summer Music invited the community to Revival House to celebrate the 25th anniversary season launch. Guests had a chance to mingle with organizers while enjoying food and beverages before Mark Fewer, artistic director, and Crystal Spicer, executive director, took the stage to discuss what the community can expect over the next year.

Some familiar musical tunes stemming from Emily Jean Flack, The Bookends and Al Simmons will be featured for the programming ensemble, along with a new family series that's free for the public. The season is set to begin on the week of July 17.

"We are still the only festival in the country that still offers this many shows for free, so the idea of adding a series like that is something we really believe in, we are having the Friday night jazz series as well," said Fewer.

"We are now doing programs all throughout the year where before it was



Crystal Spicer, executive director and Mark Fewer, artistic director talk what's to come for the 25th musical season.

(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

just our summer season. Having a presence throughout the year is one of most notable changes. We have been heading

this direction for the last couple of years." Spicer said the team wants to ensure that the community knows that music is meant

to be experienced by everybody. The invite extends to audiences of all ages, no matter the age, gender or demographics.

Spicer notes that one of the challenges when running the event comes down to funding.

"Funding is always an issue. We need support from all levels of government, our community, ticket buyers, donors, and every year it is a struggle to figure out how to make it all work. We always do but it takes a lot of planning and foresight. Working in the arts must be a labour of love and that you're willing to take the time to make it all happen."

In future years, Fewer is hoping to have more money to spend on programming to have a greater impact on the community.

"I want the community to believe they can't live within Stratford Summer Music, that's the goal," said Fewer. "If you can make it in the arts by being so needed from the community then we have done something special."

With a vibrant lineup and a renewed year-round presence, Stratford Summer Music continues to strike a chord in the hearts of the community, proving that after 25 years the music is only getting stronger.

Last graduating class of the Stratford Normal School have small reunion over 70 years later

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

It was a reunion like no other last week, as eight members of the last class ever to graduate from Stratford's Normal School (as it was called then, before it became the Stratford Teachers' College), got together for lunch at the Best Western Plus-Arden Park Hotel.

They all graduated in 1953, to become teachers mostly in the southern Ontario area.

Like all class reunions, they reminisced about the good old days, when graduation meant going to teach in one room schools with eight grades, and – by today's standards – getting paid very little for the responsibility that was cast upon them.

In the same breath, they never complained, but were just glad to be doing what they always dreamed of doing: giving young boys and girls in the area an education.

They all remembered the day they were able to look out the back window of the school to watch a large tent go up, what would become the now world-famous Stratford Festival.

The group were very happy to talk about many of their students who went on to be famous doctors, lawyers, manufacturing company owners, agriculturalists and farmers.

Even though they know there are no guarantees, they hope to get together again next year at the same time and same place.



(GARY WEST PHOTO)

The 1952-1953 final graduating class of Stratford's Normal School, which was renamed to the Stratford Teachers' College the following year.

The Little Prince Theatre receives world recognition as one of the 50 most beautiful cinemas

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

The Little Prince Micro-Cinema & Lounge is not only a local favourite in Stratford for hosting birthday parties and events – it's also receiving international recognition for its charm and design.

In 2021, the theatre was certified by Guinness World Records as the smallest purpose-built cinema in the world, measuring just 16.29 square metres and accommodating up to 12 guests. Now, the micro theatre has been named one of the most beautiful cinemas in the world by TimeOut magazine.

Beating out iconic venues like the Paris Theatre in New York and the Phenomena Experience in Barcelona, Stratford's own Little Prince Theatre ranks number 16 on the list of 50 cinemas worldwide.

Leigh Cooney, a local artist and owner of the theatre, says the venue – which began as a small gift shop – gradually evolved into a fully functional cinema complete with red velvet curtains and tiered seating.

"Initially, I wanted to showcase local talent, maybe have a pull-down screen and fold-up chairs, but then it just kind of snowballed a little bit," he said. "Even-

tually I added the red velvet curtains and wallpaper, and even added the tier seating. One thing led to another and all of a sudden it looked like a tiny movie theatre."

Despite challenges, including pandemic-related shutdowns, the theatre has been operating for about five years.

"Within a week of opening the doors, we were shut down because of COVID," said Cooney. Luckily, the theatre survived the trying times and is now thriving thanks to locals who see the space as an ideal spot for intimate gatherings.

The micro theatre primarily serves Stratford residents, hosting everything from birthday parties to retirement celebrations, though some tourists are drawn in by its Guinness World Record status.

"We do see a lot of tourists through the doors, but generally speaking, it's local people coming here for bachelorette parties, birthday parties, retirement parties and even Christmas parties."

Cooney is now expanding, bringing a second micro theatre – set to be the second smallest in the world – to the Gaslight District in Cambridge. The new venue, featuring a similar aesthetic, is expected to open any day.



The Little Prince Micro-Cinema & Lounge owner, Leigh Cooney, now holds another award as one of the 50 most beautiful cinemas in the world (AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

Nita Prose launches Stratford Arts and Lectures with inspiring discussion

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Nita Prose, bestselling author of *The Maid*, *The Mystery Guest*, and *The Mistletoe Mystery*, visited Stratford last week for the first Stratford Arts and Lectures event at the Bruce Hotel.

At the event, women and men from Stratford and several out-of-town visitors gathered for tea and pastries as Prose discussed her newest novel, *The Maid's Secret*.

Prose opened up with a short reading of her latest novel, and then dove into a discussion about her novels, background and her main character, Molly.

Originally, Prose said she had intended her first book to be a stand-alone, but so many readers connected with Molly that she decided to continue the series.

"I finished the first book, and my publishers started calling me, saying, 'Can you write another book?' I said, 'No, I can't,'" joked Prose. "I didn't plan to write another book, but I started getting a lot of messages, emails and little notes on Instagram all saying the same thing: 'I love Molly. She helps me.' So, I decided to write a second book."

Molly's evolution from a grieving maid in the first book to a self-sufficient woman learning to navigate social cues became more apparent as the series progressed. Prose noted that, unbeknownst to her, she had incorporated traits from her former students into Molly's character.

"I was very young when I was a teach-



Nita Prose discusses her latest novel, *The Maid's Secret*, with Rina Barone of Stratford Arts and Lectures during the inaugural event, *Spilling the Tea with Nita Prose*, at The Bruce Hotel.

er. I taught special needs high school students, and it was wonderful. I loved those kids; I learned so much from them," said Prose. "It was only after I finished that first book that I realized I took all the best characteristics of those students I taught and

gave them to my main character as a kind of tribute to them."

Although Prose often speaks at large engagements across North America, she said she finds joy in sharing her work in intimate settings like the Bruce Hotel in

Stratford, where she can receive genuine feedback from the community.

"It's in smaller venues like this, in communities like the one I grew up in, that mean the most to me," said Prose. "This sort of gathering of people around books, bringing people together – nothing makes me happier."

Prose emphasized that these events create a powerful sense of connection and belonging. She said discussions like those hosted by Stratford Arts and Lectures are especially important in today's uncertain world.

"Events like this matter so much to a community," Prose said. "Bringing people together through something as powerful as a book actually creates intimacy, meaning, connection and belonging."

At the end of her discussion, Prose hinted at her upcoming project – a mystery-thriller set in cottage country that will explore themes of wilderness, memory, and intergenerational bonds. Readers can expect its release in early 2026.

Stratford Arts and Lectures, a new initiative by Rina Barone, offers locals and visitors a chance to participate in thoughtful discussions and lectures each month. The curated, year-round events are focused on creating cultural offerings through live conversations and tailored gatherings, inviting audiences to explore ideas, creativity, and the stories that shape our lives.

To learn more, please visit www.stratfordartsandlectures.com.

Victoria Day weekend heralds the return of Art in the Park along the Avon River

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

The highly anticipated Victoria Day weekend marks the return of Art in the Park (AIP) to Stratford. Nestled in the park along the shores of the Avon River, between the Festival Theatre and the Tom Patterson Theatre, will be original works of art on display and priced to sell.

This season's call for artists has brought in sixteen new artists, which together with returning exhibitors brings the roster of membership to 71. Each artist makes a commitment to be present at AIP for a total of a minimum of ten shows each season. There are three show days each week throughout the spring and summer: Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Thursdays are added in July and August.

"As usual, there was a lot of interest (from artists) and a lot of new stuff coming through. The call brings new artists, new styles. It's brilliant. It's a complete changeover every year for fifty odd years now," said Bev Hewitt, juror coordinator for AIP.

The mix of artists on any given show day will change as some do not come every day. This makes it an exciting and unique experience every time art lovers attend. Every day is a new day. There are ten categories of styles representing



A more scenic venue for an art show and sale couldn't be found. Art in the Park returns this year on May 17.

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

a diverse range of art presented. Some of those categories are jewellery, glass, painting, and the new category, digital fine art, among others.

The quality of the professionalism of the membership and the outstanding work that they produce for the shows each sea-

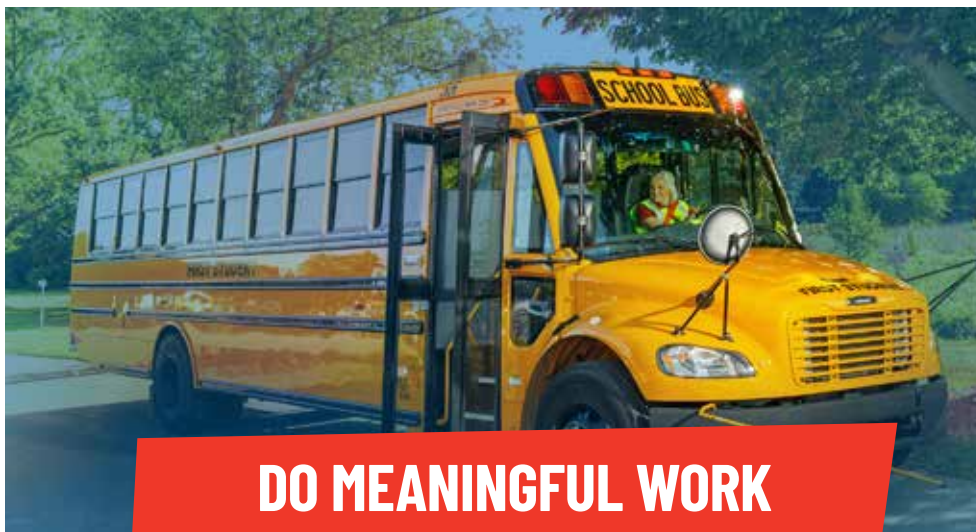
son is due to the executive and the jury. The work of new artists is subject to the scrutiny of an anonymous jury of professional artists that have been tasked with ensuring the art is original, artistic, consumable, and developed within the styles of defined categories.

"The process has evolved a bit over the years as this time the call went out Dec. 2. I print out the bio and I allocate them a letter of the alphabet so that they are known as applicant A, B, C and so on. I also associate the jpeg photos of the artwork submitted as anonymous so that the judging is fair. This year we have two new jurors (of three) which is a nice change," said Hewitt.

There will be plenty of returning artists that attendees would be familiar with, like David Humphrey with his beautiful wood bowls made from sustainably sourced local wood, or the sculptures of Sandy Cline who will be seen on site creating one of his pieces, and the always favourite Triple R Robots by Eden and Judy Palmer. Still present is Mathias Muleme, the longest standing member of 54 years with AIP committee.

Now that the season is underway, locals will note that there are cards on counters and posters mounted around town advertising the show. AIP maintains close ties with Destination Stratford for cross promotion and supporting each other in recognition that each artist is an ambassador of Stratford to tourists and locals alike.

Art in the Park runs every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. beginning May 17 until Sept. 28, and includes Thursdays in July and August.



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Step back in time at the Brocksden Country School Museum

DIANE DANEN

Times Contributor

The Brocksden Country School Museum is welcoming visitors for another season of pioneer-style learning and community events.

Just outside Stratford in Perth East, this one-room schoolhouse, built in 1853, is the perfect spot to step back in time and experience what school life was like long ago.

So far, seven school groups have booked visits to Brocksden this season, with the Guelph Christian Home School Group kicking things off on May 2.

Students step back in time to 1910, trying their hand at writing on slate boards, joining in old-fashioned spelling bees, and even receiving a playful (pretend) strapping for a bit of mischief. Don't worry, it's all in good fun and part of the hands-on learning experience. Dressing up in period costumes adds to the experience and really helps everyone get into character.

Gloria Hutchison has spent 20 years ringing the school bell and welcoming classes to Brocksden. After a successful, 33-year teaching career with the local school board and two decades as the much-loved schoolmarm at Brocksden Country School Museum, she's ready to leave the old spellers and primers behind and start a new chapter in her life.

The traditional 1910 schoolhouse program will continue under the direction of three new educators, each bringing



Brocksden Country School Museum teachers in historical costume, from left, are Kim Schelhaas, Colleen Crosbie, Gloria Hutchison and Pauline Horst. (DIANE DANEN PHOTO)

a strong background in education and a shared interest in preserving local history.

Kim Schelhaas, a former French and music teacher, brings years of classroom experience to her new role. Her own kids loved visiting Brocksden, so it's a place that's special to her. Along with her teaching experience, Schelhaas spent 20 years running the Forest Motel and Woodland

Retreat in Stratford, so she will definitely know how to make visitors feel welcome.

Pauline Horst began her teaching career at a mission school in northern Ontario, later going on to teach four grades in a two-room old-order Mennonite school. Today, Horst runs a busy piano studio in the Millbank area. She has a personal connection to the school; her dad was a student at Brocksden back in the early 1940s. As co-founder of the Millbank Heritage and Arts Society, she continues to pursue her passion for history by teaching at Brocksden Country School Museum.

Colleen Crosbie has a varied teaching background from her time with the Peel District School Board, where she was a kindergarten teacher, literacy coach and librarian. She has always loved working with children and has a real passion for history. Now that she's retired, she's excited to spend her time teaching at Brocksden and helping keep the schoolhouse's history alive.

New teachers are always welcome to join the team and volunteers with a passion for history are encouraged to get involved.

"We wouldn't say no to anyone interested in teaching or helping out," said Jessie Campbell, who helps oversee programming at Brocksden.

The schoolhouse is run by the Easthope Historical Group and supported by a committed board of directors, including

chairman Scott Campbell, secretary John Campbell, treasurer Jessie Campbell and board members Ruth Hart, Patricia Dann, Joan Scott, Daryl Herlick, Patricia Eidt, Hugh McDermid, Gloria Hutchison and Roger Cook.

The Campbell family became involved when board members approached them, recognizing their deep roots in the community. Three generations of Campbells have attended Brocksden. Today, Jessie Campbell, along with her husband Scott and son John, help oversee events and programming throughout the year.

The Easthope Historical Group is eager to have more local families and visitors discover Brocksden.

"A lot of people in Stratford don't even know the schoolhouse is open," said Jessie Campbell. "We're hoping to change that."

With a full calendar of events planned for this summer, they are well on their way to making that happen.

Upcoming events include:

- June 21: Teddy Bear Picnic, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., with stories, face painting, scavenger hunts and more.
- July 12: Brocksden School House All-Classes Reunion
- July 18: Old Tyme Toy Talk, with a presentation on historical toys (some available for purchase).
- Aug. 9: Beatrix Potter Readings and History, led by a local member of the Beatrix Potter Society.
- Monthly Hymn Sings: Held on the last Saturday of June, July and August at 7 p.m.

All events are open to the public with the exception of the All-Classes Reunion.

The All-Classes Reunion set for July 12 will welcome all former students who attended as children. The event will run from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. with opening ceremonies at 11:30 a.m., a 1955 class photo re-take at 12:30 p.m. and lunch served at 1 p.m.

Organizers have done their best to connect with former students, but it's possible a few were missed. Anyone who knows someone who attended Brocksden should feel free to pass this invitation along. To RSVP, email Pat Campbell at strawberry-pat@email.com or call 519-273-1725.

Looking ahead, the group is already planning for some big milestones including a major celebration for Brocksden's 175th anniversary in 2028.

Whether booking a class visit, volunteering, or just curious about the schoolhouse, reach out by email at brocksden-school@gmail.com, call 519-271-2619, or visit brocksden.ca.



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Stratford Film Festival to screen Oscar Award winning doc *No Other Land*

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

In partnership with the Provocation Ideas Festival, the Stratford Film Festival is pleased to present a special screening of the 2024 Academy Awards' best documentary, *No Other Land*. The event will take place May 31 at 4 p.m. in Stratford City Hall's auditorium.

Despite winning best documentary, this controversial film has yet to secure formal distribution in North America and is in fact banned in some countries due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. The film offers a personal look into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, focusing on the forced displacement of Palestinians on the West Bank.

The film chronicles the struggle of the Palestinian community of Masafer Yatta, a region designated by Israel as a military

firing zone leading to the demolition of homes and expulsion of residents. Central to the narrative is Basel Adra, a young Palestinian activist who documents the systematic destruction of his village and the hardships faced by its inhabitants. Through his lens, viewers witness the daily realities of occupation, including home demolitions and confrontations with Israeli forces. The film also explores the unlikely friendship between Adra and Yuval Abraham, an Israeli journalist. Their collaboration highlights the stark disparities between their lives – Adra lives under constant threat, while Abraham enjoys the freedoms of Israeli citizenship.

There will be a Q-and-A session featuring seasoned journalist Jesse Rosenfeld and moderated by Deanna Horton. Rosenfeld has been reporting in the Middle East since 2009 for major outlets including Rolling Stone, The Daily Beast, The

Intercept among others. He was also the subject of the National Film Board of Canada documentary, *Freelancer on the Front Lines*.

"I've been reporting across the region since 2007 with 12 or 13 of those years based in Palestine but have also lived in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq. I've reported on the Syrian war, the Kurdish uprising in Turkey, the war against ISIS in Iraq... I've lived in Gaza during the 2014 war and go there regularly up until this war when the Israelis locked out the press," explained Rosenfeld of his storied career.

He stays and keeps reporting on Israel and Palestine because it is the story of his friends – and they are being killed and people need to know. There have been a small number of Israelis who have fought very hard to create a different kind of world that has blown up in their faces.

He thinks the most important thing the

media can do right now is report what Palestinians are going through and what they hope for and to treat them as human beings. The most important thing when there is genocide and mass expulsion is to tell the stories of the people that those in power are trying to destroy so that there is a record of who they are and show that they can't be erased.

"It's a very important film. When was the last time you saw an Oscar winning film that was basically censored across North America, Australia and Europe simply because no distributor or streaming service would pick it up because it unvarnishedly tells the reality that isn't convenient for the United States," said Rosenfeld.

Stratford Film Festival artistic director Megan Smith-Harris invites the public to share in this poignant event. Tickets are available online at stratfordfilmfestival.com.

For 40 years Unitarians have been feeding the public one bean at a time

JANE MINGRAY

Special to the Times

Every Friday, the Local Community Food Centre in Stratford serves free lunch to more than 200 hungry guests. On the first Friday in May, the centrepiece of the meal was "raging Cajun red beans and rice" and the star ingredient was red kidney beans, donated by the Stratford Unitarian congregation.

The Local had gratefully received 45 kilograms of beans (both red kidney and black turtle) delivered by the Unitarians the week before. Beans are an important and versatile ingredient for chef Lucy Dillinger and assistant chef Jules Charbonneau, who often uses them in the Monday night dinners and Friday lunches they create. Beans also get cooked into chili and soups that stock the freezer, and dried beans are made available for free at the Local's community market.

"Beans are huge," said Julie Docker-Johnson, the Local's community connector. "We could have a day where we don't have much, but we've got beans, so we've got a base, and it can evolve from there."

For more than 40 years, the humble bean has been the focus of a charitable project initiated by two long-time Unitarians and social activists Jim Sannes and Ellen Papenburg. "We have been organizing, fundraising and delivering Ontario grown, non-GMO beans to local food banks as a healthy source of protein," said Papenburg.

The Unitarian bean project got its start in the 1980s, when Sannes and Papenburg



Volunteer Gerry Heyen serves up beans at the Local Community Food Centre, all courtesy of the Stratford Unitarians' bean project.

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

were living in Toronto and were members of the social action committee of the Northwest Unitarian Fellowship. They, along with many of their colleagues, were vegetarian. When local food banks were looking for turkey donations at Christmas,

they decided to give beans instead. They collected \$100 in donations and went looking for beans to buy.

Sannes contacted the Ontario Coloured Bean Growers Association (now Ontario Bean Growers) who agreed to match their

donation, and referred them to Grand River Beans in Paris, Ont. to buy the beans. "We went there thinking we would get 200 pounds for our \$100 and ended up with 400 pounds. Quite a load! Our congregation came together, and we made up festive bags of beans with ribbons, spices and recipes for bean chili and donated these to the local food bank," said Papenburg.

And so, the bean project was born and took off. At its peak, Unitarians were delivering beans in one-tonne loads to the Daily Bread Food Bank. "At some point, due to Jim's efforts and persistence, beans surpassed peanut butter as the most-requested commodity," said Papenburg. Sannes soon became known as "The Bean Man."

"Everyone used to think I was a bean grower instead of a computer technician and programmer," said Sannes. "I never farmed a day in my life!" Since the project began, Unitarians have provided over 50 tonnes of beans to food banks across Ontario.

Sannes and Papenburg now live in Kitchener and are members of the Stratford Unitarian congregation. The bean project has been scaled back since its heyday and health challenges keep Sannes from being actively involved, but his legacy continues. "I am delighted and grateful that the long-time bean project will be continued by the Stratford Unitarians," he said.

While patrons at the Local may not be aware of the remarkable provenance of the beans they are eating, they always appreciate the hearty and nutritious meals they provide.

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Who's Who in the Region

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At the heart of **Pet Valu's** philosophy is a deep understanding of the importance of nutrition in promoting optimal health and vitality in pets. The company offers a diverse selection of premium dry kibble, canned (wet), dehydrated food, raw pet food, and supplements made from high-quality ingredients.

Pet Valu features leading brands including Performatrin Prime, Orijen, Hill's, Now Fresh, Blue Buffalo, Weruva, Merrick Primal, Stella & Chewy's, Royal Canin, Open Range, Acana, Wellness, Big Country Raw and more!

Pet Valu carries a selection of pet toys, treats and accessories. Choose from bowls, collars and leads, pet sweaters, training aids, flea and odour control products, cozy pet beds, eco-friendly litter, portable crates, and pet barriers for vans and SUVs. They also sell beautiful Betta (Siamese fighting fish) with endless colours and magnificent tails.

Pet Valu provides a convenient self-serve dog wash, and a cat adoption program to find your purrfect feline companion.

Although **Pet Valu** is a large retailer, each store is independently owned and operated, which means customers enjoy the personalized service of a small business.

The Stratford and New Hamburg stores are franchise-owned and operated by local Stratford resident **Kayla Orleck** who has a wealth of experience in the industry. **Kim Kempen** manages the Stratford store. They are assisted by a helpful, friendly team.

Pet Valu offers a Your Rewards™/VIP Plus™ frequent Buyer Bag Program. The last Thursday of every month is Seniors' Day, members 60+ enjoy 10% off on regular-priced merchandise. Signup for **Pet Valu's** online AutoShip it is easy and flexible! Get your items shipped to your home or ready for you in-store at your desired frequency.

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You can also like them on Facebook to stay connected www.facebook.com/PetValuStratford2362/ or www.facebook.com/PetValuNewHamburg/



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Black Angus Bakery & Catering has become a beloved destination for fresh-baked goodness and expertly crafted cuisine. Known for its artisanal bread, decadent desserts, and full-service catering, **Black Angus** blends tradition, quality, and local flavor in every bite.

Black Angus, baking isn't just a business—it's a craft. Using time-honored techniques and high-quality ingredients, their bakers create everything from crusty loaves to soft sandwich breads and delicate pastries. Each item is made with care and attention to detail, ensuring freshness and flavor customers can count on. The bakery offers a wide range of freshly-baked treats, including bread, buns, cookies, muffins, tarts, pies, scones, muffins, hot cross buns, turnovers, Chelsea buns and cinnamon buns, danishes, cheesecake, brownies, apple kuchen, pudding, and specialty cakes.

The varied menu offers something for everyone with a selection of ready-to-eat meals, including stuffed rolled ribs, pigtails, lasagna-meat or veggie, macaroni & cheese, quiche, meatballs, goulash, stroganoff, cabbage rolls, sausage rolls, steak & kidney pie, meatloaf, pigtails, Shepherd's pie, beef stew, chicken or turkey meat pies, chicken & dumplings, scalloped potatoes, sandwiches, soups, chili, and tasty side dishes, plus a gluten-free and vegetarian selection.

Visit their website www.blackangusbakeryandcatering.ca to view their complete menu, and stay updated on events.

Black Angus Bakery & Catering is locally owned and operated by **Trevor and Susan Exner**, who with a friendly staff have a wealth of experience.

With a passion for creating unforgettable culinary experiences and a dedication to exceeding expectations, **Black Angus** has swiftly emerged as a leader in the catering industry as a full-service catering company, offering expertly prepared meals for events of all sizes. They provide catering services for private parties, weddings, business lunches, dinners, cocktail receptions, and more.

Great news! **Kandy Cakes** is now located inside the **Black Angus**. You can find her products in-store or online at www.kandycakes.ca. Items include cakes, cupcakes, sugar cookies, cake pops and French meringue cookies. Vegan and gluten-friendly available.

To order a custom cake, simply fill out the custom order form at their website. Like on Facebook.

Follow **Black Angus Bakery & Catering** on Facebook www.facebook.com/blackangusbakerycatering and purchase gift certificates. As always, free delivery is available in Stratford.

Stratford Walking Tours back for another season of local adventures

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Stratford Walking Tours is back for its second season, and this year owner Laurie Leduc has added several new walks that are sure to appeal to both locals and visitors alike.

The almost always sold-out Stratford History and Heritage Tour was such a success that Leduc decided to partner with local businesses to offer more walks throughout Stratford, including ghost tours, food tours, boat cruises, and bespoke specialty tours.

A new and popular walk taking place on May 18 is in partnership with Singing Nettle Herbs owner Gabrielle Arkett, a community herbalist, gardener, and educator with expertise in plants and their benefits to health and well-being.

The Local Plants and History Tour will lead attendees down the Avon River, where they will learn about the unique plants growing there, the history of the waterway, and its importance to Stratford.

"We're going to host these walks on the third Sunday of every month," said Leduc. "Gabrielle is going to talk about the plants, the forest, the fauna, and all that kind of stuff along the river, and I'll provide the history throughout the walk."



Stratford Walking Tours owner, Laurie Leduc, shows a sold-out crowd around Stratford during one of the Ghost Tours last week. (AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

Another popular partnership this year is the Walking Tour and River Cruise.

This tour, which combines a history-filled walk and a boat ride, begins with a cruise on the Avon River with services provided by The Boathouse. After the boat tour, Leduc leads attendees on foot to explore the downtown core.

The tour gives visitors a history of the Stratford Festival. They learn about the early years of Stratford and how it developed from a small rural village into the Festival City known around the globe.

Leduc notes that this tour is not just for visitors – locals have enjoyed it just as much.

"People tell me that they've lived in Stratford their whole lives and never tak-

en the boat cruise, but once they go on this tour, they tell me they really loved coming out, exploring, and learning something new about their city."

The tour showcases the exteriors of all three of the festival's theatre buildings and details the role of festival founder and Stratford native Tom Patterson for those interested in the festival's history.

Leduc's Stratford Ghost Walk, which started in October, is another fan favourite. It takes attendees through the streets of downtown Stratford, where Leduc shares facts and rumours that shaped the darker side of the city's past.

"Initially, it was strictly based around Stratford's architecture, but I've decided to expand things a bit. I had people ask for ghost tours – they were quite interested in hearing about some of the darker history."

From a haunted hotel to a spirit that roams the Avon Theatre to the Stratford Jail, this tour is perfect for anyone seeking the spooky side of Stratford.

Leduc says the ghost walk is also an option for those interested in a more private experience.

"I've had groups of friends come out for tours, which is a great experience. I've also had a group of local real estate agents come for a walk and dining experience as a team-building exercise, so that was great too."

Although the current tours are mainly based in the downtown core, Leduc says she would eventually like to expand into Stratford's broader neighbourhoods to discuss the history of its architecture.

"Right now, I have my typical loop: city hall, the courthouse, the jail, the river, the festival – but there are some really great neighbourhoods and historic homes that are fascinating and beautiful. This is something I've thought about adding."

For more information or to book a tour, visit www.stratfordwalkingtours.ca.

Motorists are reminded to share the road this spring



A local farmer navigates his tractor along Perth County Rd. 119, reminding drivers to share the road this spring. As planting season gets underway, motorists are urged to exercise patience and caution when approaching slow-moving farm equipment. Farmers often travel short distances between fields, and wide machinery may require additional space. Remember to slow down, keep a safe distance, and pass only when it's safe and legal to do so. Sharing the road helps ensure everyone, on tractors and in cars, gets home safely. (AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)

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Stratford: How green is our destination?

JULIA SCHNEIDER

Times Freelance Columnist

We all know that Stratford is a mecca for tourists, but is it a green tourism destination? Two of those involved in this idea were at Stratford City Hall talking about just that at the April 24 Climate Conversation on green tourism.

Zac Gribble, executive director of Destination Stratford, started off by getting things into perspective. He showed a graph that illustrated where Stratford and the surrounding area stands when compared to three of the world's most sustainable tourist cities to show that Stratford still has much to do. These cities, Stratford and many others are part of the Global Sustainable Initiative which uses a global destination sustainability (GDS) index to measure, benchmark and chart improvements looking at sustainability and resilience strategies and performance in such areas as tourist agencies, hotels, restaurants and transportation.

"Tourism entities tend to be very traditional, and we need to get away from the plan," he said, with more attention to the community's regenerative power and reducing the impact of tourism, making Stratford a low carbon destination, redefining the signals of success, and consider-

ing the environment.

If the sign of a healthy economy is a drinkable river, he commented, there is a lot of work to do.

What are some of the things has Stratford done well, so far?

Maps and directories. It has changed their printing system to use much more sustainable printing methods and supplies.

Al Fresco dining. Outdoor dining in town spaces has increased and reusable utensils and containers are encouraged. There has, however, been no green bin in public spaces, though a six-month trial of this is in the offing.

Lights On Stratford. This year it will deploy two hybrid buses to take passengers from city hall to look at lights, aiming to mitigate the carbon footprint of this auto-dependent spectacle.

Large challenges remain: how do people get to Stratford?

"We live within three hours of 14 million people," Gribble said, but carbon-intensive single vehicles are the most common inter-city method of transportation, with existing public buses and trains inconvenient or impossible to use for day trips. The best alternative would be the train, and Gribble said Destination Stratford continues to advocate for improvements to its service.

The conversation's other speaker was

Rosehurst B&B owner Theresa Albert, the recipient of a 2023 Green Recognition Program award for her environmental initiatives. She spoke of how she is able to incorporate an environmental strategy into all her daily operations.

"Everything I have done has saved money," she added, as yet another incentive to sourcing sustainable supplies and systems.

Some of her strategies, some adaptable to private households and worth trying:

- Instead of supplying disposable bottles for shampoo and the like, she uses refillable pump bottles, thus reducing plastic waste.

- Sourcing linens and towels at thrift stores, she uses natural and effective cleaning materials to make them vintage-new.

- Having a two-day minimum stay, she cuts down on laundry.

- Creating an African-inspired keyhole garden she conserves water, recycles food waste like eggshells into compost, and grows fresh vegetables and herbs for her guests (check out keyhole gardens, they are genius!).

- Facilitating the composting of food waste by digging large pots into the ground, she fills them with kitchen waste, letting worms enter through the hole in the pot's bottom to work their magic.

- Making her own butter.

The usual Q-and-A and conversations between the audience members followed the presentations.

Some of the questions asked were:

- Why isn't waste from restaurants captured for compost?

- Why does Stratford have no bike lanes?

- What happened to the Culture Cab program that transported visitors to theatres around town during the summer season a few years ago?

- What is the effect of tourism on housing?

On the housing question, Gribble commented that to be a functioning city, you can't just have tourism; housing is needed for workers and residents as well. The issue of the University of Waterloo's Stratford campus came up. The program has many students but most of them have to commute here because there is no student residence and rental housing is extremely limited for everyone. There were obstacles to implementing the other initiatives as well.

A question that came up later in a group discussion: How does Stratford's Community Climate Action Plan figure into the picture? Is its implementation ongoing?

The next Climate Conversation will be about "the circular economy" and will take place at city hall at 7 p.m., May 22.

Pathologist gives crash course on brain injuries to Shakespeare Optimists

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

Members of the Shakespeare Optimist Club were given important information by their guest speaker last week, who is a specialist in treating brain injuries.

This topic is becoming more common every day, due to strokes, accidents and other brain damage that can contribute to mental health disorders at any age.

Nicole Ferreira is a speech language pathologist with the College of Audiologists and Speech Language Pathologists of Ontario.

She has worked for over a decade, providing community based cognitive, communication, and speech assessment and treatment services. She has also worked with a variety of client populations, including acquired brain injury, learning disabilities, and mental health disorders.

Nicole volunteers in her community by facilitating the Perth County brain injury support group and also sits on the board of directors for the Brain Injury Association of London and Region (BIALR).

She surprised the Optimist group by explaining to them that brain injuries occur every three to five minutes in Cana-



Nicole Ferreira, speech language pathologist who talked about brain injuries with the Shakespeare Optimist Club, is thanked by president Mike McNeil for giving an interesting and informative talk. (GARY WEST PHOTO)

da, there are at least half a million cases in Ontario, 18,000 new cases each year, 15 times more common than spinal cord injuries, 30 times more common than breast cancer, and 400 times more common than HIV/AIDS.

The pathologist stated that the major causes of brain injuries include intimate partner violence, motor vehicle accidents, substance abuse, homelessness, and sports related head trauma like concussions, among others.

She stated that brain injuries can be invisible, but at the same time life-changing, and says the BIALR can help anyone who has experienced a brain injury and also helps caregivers and family members to cope with various situations of brain injuries.

There is a Brain Injury Support Group that meets the last Tuesday of every month in Perth County at the Local Community Food Centre, at 612 Erie St. in Stratford, from 7-9 p.m.

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Blossoming in spring: How seniors can thrive in the season of renewal



IRENE ROTH

Times Freelance Columnist

Spring is a time of renewal, growth, and fresh starts. After months of shorter days and colder temperatures, the arrival of spring often feels like nature's invitation to come alive again.

While spring is commonly associated with youth and new beginnings, it is also a powerful time for seniors to blossom in their own unique ways. The season offers opportunities to refresh routines, engage with community, and deepen one's sense of purpose and joy.

Spring is the perfect time to

reconnect with nature. For seniors, even small doses of outdoor time can have significant benefits. A walk through a local park, time spent gardening, or simply sitting in the sunshine can improve mood, enhance mobility, and reduce feelings of isolation. Vitamin D from sunlight supports bone health and boosts immunity, both vital for aging well.

Gardening, in particular, is a springtime activity that combines gentle physical movement with emotional satisfaction. Whether it's tending to flowers, growing herbs, or nurturing vegetables, gardening fosters a connection with the earth and a tangible sense of accomplishment. Even container gardens or window boxes can offer a meaningful outlet for creativity and care.

Spring's sense of awakening can motivate seniors to renew their focus on physical wellness. Gentle exercise routines like tai chi, yoga, and walking not only improve flexibility and balance but also support heart health and mental clarity. Many community

centers and senior organizations offer spring fitness programs tailored to different mobility levels, making it easier for everyone to participate.

Hydration and diet are also worth revisiting in spring. With fresh fruits and vegetables coming into season, it's a great time to embrace lighter, more nourishing meals. Asparagus, strawberries, leafy greens, and citrus fruits bring a taste of spring while supporting overall vitality.

Spring is not only about physical rejuvenation. It's also a prime time to reawaken the mind and spirit. Seniors can explore new hobbies or revisit long-loved ones like painting, writing, bird-watching, or crafting. Learning something new, whether it's a language, instrument, or skill, stimulates the brain and enhances cognitive health.

Book clubs, local classes, and lifelong learning institutes often offer spring sessions that combine education with social engagement. Even online learning platforms provide a wide array of accessible courses. The im-

portant thing is to keep curiosity alive. As the world around us blooms, so too can our capacity for joy and discovery.

Social connection is a cornerstone of healthy aging, and spring offers a wealth of ways to reconnect. Community gardens, spring fairs, faith-based events, and volunteer opportunities bring people together in meaningful ways. Seniors can reach out to friends for a spring picnic or join walking groups that combine companionship with gentle activity.

Technology can also be a bridge. Setting up regular video chats with loved ones or joining online communities around shared interests can reduce feelings of loneliness and keep relationships strong. The renewed energy of spring can inspire reconnection, helping seniors feel seen, valued, and supported.

Spring is a symbol of hope and change – an ideal time for reflection and setting intentions. Seniors can use this season to let go of limiting beliefs or past regrets and focus instead on what's pos-

sible in the here and now. Journaling, mindfulness practices, or spiritual reflection can all help foster a sense of inner growth.

This is also a wonderful time to mentor others. Many younger people crave wisdom and guidance, and seniors carry lifetimes of experience that can be shared in both formal and informal ways. Intergenerational relationships nourish both the giver and the receiver, and spring offers natural opportunities for these bonds to grow.

Spring is such a great time for seniors to blossom in countless ways. By stepping outside, embracing movement, nurturing the mind, fostering connection, and leaning into new beginnings, we can experience spring not just as a change in weather, but as a powerful time of renewal. Age is not a barrier to blossoming. It is, in many ways, the very soil from which wisdom, resilience, and joy can grow.

So, this spring, let the season be a reminder that it's never too late to grow, flourish, and thrive.

Have a great month!

Earth Rise: In honour of duty and sacrifice

ANNA KOWALCHUK

Times Contributor

Back in the 80s, there was a maxim which remains as true today as then: "If you're not angry or depressed, you're not paying attention."

These are, indeed, dark times. We are surrounded by proverbial powder-kegs of every kind – political, economic, social, environmental – and no shortage of bad actors just itching to light the fuses. For those of us who recognize that it is our responsibility as human beings and citizens of the world to pay attention, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find any glimmer of hope that we will ever make our way back to the light, or even that the light still exists.

But as the words of 5th century BCE philosopher Lao Tzu remind us, "A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step." Focusing only on the monumental

nature of a task can be overwhelming and the temptation is to turn away. We no longer have that luxury. While awareness may fuel anger and angst, anger and angst fuel action – if only one small, determined step at a time.

Read the book by Jean Giono, dear reader, or watch the beautiful 1988 Academy Award winning Canadian animated film version, *The Man Who Planted Trees*. It's a fictional but nonetheless truly inspiring story of a shepherd who, through his life, single-handedly plants forests of trees, one seed and sapling at a time.

And, for further inspiration, as witnessed by the recent commemorations of the 80th anniversary of VE-Day, we can look to the real-life men and women who, in pursuit of a more just and secure world, endured (and continue to endure all over the world) the horrors of war in the air, on land and at sea. Skies thick with bombs

and bullets, torn bodies everywhere, gains would be lost and made and lost again, sometimes metres and days at a time. Driven by duty and a willingness to sacrifice everything, their stories become all the more poignant and humbling with the realization that the duration and outcome of their staggering efforts were completely unknown to them.

We must honour these heroes, not only for what they accomplished, but for the invaluable lessons they taught us in duty and sacrifice. Let us now "put aside our childish things." Let's each of us choose a cause and give to it everything we have. If that cause is a healthy environment, know that three critical fronts are in desperate need of good folks willing to do the right thing and willing to do it for as long as it takes: transportation, heating/cooling and manufacturing.

If you can, refuse to drive gas-powered vehicles and take public transit (with its

two new hybrid buses!) instead; and refuse non-essential air-travel – much joy can be found locally. Save your nickels and dimes, if necessary, and refuse to invest in anything but green heating/cooling options which are quickly coming down in price. Refuse to purchase non-essentials, especially plastics and especially those non-recyclable, non-compostable coffee cups – bring your own or go without.

Surely it is our duty to make these sacrifices, as miniscule, insignificant even, as they are given the wider context and given that what is at stake is our continued existence on this paradise of a planet. It will be to our enduring shame and dishonour if we don't, at least, try.

If you know of an individual, company or organization that deserves recognition for their innovative and sustainable environmental practices, please contact me at frogs-a-leaping@tutamail.com.

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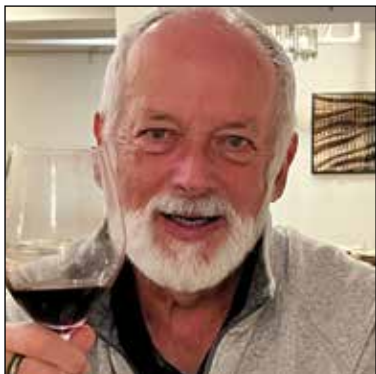
Quality Inn Festival
(1144 Ontario St., Stratford)

WORSHIP TIMES:
10 a.m. and 3 p.m.
stratfordarp.org



Invite readers to your worship services. Contact stratfordtimes@gmail.com

OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: A region offering dozens of mini-vacation opportunities



PAUL KNOWLES

Times Contributor

I have lived in southwestern Ontario all my life. Over the past few decades, as my journalism career has focused on travel writing, my appreciation for this region and what it has to offer has only grown stronger.

Today, with many of us deciding to avoid travel to the United States, the benefits of our extended neighbourhood are even more apparent because there are many years' worth of short-drive travel destinations at our doorsteps. One of my favourites is Niagara's wine country.

I realize that the number-one attraction in that area is Niagara Falls. In fact, Niagara Falls will usually appear in the top-10 bucket list destinations in the world! However, I am a bit embarrassed to admit that I almost never make it to the falls because there are so many great places to stop on the way – and yes, I do mean wineries.

We made our early spring visit to wine country a week or so ago and didn't get past the Beamsville area, home to some of the finest wineries on the Niagara Peninsula.

The experts have divided the Niagara Peninsula into two regions: Niagara Escarpment and



Ridgepoint Wines.

(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTOS)

Area and Niagara-on-the-Lake and Area. Our stops this time were all in the escarpment region, all within about 10 minutes of each other.

Would you believe there are now 61 wineries in this region alone, and another 41 in the Niagara-on-the-Lake district for a total of 102 along the Peninsula. Incredible.

I probably should be more adventurous and try to explore new wineries – and I shall – but for our first wine-country venture of 2025, I also wanted to revisit some of my favourites. I was not disappointed.

I have a special affection for smaller, independently owned wineries. A visit to any of these will probably be a little unpredictable because they are, by definition, small operations with limited staff, which contributes

significantly to their charm.

For instance, we dropped into Ridgepoint Wines on Cherry Avenue where I know we are guaranteed some tastings of superb, Italian-style red wines. It was lunch time and there was a big bus in the small parking lot.

When we entered, I heard the voice of owner and dedicated farmer Mauro Scarsellone addressing the folks in a crowded tasting room. His right-hand person, Avril, bustled by, explaining breathlessly that she couldn't really talk right now and the dining room was temporarily closed.

Like I said, unpredictable. So, as she turned to cart more open bottles into the crowded tasting room, we told her that we would come back in a couple of hours. "Great," and she was gone.

Two hours later, all was at peace. We relaxed at the tasting-room

bar, chatting with Avril, getting hugs from Mauro and sipping a superb 2020 Ripasso. That kind of personalized attention makes the necessity of a return visit more than worthwhile.

We found the same laid-back atmosphere when we dropped in at Fielding Estate Winery on Locust Lane. Because it was a weekday in early spring, there was a small staff on hand. By small, I mean one in the tasting and sales room, at least.

But she was bubbly (the server, not the wine) and full of information, and managed to chat with us and other customers, never leaving us feeling ignored. Meanwhile, there were two gentlemen seated at a table in the middle of the room, clearly enjoying a relaxing afternoon out, and in no hurry to be anywhere else. Unlike at some of the big, industri-

al wineries (my term, not theirs), this kind of leisurely visit was entirely acceptable. In fact, at Fielding there are Muskoka chairs on the front patio and picnic tables on the lawn between the winery and the vineyards. Fielding is all about relaxing.

Our third visit was to Megalomaniac Wines, right next door to Ridgepoint. It's a bit bigger, perhaps, but I love the name, the view (one of the best in the region) and the excellent, inexpensive wines produced by this independent winery, owned by John Howard (who also owns wineries in France). All the wines here have tongue-in-cheek names ("Pompous," "Narcissist" and "Sonofabitch" among others), but that doesn't mean they can't be taken seriously as fine wines.

Many of the wineries in this area also now have restaurants or dining patios – including Ridgepoint and Megalomaniac – but we opted for a brewery instead – Bench Brewery on King Street where the central building is an old school. The menu was surprisingly sophisticated considering the fact we were dining in a brewery. But this was several steps above pub food; between us we had a burrito power bowl and pork souvlaki, both terrific.

That leaves us with exactly 99 more wineries and several dozen fine restaurants for future day-trips or weekends away. If you are looking for alternate travel opportunities this year, you need look no further than the Niagara Peninsula.

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



Fielding Estate Winery with its comfortable Muskoka chairs.



The folks at Megalomaniac never lose their sense of humour.

Stratford, county students continue to learn about agriculture

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

If residents of the Stratford and Perth County areas want to know where their food comes from, mark your calendars for June 10-12 at the Stratford Rotary Complex.

School classes from both public and Catholic boards are learning through educational stations set up in the RBC arena during those days, a program that has been occurring for 45 years now.

There are 688 Grade 3 students registered to participate in the program this year.

The education program during the day is sponsored by Perth County Dairy Producers, Chicken Farmers of Perth County, Perth County Beef Producers, Perth County Pork Producers, Grain Farmers of Perth County, and Egg Farmer's of Perth County.

There is a butter making demonstration and the Gay Lea Heritage Museum gives a glimpse of farming practices from years gone by.

Eight different stations are set up around the perimeter of the arena for the various schools that are invited to come and who have registered for the program.

For the second year in a row, there is a free community barbeque for area residents on June 10 running from 5 p.m.-7:30 p.m. Cash donations for the barbeque will be accepted and donated to the Perth County food banks in the area.

That evening, those interested residents that come to the arena are invited to also tour the different stations to be educated on where their food does come from.

It will allow all ages to come and learn about agriculture in Perth County, as well as farm safety, with a special focus on rural road safety with large farm equipment.



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Logos: 4H, cfo, Chicken Farmers of Ontario, PERTH COUNTY, 4H, get cracking! Egg Farmers of Ontario

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FOOD TRUCKS

at Grace United Church in Tavistock

May 19th: Crystals Fries, Fo' Cheezy and Ish n chips
Proceeds supporting Grace United

SPRING TEA

Sunday, May 25; 2 - 4 p.m.

Stratford Legion, 804 Ontario St B1.

Come, bring your family and friends, and enjoy an afternoon of conversation, fun, door prizes and silent auction. Enjoy tea, finger sandwiches, dainties and more. \$20 for adults, \$10 for children 5-12 yrs. and under 5 yrs. are free. Order your tickets soon! Call Anne 519-301-0914, Dave 519-703-6544 or the Legion 519-271-4540.

FOOD TRUCKS

at Grace United Church in Tavistock

May 26th: Berlin 95, Serial Griller, Los Rolling Tacos, and Beavertails Proceeds supporting TAP - Tavistock Assistance Program

"Y" KNOT QUILT SHOW AND SALE

Sunday, June 1; 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Falstaff Family Centre 35 Waterloo St. Stratford

All proceeds will go to support the Stratford Family Y and Rotary Hospice Stratford Perth. Many beautiful new and antique quilts will be for sale and for more information please visit yknotquiltshowandsale.com.

TAVISTOCK MENS CLUB FISH FRY

Wednesday, June 4; 4:00-7:00 pm

Pickerel Dine in or take out. Portion of profits to Tavistock Community Health fundraiser. Visit <http://www.tavistockmensclub.ca> for more info and tickets. 519-655-3573

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After May 12th
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lamps or electronics thanks



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TAVISTOCK MEN'S CLUB FISH FRY
Wednesday June 4, 2025
Serving 4:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.
TAVISTOCK MEN'S CLUB HALL
Pickerel Dine-in or Take Out
Adults \$30 Children (Ages 6-12) \$15
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Saturday 11-2 pm
or from Club members
or call 519-655-3573
or email: info@tavistockmensclub.ca
Portion of profits to Tavistock Community Health fundraiser

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Deadline: Tuesday prior at 3 p.m.
Contact: stratfordtimes@gmail.com

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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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Wristwatches and pocket watches, Old fruit jars Beaver Star Bee Hive etc. Any old oil cans and signs Red Indian Supertest etc. Any small furniture.

If you are moving or cleaning out stuff please contact me - 519-570-6920.

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Riddles

- Why did the teddy bear say no to dessert?

Because he was stuffed!
- What do you call a sleeping bull?

A bulldozer!
- Why don't eggs tell jokes?

Because they'd crack each other up!
- Why did the banana go to the doctor?

Because it wasn't peeling well!
- What do you call a bear with no teeth?

A gummy bear!
- Why did the math book look sad?

It had too many problems.
- What did one wall say to the other wall?

"I'll meet you at the corner!"
- Why can't you give Elsa a balloon?

Because she'll let it go!
- What kind of tree fits in your hand?

A palm tree!
- Why was the broom late?

It swept in!
- What's a pirate's favorite letter?

You'd think it's R, but it be the C!
- How do you make a tissue dance?

Put a little boogie in it!

Sudoku

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

Solutions on page 34



Pet of the Month



ZAPP

Meet Zapp, a handsome working breed mix bursting with energy and affection! This big guy lives for long walks, tasty treats, and learning new things. He's a smart, food-motivated pup who's eager to please and loves bonding with his people.

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Word Search

PHOTO TIME

A	D	S	V	S	Y	R	A	G	M	X	U	R	P	P	I	I	B	B	P
I	V	H	U	S	M	W	W	W	T	A	P	E	R	T	U	R	E	K	W
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B	E	O	V	F	H	C	Q	B	A	L	T	D	E	U	G	C	Q	W	Y
D	E	B	T	X	S	R	S	L	Z	M	A	N	G	L	E	R	J	N	S

- ANGLE
- APERTURE
- CAMERA
- DEPTH OF FIELD
- DIGITAL
- EXPOSURE
- FOCUS
- ISO
- LENSES
- LIGHT
- LIGHT METER
- PHOTOGRAPHER
- POSING
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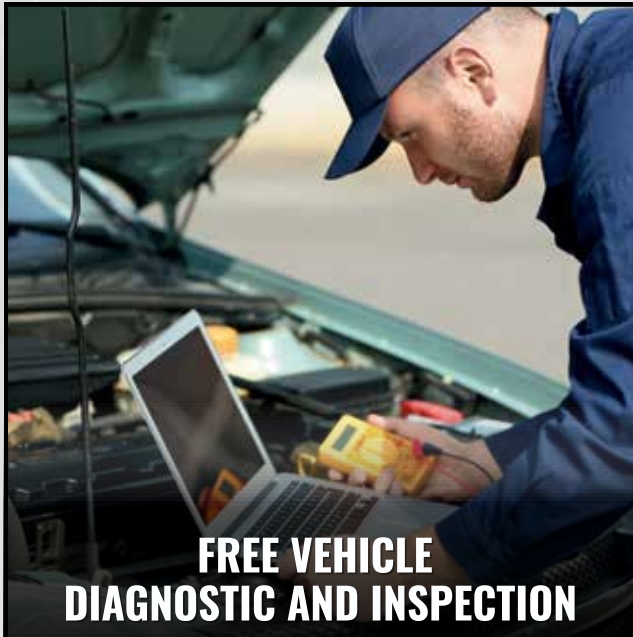
SUDOKU

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