

# St. Marys Independent

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(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTO)

Abel Brosens and Noah Hauser take the plunge into the new and improved Pyramid Recreation Centre pool during the aquatics centre's grand reopening public swim Jan. 24.

## Town of St. Marys celebrates pool reopening with sold-out public swim

After more than a year of renovations, the pool at the PRC is back in operation

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Dozens of St. Marys and area residents turned out Saturday for a special public swim at the newly renovated Pyramid Recreation Centre (PRC) aquatics centre to celebrate the grand reopening of the pool after it was closed for more than a year.

With free cupcakes, balloons and swag bags courtesy of the town, as well as rubber ducks courtesy of Quadro Communications,

the event showcased the nearly \$2 million in renovations and upgrades undertaken by the town and its contractors since the pool was first closed in November 2024, a decision made to address the deterioration of equipment and infrastructure caused by an undersized HVAC unit and the use of saltwater instead of chlorine earlier in the pool's lifespan.

"This is really exciting; I'm so glad we're open after such a long time," said Town of

CONTINUED TO PAGE 2

## Perth County council approves 2026 budget in principle

Draft budget carries proposed 8.75 per-cent tax-rate increase following review of operating budget

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Perth County council has concluded the bulk of its 2026 budget deliberations and has now approved the full draft budget in principle after county council reviewed its draft operating budget on Jan. 22., resulting in a proposed levy increase, inclusive of growth, of 8.75 per cent over the county's 2025 levy.

As part of council's review of the draft operating budget, which originally included roughly \$64.4 million in spending this year, councillors were asked to consider four budget requests totalling an additional roughly \$205,000.

They included a \$50,000 request in support of the development of the Ontario Agri-Food Discovery Centre in North Perth, an additional \$100,000 to support a countywide sign and wayfinding project to be undertaken by the county's economic development and tourism department, \$30,000 to support other special projects aimed at supporting economic development in the county, and \$25,000 in support of the eradication of the invasive plant species, giant hogweed, in collaboration with the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA).

While councillors ultimately included all four budgetary requests in the draft 2026 operating budget, deputy warden Sue Orr and

CONTINUED TO PAGE 3

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# COMMUNITY

## St. Marys celebrates grand reopening of PRC pool after closure

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

St. Marys director of community services Stephanie Ische, who oversaw the renovation project and handed out cupcakes at the grand reopening Saturday. “When you walk in, the ventilation definitely feels different in there. ... If you were in there before, there just wasn’t as much airflow. But when you walk in now, there’s a definite temperature difference and you don’t notice the humidity.”

Ische said the new HVAC system includes a large ventilation duct above the pool, allowing for better airflow and humidity control, keeping condensation from clouding up the aquatics centre windows – just a few of the many improvements noticed by users since the pool officially reopened to the public at the end of December.

“We’ve had 100 per-cent positive feedback,” Ische said. “We’ve heard nothing negative, which has been fantastic. People are happy to get back in the pool, and that was one of our worries because we weren’t sure when we closed if people would come back quickly ... but our numbers are higher now than they were when we closed.”

As one of the few indoor pools in the areas, Ische said both local and out-of-town users have been returning to St. Marys to swim for exercise and for leisure – a notion not lost on several St. Marys town councillors who were on hand Saturday to watch the pool fill up with happy swimmers.

“It’s a little bit of a sigh of relief,” deputy mayor Brogan Aylward said. “It’s nice to see the community coming out in full force upon our grand reopening

now. It’s nice to know they still do love and value it as much as we do, and we’re willing to commit and put the time in to fix it right and make sure it’s ready to go.”

“I tell you, it’s pretty exciting to have the pool open and I’ve spoken even with people in Stratford who have been making their way to New Hamburg instead of St. Marys while the pool was closed for such a length of time, and they’re now coming back and excited and happy because they love the facility,” Coun. Fern Pridham added. “It’s great to see it open and refurbished and new.”

While the pool is once again a draw for folks across the region, town aquatics manager Andrea Slade said St. Marys is prioritizing locals when it comes to registration for swim lessons.

“It is amazing to welcome both re-

turning patrons and new members of the community and surrounding areas back to the pool,” Slade said. “We have officially returned to full programming including Aquafit, Water Walking, Lane Swims, Open Swims, rentals, swimming lessons and leadership courses. We are currently in week three of a 10-week winter session. The next swim-lesson session begins the week of Monday, March 16. Residents are now given priority access for swim-lesson registration set for Monday, March 9, at 9 a.m. for residents and Tuesday, March 10, at 9 a.m. for non-residents.”

For more information on aquatics centre programming at the PRC, visit [www.townofstmarys.com/recreation-community-culture/pyramid-recreation-centre/pool/](http://www.townofstmarys.com/recreation-community-culture/pyramid-recreation-centre/pool/).



(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTOS)

The temperature may have been frigid outside, but inside the St. Marys aquatics centre at the Pyramid Recreation Centre it was perfect for a swim during the pool’s grand reopening event Jan. 24.



Complete with her swag bag courtesy of the Town of St. Marys, Mary Silverthorne was ready to get in the pool at the Pyramid Recreation Centre during its grand reopening event Jan. 24.



Town director of community services Stephanie Ische hands out free cupcakes to swimmers during the St. Marys aquatics centre’s grand reopening event Jan. 24.

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# Perth County council advances 2026 budget with proposed 8.75% levy increase

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Coun. Rhonda Ehgoetz, representing Perth South and Perth East respectively, weren't sure the full \$25,000 for the eradication of giant hogweed across the county was necessary, and asked staff to arrange a presentation by UTRCA on how exactly the county would support those efforts with this funding.

"I know it's out there, I know it's a problem, I still think there has to be some onus on the property owners," Ehgoetz said, referring to who will be expected to cover the cost of hogweed eradication on private property. "We can't expect the county and the conservation authority to come in and look after it all. If there's going to be costs, the farmer or the landowner has to participate in that somehow. That's my concern, that we're not going to start taking over looking after hogweed for everybody in the county and it's just going to get bigger and bigger and bigger as a program."

Coun. Walter McKenzie, meanwhile, warned his fellow county councillors that West Perth has been contracting the UTRCA to help the municipality deal with its issues surrounding giant hogweed – a noxious weed that can cause skin burns and other injuries to both humans and animals – along portions of

the North Thames River south of Mitchell. That work, he said, takes months or even years to eradicate giant hogweed completely and he said it cost the municipality \$6,500 last year.

"Giant hogweed is considered a noxious weed both here in Ontario and in B.C. due to its toxic sap that causes skin burns and blisters upon some exposure. ... It is out there and it is a problem, and I don't think it's just a problem in West Perth, but it is a problem in West Perth," McKenzie said, adding West Perth has little chance in eradicating the weed completely without expanding efforts to the rest of the county.

Given the need for more information on the UTRCA's giant hogweed program and the county's role in it if funding is provided, county council voted to leave the door open for adjustments to the giant hogweed budget line should councillors determine the full \$25,000 is not needed after the conservation authority's presentation and before the 2026 budget bylaw is passed.

"Just to put it into context, what was requested for asks would increase our tax rate 0.82 per cent to 8.75 per cent total tax rate, essentially adding \$8.20 to the (average assessed) single-detached home (with a 2016 assessed value

of \$284,000), which still brings us to a total increase of just under \$90 (to the upper-tier portion of residents' property tax bill for the year)," county treasurer Corey Bridges told council, comparing the impact of the new proposed levy increase to the impact of the 7.93 per-cent levy increase included in the original draft of the budget.

Orr and Ehgoetz also requested a review of the Perth County Stewardship program, budgeted at \$100,000 as part of the county's 2026 grant program, to determine if grant funding can be more effectively allocated elsewhere, which staff agreed to bring back at council's Feb. 5 meeting.

Looking at the 2026 draft operating budget as a whole, Bridges told council much of this year's levy increase from \$25.1 million in 2025 to \$27.5 million has to do with increases in operating expenses in both the public works division and paramedic services.

In total, the public works division is expected to see a net increase in operating expenses by roughly \$547,000 across its administrative, roads, facilities and fleet departments, primarily resulting from increases in the costs of overhead, winter maintenance, the amortization and operation of the county's connect-

ing link expansion at the Perth County Courthouse, and transfers to capital reserves for the future replacement of county vehicles and inflation.

In paramedic services, the county's operating expenses are budgeted with an increase of \$473,000 over last year, primarily driven by increases to wages and benefits, including a planned increase in staffing by 1.83 full-time-equivalent positions to allow for the hiring of part-time paramedics to cover parental and maternity leave.

Accounting for COLA and non-COLA salary and wage increases this year, the total salary and benefits cost increase across all divisions in the draft 2026 operating budget is roughly \$1.7 million.

The county has also budgeted an additional \$652,000 for its portion of the costs for shared services this year – services run by a different municipality or a separate board including Stratford Social Services, Huron Perth Public Health, Spruce Lodge and the Stratford-Perth Museum.

A final draft of the Perth County 2026 budget will be considered at a council meeting in February, at which point any last-minute amendments can be made before council officially adopts the 2026 budget bylaw.

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# EDITORIAL

## Canada lives

PETER RICE

*Special editorial*

Our prime minister, Mark Carney, delivered a speech on Jan. 20 at the 56th annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He received a standing ovation from the world leaders in attendance. The prime minister warned about the world's "rules-based order" fading, and called for the middle powers to unite.

The next day, Trump accused Canada of being ungrateful. He disrespectfully called our prime minister by his first name and said in a low, threatening tone, "Canada lives because of the United States." I assume he wants us to be grateful for the punishing tariffs he has imposed which are designed to bring our country to our knees, forcing us to become the 51st state.

Canada lives because we are a country that celebrates its diversity and gives refuge to those who are escaping war and strife. Canada does not fill our cities with masked ICE agents roaming our peaceful neighbourhoods and arresting citizens and noncitizens alike based mainly on the colour of their skin, or the fact they are legally protesting injustice.

ICE agents have now been given immunity for whatever action they take on their own citizens, allowing them to use tear gas and tasers along with live rounds. A five-year-old preschool boy was arrested and used as bait in his own driveway on the way home from school. I can only imagine the horror of this happening to my own grandson of the same age. Two people have been shot and killed. They were instantly labelled as instigators by the federal government before any investigation had taken place. Those investigations will be strictly controlled and will only proceed with those chosen by the ruling party. Other local law enforcement will be shut out. Can we guess what the con-

clusions of the investigations will be?

Canada lives because we have gun-control laws. The U.S. had 408-425 mass shootings in 2025 with 420 dead and 1,898 wounded. Australia has set an excellent example on how to take positive action after their Bondi Beach tragedy. New gun restrictions and anti-hate laws have come into effect quickly. Thoughts and prayers only go so far, America.

Canada lives because we don't attack and censor the mainstream media. We don't try to control it by insulting and bullying the people who are hired to ask the tough questions.

Canada lives because we don't ridicule and bully others if they have different opinions than us. We also don't mock the disabled for our own personal gain, rather we accept them with open arms as valuable and contributing members of our society.

Canada lives because we accept the decisions of the electorate. We don't try to overthrow the government in violent insurrections. In Washington on Jan. 6, 2021, a number of people died as a result and the justice system has failed miserably to hold the instigator and other participants of this deplorable incident responsible. In fact, they had a great idea, let's make him president again!

Canada lives because we don't persecute the political opposition in personal vendettas after gaining power.

Canada lives because we mobilize without hesitation to help our neighbours. We deployed hydro workers in ice storms in the American northeast and sent water bombers and firefighting personnel when California wildfires were out of control.

Canada lives because a small town, Gander, Nfld., opened its hearts and homes to over 6,500 people on 38 airplanes. The United States Federal Airport Administration shut down international airspace after the 9/11 attacks.

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### Bravo

We have 1 Bravo this week.

1) Bravo to the two young men in their mid 20s that offered their arms to help a senior lady get over a snowbank in front of the town hall. Your kindness was greatly appreciated.

### Boo

We have no Boos this week.

*\*Please note all Boos and Bravos must be signed in order to be considered. Bravos and Boos are submitted by community members and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the St. Marys Independent.*

### Quote of the Week

"Our warming centers in town include the Pyramid Recreation Centre, which is open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. and the St. Marys Library open 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Fridays and 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays. If community members need assistance after hours, they are asked to call Shelterlink in Stratford at 519-272-2294."

**- Town of St. Marys outreach worker Jade Orquin on where and when the warming stations are available during this stretch of frigid temperatures.**

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## St. Marys Independent

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## Overheard

# AT THE COFFEE SHOP

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This is the longest January in the history of January's

Why do I feel like there is a lot more pressure on the groundhog this year?

Have you heard something humorous around town that you think might be of interest to others? Either email them to us at [info@stmarys-independent.com](mailto:info@stmarys-independent.com) with the title "Overheard at The Coffee Shop", call 519.284.0041 or drop by the office to let us know!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

RCMP officers first made their presence known to assure all the passengers they were safe. Then the town of roughly 12,000 mobilized. They put their lives on hold to house and feed strangers who numbered half of their entire population. That's what neighbours do. Their kindness will never be forgotten by the passengers, but sadly it appears to have been forgotten by this administration.

Canada lives because we believe in the threat of climate change on the health of the world's fragile environment. Though we aren't perfect in our response, we are not shaming other nations by proclaiming that the issue is a hoax and a sham. Trump's beliefs are based on oil greed and ignoring proven science and facts.

Canada lives because we don't invade independent countries. The U.S. disregards international law and does so only on the moral authority of one person, without congressional approval. That would usually label that leader a dictator.

Canada lives because we don't flaunt international law. We don't murder human beings in small boats off the coast of their own country with lethal drones fired from thousands of feet in the air. The U.S. military did this without due process and committed an indisputable war crime by circling back and murdering the survivors near the wreckage of their vessel.

Canada lives because we work cooper-

atively with other nations for the benefit of all. We don't punish friends and allies economically for our own imperial gains and status.

Trump has also mentioned that he doesn't need Canada, and NATO has done nothing for the United States. Yet NATO's Article 5 was only used once, and that was after the 9/11 attacks.

Canada lives because we lost men and women in battle in Afghanistan, joining the NATO alliance to fight the Taliban after the 9/11 attacks. Canadian soldiers who had friends die in battle find Trump's words disgusting and insulting.

Canada lives because we are peacemakers and have donned the blue helmets to participate in over 50 United Nations peacekeeping missions since 1954.

Canada lives because we are innovators and inventors. Think about how the discovery of insulin, the invention of the telephone, the pacemaker, the alkaline battery, the Canadarm and even one of America's favourite sporting pastimes, basketball, just to name a few, have all enriched the world.

Sorry, Donald, (we are polite as well) but Canada lives because we are Canadian! I wish America well and hope that you can solve the mess that you are now in. You are much better than this. We wouldn't want to lose our best friend.

## St. Marys Public Library to host a "Heart Felt" craft night

ALEX HUNT

Independent Reporter

The library's upcoming Make and Take event will provide locals with an opportunity to take home a craft made from the heart.

On Feb. 4 from 6-8 p.m., the library will host a "Heart Felt" Make and Take craft night, a Valentine's themed weaving project where participants will be able to make blanket-fabric hearts to take home.

"I think it's cute when people want to come out and take part in a craft that's very hands-on and lets them get into a creative flow," said Caroline Rabideau, library services coordinator.

"It gives people a chance to step away from their phones and technology, to actually participate in something and walk away feeling different. I like seeing people engage like that, especially when they're connecting with others."

The event is for those aged 18 and over with a suggested \$10 donation. Registration is available through the website or by calling the library directly.

Later this year, Rabideau said that after a successful turnout at the Stratford Public Library, Baycrest Academy will be hosting a brain health assessment workshop in April.

The agency focuses on brain and cognitive health," said Rabideau. "Laptops will be provided, allowing participants to complete a real-time assessment of their brain health.



(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

**Caroline Rabideau, library services coordinator at the St. Marys Public Library.**

"I'm really excited about this. It's geared toward older generations, so they can see where they stand on a cognitive level. People can start improving their brain health from the suggested changes from the assessment as well."

For young readers, the Winter Reading Challenge concludes on Jan. 31. Children under 12 are encouraged to submit their reading minutes before the end of the month for a chance to win a Chocolate Factory gift card, which will be drawn on Feb. 2.

# STONETOWN CRIER

The latest municipal news from the Town of St. Marys



## NAVIGATING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

February 23 | 6 - 7:30 PM | PRC

St. Marys EarlyON is hosting a supportive workshop for caregivers to explore sibling dynamics, learn strategies to reduce rivalry, and strengthen cooperation between children. Gain practical tools for communication, emotional regulation, and building positive sibling bonds.

Register via your KEyON account

## WARMING CENTRES

The following Town facilities are open to anyone seeking a safe and heated space during their regular operating hours:

- Pyramid Recreation Centre
- St Marys Public Library

If you or someone you know needs assistance, please reach out to the Community Outreach Worker at 226-261-0098 or email [communityoutreach@town.stmarys.on.ca](mailto:communityoutreach@town.stmarys.on.ca).



## SCRAPBOOKING DONATION CALL OUT

The St. Marys Friendship Centre is currently in search of donations for their spring Scrapbooking Garage Sale. All proceeds raised from the sale of donated items directly support St. Marys Senior Services. They will gladly accept cardmaking/scrapbooking items, notebooks, adult colouring books, markers, pencils and pens.

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## WINTER SAFETY REMINDERS

Residents are reminded to regularly check their property and ensure the following:

- At least three feet of clearance around all fire hydrants
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### Senior of the Week



Our senior of the week is Alfreda Barron who turned 98 on Jan. 16. Alfreda has lived in St. Marys all of her life. She worked for the dentist Dr. Curie and then the Royal Bank of Canada until her retirement. After retirement she worked at M&M Crafts. She has two boys and a girl and has eight grandchildren. She is enjoying life at Wildwood Retirement Community.

If you would like to nominate someone for Senior of the Week, contact us at 519.284.0041 or [info@stmarysindependent.com](mailto:info@stmarysindependent.com).

# Who is the St. Mary Memorial Hospital Auxiliary?

JANIS FREAD

*St. Marys Memorial Hospital Auxiliary*

Meet our two newest members, Peggy O'Brien and Vivian Reid.

Peggy has lived most of her life in St. Marys, both her children were born at St. Marys Memorial Hospital and, at one point, she was employed at the hospital, so it was a natural next step to join the hospital auxiliary when she retired!

Because she worked in health care and enjoyed both the experience and the people, it has been an easy transition to spend volunteer hours working in the hospital Boutique where she interacts with both patients and staff. Since joining in the fall of 2025, Peggy has participated in fundraising events and is now a member of the fundraising committee. She is happy to support the hospital auxiliary saying, "Our hospital has a connection to everyone."

Vivian, a newcomer to St. Marys, having moved here just over two years ago, is "enjoying everything St. Marys has to offer." Her working career was in health care, so when looking for ways to get involved in her new community, the hospital auxiliary was an easy choice.

She has brought fresh ideas to the hospital Boutique from her experience staffing a small giftshop in her previous community. Watch for her handmade cards that will soon be available for sale at the Boutique.



(PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. MARYS MEMORIAL HOSPITAL AUXILIARY)

Two of the St. Marys Memorial Hospital Auxiliary's newest members, Peggy O'Brien and Vivian Reid.

Once the weather settles down, there will be a few more finishing additions to the gazebo on the hospital grounds in preparation for a grand celebratory reopening! Details to follow. The next project for the auxiliary is a cheerful mural in the patient lounge. Our 2026 fundraising will

be directed towards the mural and another piece of equipment for the hospital, which has yet to be decided.

For updates on fundraising events or to become a volunteer, follow the auxiliary on Facebook at The Boutique at St. Marys Memorial Hospital or email [smmhauxiliary@gmail.com](mailto:smmhauxiliary@gmail.com).

## WEEKEND QUIZ

By Jake Grant

1. Alex Honnold solo climbed Taipei 101 on Jan. 23, 2026. What country is that in?
2. What does WEF stand for?
3. What does China's Terracotta Army protect?
4. What animal species did Jane Goodall study?
5. How many years ago did the Ice Age end?
6. Williams and Bosc are varieties of which fruit?
7. Which basketball team became the first to reach the milestone of 3,000 wins in 2010?
8. In beer, what does IPA stand for?
9. The gopher is a member of what order of mammals?
10. What vehicle is used to smooth an ice rink?

This week's answers are found on pg. 31



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# On a day of love, locals can learn about the town's darker mysteries

ALEX HUNT

Independent Reporter

On Valentine's Day of all days, Stratford Walking Tours will guide locals through the downtown core to learn about the life of a former St. Marys mayor who was accused of murder.

Stratford Walking Tours is running a Valentine's Day Ghost Walk in St. Marys on Feb. 14 at 7 p.m. The tour will begin in front of MacPherson Arts & Crafts, where locals will learn about the building's previous life.

"In the late 1800s, the office belonged to a well-respected doctor and the town's mayor, Dr. Adam Enoch Ford," said Lauri Leduc, owner, operator and guide of Stratford Walking Tours.

"He would invite people there after hours to drink and talk about sports and politics. One night, an incident occurred in that building that would change the lives of two men forever."

One of Ford's friends would die a few hours after one of the group's evening hangouts, but not before he accused Ford

of poisoning him. Ford denied the claim but would later be imprisoned in Stratford Jail on the charge of death by poison. Due to insufficient evidence, the charges were dropped and Ford was released after his trial.

"His reputation sank; nobody wanted to be associated with him and they wouldn't let him in the service clubs," said Leduc. "He left town with his oldest son and went to Denver, Colo., and never returned."

Leduc said the ghost of the man who died that night haunts Ford's house, which still stands in the town.

Leduc started the business in 2024 and has been doing nature walks, history, heritage and ghost tours in Stratford and St. Marys ever since.

"The locals love the ghost tours. For the Stratford tours, people come from all around the country and sometimes the United States," said Leduc. "People like hearing about stories of dark crimes, history and the ghostly elements, and I decided to formulate a tour around that."

Those interested in participating in the Valentine's Day Ghost Walk can purchase tickets online at stratfordwalkingtours.ca.



(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

Lauri Leduc, owner, operator and guide of Stratford Walking Tours, in St. Marys.

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# Nature school expands offerings with new “Chipmunks” and “Rooted In Nature” programs

ALEX HUNT

Independent Reporter

Coyote Nature School, an outdoor educational alternative for kids, is preparing to open its summer-camp registration and recently unveiled new programs for 2026 and 2027.

Parents can register their child in Coyote Camp this summer on Feb. 1. The full-day nature school welcomes registrations from current families starting Feb. 1 and will open it up to the general public on March 1.

“As we did last year, we’re running two Coyote Camps this summer,” said Martin. “One will be a week-long program here at Stoneridge Farm, and the other will run for a week in Harrington around the Mill Pond. Both offer distinct, beautiful, natural environments, but they’re focused on helping kids explore, connect and learn outdoors.”

Founder and director Kendra Martin is planning to launch the new Chipmunks program at the school’s Harrington location next year. The full-day class is aimed at children ages four to seven as a transition into the full-year nature school. This program will run in the fall and the spring seasons, taking a break for winter. The Rooted in Nature program focuses on child wellness through deeply connected outdoor experiences. This is Coyote Nature School’s first weekend program and will take place over six weeks this fall on the farm for children aged eight to 14 years old.

Martin said that she plans to broaden the programs next year and will continue to run the Acorn & Oaks (parent-and-tot) program. An eight-week program in the spring and fall, the class allows parents to connect with their child in a natural setting.

“Parents and children will explore nature together while parents learn how to bring the outdoors into their kids’ lives in meaningful ways,” said Martin. “By increasing



(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

Kendra Martin and her Chickadee program students taking a snack break at Coyote Nature School.

parents’ nature literacy, their children can engage more fully with the natural world.”

Currently, the school is running the Chickadees, Herons, Homesteaders and Turtles programs. One day a week, classes run during the school year for children between the ages of four and 16. Children learn according to what nature brings. Right now, Martin said students are learning how animals adapt during the winter and how that translates to humans.

Experienced students can now take on a leadership role as a junior nature mentor. In this position, they help teach and assist younger students and take part in planning what’s on the menu for learning.

“We wanted to offer a leadership role within the school so students would stay invested in the program, take on greater responsibilities and support younger kids throughout the day,” said Martin. “It’s an important role for us and we hope that they can take new skills back into their lives, be a better leader, community member and

eventually come back as staff.”

Twelve-year-old Hadley Carson-Voyce and 11-year-old Jamie Barber serve as junior nature mentors, helping younger students and taking part in planning activities.

“My favourite part of being a nature mentor is spending time with the kids. It helps me learn how to be a leader, and it even makes me a better sibling,” said Carson-Voyce. “I enjoy interacting with the younger students because they have such creative ideas and it’s a lot of fun to be with them.”

Barber said she’s learned lots of life skills from the role, such as helping other kids focus during lessons, as well as building shelters and campfires.

In addition to learning skills, “We focus on overarching quality or character traits that will help kids navigate through life when things get tough,” added Martin.

Martin said when she started Coyote Nature School, she was unsure if parents would understand or appreciate the na-

ture-education approach. After experiencing the school’s programs, she says parents have seen the health and mindset benefits the school has to offer and they keep coming back each year.

“Parents feel that this school has a huge value, and when you put something out there that’s new, it’s a risk,” said Martin. “Now I have many people who jump on board and want to get involved.”

To lessen financial barriers, some community members chose to sponsor a child’s participation by making a donation to cover costs. Find out more about sponsorship at [www.coyotenatureschool.ca](http://www.coyotenatureschool.ca).

Coyote Nature School invites volunteers to support children in learning activities and as guests to share their skills (gardening, sewing, art, woodworking, etc.). Anyone interested in getting outdoors and being around some amazing adults and children can email [coyotenatureschool@gmail.com](mailto:coyotenatureschool@gmail.com) or call Martin at 519-852-1842 for more information.



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# Boeing Boeing, You're A Good Man Charlie Brown and improv classes part of SMCP's 2026 season

EMILY STEWART

Independent Reporter

Although the St. Marys Community Players (SMCP) has two distinct productions lined up for 2026, both productions explore the desire for a sense of belonging.

SMCP announced its 2026 season spring and fall productions, French comedy *Boeing Boeing* and the musical, *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown*, respectively.

*Boeing Boeing*, currently in rehearsals, will take the stage at Town Hall Theatre from April 24 to May 9. The Marc Camoletti comedy, directed by Ralph Small, will time travel to the 1960s and showcase the shenanigans of bachelor Bernard and the three stewardesses he's dating. Though Bernard had it set up so all flight attendants arrive at different times and not know about the other relationships, a change in schedule happens so all stewardesses arrive at the same time.

Based on the beloved classic *Peanuts* comics by Charles Schultz, *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown* will highlight childhood worries, the universal desire to be understood and quiet hopes. The musical will feature songs like "Supertime," "Happiness," and "The Baseball game."

The fall production will run from Oct. 22 to Nov. 7 at the Town Hall Theatre.

"It's going to be a really interesting season this year," said Gregory George, SMCP's marketing, communications and promotions.

George said the Charlie Brown musical had been examined by SMCP in the past but was picked this year because of the contrast to *Boeing Boeing*. Both productions, in their own right, explore the desire to feel understood – *Boeing Boeing* with understanding chaotic love and *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown* with day-to-day life.

"While they could be wildly different, farce comedy versus a traditional and quite a well-known musical, they still have this interconnection of really wanting to belong and wanting to be understood so we're really looking at a shared experience essentially, right?" George said. "So, whether the audience is actually coming for the farce or the music, we want to make sure they're covered at both ends with our spring and our fall shows."

In addition to the productions, SMCP will run weekly Laugh and Learn Improv classes every Thursday starting Nov. 19 and will have graduation performances

on March 27 and 28, 2027. The 16 classes for ages 18 and over will be taught by SMCP's own Lianne Gregory-Sterritt, who taught improv classes across southwestern Ontario, including in Toronto.

"We've had these in the past before and we have done these prior to covid, so

we're re-inviting people to actually join the class again and improve their improv skills," George said.

More information about the 2026 season can be found online by visiting [www.stmaryscommunityplayers.ca](http://www.stmaryscommunityplayers.ca).

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# Town of St. Marys warns residents to be cautious amid provincial salt shortage

ST. MARYS INDEPENDENT

Staff Contribution

As the Town of St. Marys worked to manage the snow accumulation in St. Marys with a townwide snow cleanup earlier this week, staff warned residents to be cautious amid a provincial road-salt shortage.

Throughout the day on Monday, Jan. 26, local plows completed their final plow run, prioritizing hills and applying a heavy sand mixture to provide traction. According to a press release, St. Marys is facing a salt shortage impacting much of the province.

Typically, the town said tactics for road maintenance would include switching to a treated salt that activates at a lower tem-

perature. However, this is not an option due to the shortage. The salt the town currently has access to is not as effective in these conditions.

The public works team is reminding residents to take extra caution on the roads, sidewalks and trails. Plowing and sanding will continue to improve traction, but the roads may still be slippery. Slow down, make gentle turns and avoid sudden braking.

Throughout the week, the town said it would be cleaning out critical snow-storage areas, performing blowbacks where possible and removing snow from cul-de-sacs.

A downtown core snow cleanup was scheduled for the early morning hours on Wednesday, Jan. 28, after the Indepen-

dent went to press. Streets included in this cleanup were to be Queen Street from Water Street to Peel Street; Water Street from Jones Street to the bridge; Wellington Street from Jones Street to the bridge; and Church Street from Jones Street to the bridge.

Residents were asked to refrain from parking on the street overnight to enable crews to clear snow efficiently and effectively in accordance with the town's traffic, parking and boulevard maintenance bylaw.

A municipal parking lot cleanup will take place on Thursday, Jan. 29 from 3:30-6 a.m. in the following lots:

- Water Street North
- Jones Street East
- Elgin Street East

- The Opera House lot
- Well 2 lot (located north of Queen Street between Water Street North and Wellington Street North)

People with municipal parking permits were to receive direct notifications requesting the removal of their vehicles from the affected lots. During this period, vehicles with municipal parking permits were allowed to be parked on the street overnight; however, parking in other municipal lots was prohibited.

The Town of St. Marys thanked everyone for their cooperation.

"Travel safely and be mindful of others! We will get through this winter weather together," the press release said.

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# Perth County warden and councillors reflect on 2026 ROMA annual conference

## Perth County delegation advocates for rural priorities

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Perth County Warden Dean Trentowsky, county councillors and staff joined more than 1,900 municipal and provincial representatives from across Ontario at the 2026 Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) Conference at the Sheraton Hotel in Toronto Jan. 18-20.

At the Jan. 22 Perth County council meeting, Trentowsky reflected on how the conference and the sessions the local delegates attended went, and how Perth County was able to advocate for rural needs across two official delegation meetings with representatives from the provincial government.

“For our part, we had two delegations from the county to the province,” Trentowsky told council. “One was on planning matters related to trying to find some methods to be innovative in finding efficiencies within the planning-submission

requirements, asking the province for some funding assistance towards that goal of streamlining the applications.

“We did get some recommendations on how to pursue that further, so staff will be following that up. Thanks to Andrea Hachler, director of planning services, for putting that delegation together, and thanks to councillors (Walter) McKenzie, (Todd) Kasenberg and deputy warden (Sue) Orr for attending and supporting that delegation.”

While the first delegation was with Laura Smith, the parliamentary assistant to the minister of municipal affairs and housing, the second delegation was heard by Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness Trevor Jones and revolved around agribusiness growth, investment successes and opportunities in the region.

“Meredith Forget, our economic development and tourism director, in cooperation with (communications officer) Sarah Franklin and the rest of staff put together

a package that we presented to Minister Jones highlighting the wins, celebrating the successes of provincial funding towards agriculture and also the ag. tourism sector in Perth County, reaffirming with the province that their programming is successful – it’s having a definite positive impact within the county.

“We highlighted some local agricultural and ag. tourism businesses that were direct benefactors of provincial funding, and we offered to work together with the province to continue getting the message out, getting provincial-funding programming to our residents and ratepayers, helping these ratepayers find these programs and facilitate their participation in these programs.”

Trentowsky said the delegates invited Minister Jones and his staff to visit Perth County in the fall and see firsthand the benefits of the provincial funding extended to local farms and agribusinesses – an invitation Trentowsky said Jones eagerly accepted.

This year’s conference theme was ROMA 2026: Ontario’s Rural Leaders Conference. The three-day event served as a key moment for municipal and provincial officials to connect on the unique challenges faced by rural municipalities.

Sessions focused on topics covering the breadth of rural municipal matters, including rural access to health care, Indigenous relations, codes of conduct, Community Safety and Wellbeing plans, infrastructure, waste management, housing, and road safety in rural communities.

“It’s a very worthwhile conference to attend with a range of really important municipal topics and a chance to connect with colleagues across the province,” said county CAO Lori Wolfe.

“Warden Trentowsky did an excellent job in the presentations and I’m very grateful that he took the lead,” deputy warden Orr added.



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# Meet the people behind the local Salvation Army

ALEX HUNT

Independent Reporter

After a successful Christmas campaign, staff at The Salvation Army Stratford-St. Marys Regional Community Ministries reflected on what drives their commitment to help others.

The Salvation Army is an international Christian organization that provides a range of community supports, including emergency shelters, food programs, rehabilitation services and housing assistance. The nonprofit aims to help vulnerable people rebuild stability and independence.

A day in the life of a Salvation Army team member begins with a morning meeting to review the previous day's duties and plan the day's agenda. A moment is dedicated to staff and volunteers to share the challenges encountered on the previous workday.

Community and family services manager Jennifer Morris said sometimes team members can take home more emotional weight than they realize. Management strives to provide staff and volunteers with a work environment that is supportive and respectful.

"Our goal is to make our community feel supported and ensure that our team is safe and respected," said Morris. "We want to help our clients navigate the system to the best of our ability and ensure that they are directed to the appropriate resources."

Raelyn Marshall said that it was a shock to see how many locals were struggling when she was first hired as a family services worker three years ago.

"I think a lot of people don't realize what goes on behind closed doors or the struggles others face. Many of our clients do an incredible job of making things work for



(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

Pictured are Raelyn Marshall, family services worker, and Michael Tigani, casual support worker, at The Salvation Army food bank in Stratford.

themselves," Marshall said.

Marshall's role requires her to book client appointments, prepare food, delegate volunteer duties and ensure day-to-day operations run appropriately.

"I move between our food banks in Stratford, St. Marys and Mitchell, which operate on different days."

Marshall prioritized working for a local nonprofit after graduating from the social service worker diploma program at Conestoga College. She was onboarded at The Salvation Army immediately after her studies.

"Working here has taught me that I can handle different situations. When I started, I didn't really know what I was doing," said Marshall. "I've learned by asking for help and gaining experience, and now I feel very confident in my role."

Casual support worker Michael Tigani concluded his third Christmas with The Salvation Army. Tigani commits to his position on a part-time basis while he finishes

his last semester at the University of Guelph for criminal justice and public policy.

Tigani helps volunteers and staff sort and transport donations, pick up kettles and run community drives. He said one of the parts he enjoys most is interacting with clients and locals.

"I'm surprised at the scale of how many people we are helping, and I can see that the struggles are expanding," said Tigani. "You hear in the news how groceries and rent are more expensive than ever. Before I started, I knew people were struggling, but I didn't realize how many or how widespread it was."

Tigani's passion for community and helping others has encouraged him to pursue a career working with the Stratford Police Service after he graduates in the spring.

Dale Bowyer has volunteered with The Salvation Army for two-and-a-half years and plans to continue helping for as long

as he can.

Bowyer helps with preparing hampers, stocking donations and organizing the back rooms at the Mitchell food bank branch.

"I've been involved in community support volunteer and work positions in other places. I think The Salvation Army is a great outreach program," said Bowyer.

"I really like being part of getting food to the people who need it most. It feels good knowing you're helping make a difference in someone's day, and it's great working alongside such a dedicated team here."

Morris said staff and volunteers bring a variety of skills to the workplace.

"I love how diverse our team is, and that brings a lot to the community."

Morris joined The Salvation Army in 2017 as a family services worker, filling a temporary contract, and returned in 2021 in her current role. As a manager, her responsibilities include building relationships with local organizations, ensuring programs meet community demands, supporting clients' needs and facilitating community fundraisers.

"I do this job because I believe in its importance and value in people's lives," said Morris. "People thrive in an environment where they feel supported. Not everyone has that, but if we do our job well, then our clients can experience what that feels like."

Morris said she gets excited when she notices recurring clients no longer need the nonprofit's support.

There's a lot of stuff that we do where we won't see the impact, and you can only hope that it's positive," said Morris. "We won't solve world hunger. We're going to try and do our best, and we will do it together."



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# St. Marys Legion to host second-annual Chili Cookoff

EMILY STEWART

Independent Reporter

The upcoming Chili Cookoff hosted by the Royal Canadian Legion – Perth Regiment Branch 236 will warm up St. Marys and area residents during a cold winter.

The Chili Cookoff will be held at the St. Marys Legion, 66 Church St. S, on Feb. 7 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Along with a variety of chilis to try made by local restaurants, service clubs and residents, the event will also feature some draws and a bar serving beer and soft drinks.

“Come on down, get out of the cold, get a nice warm bowl of chili and enjoy the fun,” said Legion member Colin Coburn.

There will be four prizes to be awarded by a judging panel for the winning chili by a restaurant, a service club like the Rotary Club and the Lions Club, an individual and recognizing the People’s Choice. The Legion will supply the spoons, napkins and sample cups, and participants are to bring two pots of chili plus their own chili toppings like cheese, onions and sour cream. Coburn was a participant in the successful first Chili Cookoff in 2025 and provided sriracha and tobacco hot sauce for guests to control their chili’s spiciness.

“There’s no rules on how mild it has to be or how spicy it has to be; that’s up to each individual participant,” he said. “Verbally, I’m tell-

ing them if you’re going to have very hot chilli, you should probably put a warning on it for the folks that don’t like spicy.”

Tickets are \$5 for three tickets and \$10 for eight. All proceeds will support the maintenance of the building and the bar staff, as well as Legion programming like free coffee and donuts for veterans. As part of the organization’s mandate, the Legion will donate 50 per cent of funds raised from events towards community initiatives like youth sports.

For more information about the Chili Cookoff, contact Coburn by emailing [coburncolin296@gmail.com](mailto:coburncolin296@gmail.com) or calling 519-275-2324.

# Celebrate local history at the St. Marys Heritage Fair

ST. MARYS INDEPENDENT

Staff Contribution

On Friday, Feb. 20, exhibitors will come together to share artifacts, collections and special projects that celebrate local history.

It’s all part of the St. Marys Heritage Fair, an annual event hosted by the St. Marys Museum, taking place at the Pyramid Recreation Centre from 7-9 p.m.

Celebrating its 30th year, the Heritage Fair provides an opportunity to catch up on developments in local history. A number of exhibitors will share their collections and special projects that inspire connections within the community.

Admission to the Heritage Fair is free, and all are welcome to attend. Those planning to watch the St. Marys Lincolns play Strathroy at 7:30 p.m. are encouraged to drop by the event before the puck drops or pay a visit during intermission.

Members of local organizations with a longstanding history in the community and people with unique collections of historic items are welcome to be exhibitors at the Heritage Fair. Those interested should contact the museum by Wednesday, Feb. 18 to register.

For information regarding this event, contact the St. Marys Museum at 519-284-3556 or [museum@town.stmarys.on.ca](mailto:museum@town.stmarys.on.ca).

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# Council presents \$100,000 donation to support St. Marys Memorial Hospital



(PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ST. MARYS HEALTHCARE FOUNDATION)

The Town of St. Marys recently donated \$100,000 to the St. Marys Healthcare Foundation in support of St. Marys Memorial Hospital. Of that total, \$25,000 has been designated toward the purchase of a new X-ray machine, bringing the campaign closer to its \$650,000 goal and helping ensure enhanced diagnostic care close to home. Pictured, from left to right: Mayor Al Strathdee, Councillor Jim Craigmile, Councillor Brogan Aylward, Councillor Dave Lucas, Councillor Fern Pridham, Councillor Marg Luna, Linda McFadyen, Wendy Lamond, Lynanne Mason, Pam Zabel, Brandon Boyd, Mark Kennedy, Bernice De Decker and Andrew Williams.

# Friendship Centre collecting craft-supply donations ahead of spring scrapbook sales

EMILY STEWART  
Independent Reporter

The St. Marys Friendship Centre is hoping a community request will inspire residents to sort through their belongings and donate scrapbooking and other crafting supplies.

The Friendship Centre is collecting donations of new and gently used crafting items for their upcoming spring scrapbooking garage sale fundraisers. Donations of notebooks, adult colouring books, markers, pens, pencils, self-care items, holiday basket items, birthday items and materials for cardmaking and scrapbooking will be accepted.

“We’re putting out that call to the community that if you do have any new or gently used scrapbooking or cardmaking or crafting supplies, we would love to have them and it’s a nice time of year if anyone is sort of doing post-holiday cleaning and organizing,” said Sarah Jones, senior services activity coordina-

tor with the Town of St. Marys.

Donations can be brought in until March 20 or 21, ahead of the next Spring Scrapbook Sale on March 28 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. There will also be another sale on April 11. The scrapbook sales usually have 50 or more vendor tables full of crafting supplies that can be purchased tax-free.

All proceeds from the fundraisers will support St. Marys senior services. The scrapbook fundraisers contribute towards the yearly fundraising goals, support programming and ensure costs stay low and accessible.

The popular events bring in plenty of out-of-towners.

“We get a lot of participants at our garage sale from far and wide. People are looking for deals on a fun day, so through our tracking and such, we’re pretty impressed by how far people come to shop and check things out,” Jones said.

For more information, call the Friendship Centre at 519-284-3272.




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# Province makes early changes to police board

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

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

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

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

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

"The board, under the stewardship of Steve Cousins, Martin Ritsma and Harjinder Nijjar, has been making significant gains for the service and the community," Skinner wrote. "In addition to enhancing efficiencies ... they have taken a critical look at the strategic direction of the service in compliance with new legislation and are in the process of creating a strategic plan focused on the future of policing prioritizing community engagement, they have taken significant steps to restructure the police service to contain costs and enhance frontline service delivery, and they have worked tirelessly on commissioning a new police HQ.

"I am confident the new board members will continue to focus on improving front-

line service delivery, containing costs and ensuring that the Stratford police provides a sustainable, high performing service to the residents and visitors to Stratford, St. Marys and Perth South."

Speaking with Grant Haven Media, Ritsma confirmed the news was a surprise to him, having only heard of the change on Jan. 14 after media reached out inquiring about it. He has yet to receive anything from the ministry officially but reached out to local MPP Matthew Rae about the move.

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

"... They recognize that their appointee of Steve Cousins was coming towards the end of his mandate, and like other individ-

uals across the province, they revoked that and moved forward on naming a new individual."

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

"We're going to have a full complement," Ritsma said. "The board will be filled out with Lisa Wilde, who is no stranger to the community, and we'll add such strength from her position with the Emily Murphy Centre. I know Travis Blum as well with regards to his commitment to the business community and beyond. You know, he's been involved with things like the chamber of commerce, so he will bring that strength. And of course, Dan's previous work with the police services board will be an asset as well."

Grant Haven Media attempted to reach Cousins for comment, though did not hear back in time for press.

## Stratford police services board names new chair, vice-chair

AMANDA NELSON

Independent Reporter

A busy start to the new year for the Stratford police services board included welcomes and affirmations for new appointees, followed by the election of a new chair and vice chair for 2026.

The meeting marked a period of transition for the board following the recent removal of former chair Steve Cousins as a member by the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

Newly appointed board members Lisa Wilde and Travis Blum formally affirmed their oaths of office, each committing to uphold the Canadian Constitution, recognize and respect Aboriginal and treaty rights, and maintain confidentiality in mat-

ters brought before the board.

The Stratford police services board is responsible for providing civilian oversight of local policing, including setting priorities, monitoring performance and ensuring the Stratford Police Service (SPS) operates in the best interest of the community.

Following the affirmations, an election was held for the position of chair. Mayor Martin Ritsma was nominated by former mayor Dan Matheson and elected unanimously.

Ritsma said he was humbled by the nomination to continue serving the community as chair.

"It's always humbling when you're selected by your peers to take on a role like this," Ritsma said. "It's an opportunity for me to continue the good work that we have

done in the last three years and that I have been part of as a police services board member.

"This position gives me a chance to represent our residents and continue to help keep them safe, whether they're in a place of work, driving a car or riding a bicycle to school. I'm pleased to be the chair promoting and recognizing the importance of safety in our community."

Coun. Harjinder Nijjar was then nominated by Ritsma and elected to serve as vice chair for the 2026 term.

Nijjar said he plans to continue moving forward with optimism and build on goals set out in the board's strategic plan.

"The board has been making strong progress in supporting both the police service and the community," he said. "I'm

going to encourage that we continue the collaborative approach we've taken so far. I'm focused on maintaining momentum and looking ahead.

"Our priority is to continue advancing the board's strategic plan with a clear focus on the future. This includes working closely with the service, improving frontline service delivery, identifying efficiencies to help manage costs and continuing important discussions around securing a new police station that meets our long-term needs within our own community.

"I'm very optimistic about the direction we're headed and committed to ensuring the board remains accountable and forward-thinking," he said.

## Stratford police report slight drop in calls, rise in charges for 2025

AMANDA NELSON

Independent Reporter

Stratford police saw a slight decrease in overall calls for service in 2025 compared to the previous year, according to a year-end report presented to the Stratford Police Service Board on Jan. 21.

Insp. Jason Clark presented the December 2025 statistics, reporting 1,423 calls for service in Stratford, 165 in St. Marys and 134 in Perth South. Total calls for the year reached 22,902, down from 23,388 in 2024.

Charges laid in December included 271 in Stratford, 37 in St. Marys and 16 in Perth South. A total of 6,456 charges were laid in 2025, up from 5,971 the year before.

"The increase in charges late in the year indicates proactive law-enforcement efforts," Clark said. "Our youth crime diversion suggests that we are successful in our intervention strategies."

Youth-crime diversion statistics showed 53 charges and 93 diversions in 2025. No hate crimes were reported in December.

Mental-health-related calls totalled 849 in 2025. The community resource unit had 15 contacts and attended six community events in December. Board members discussed improving statistical reporting and the potential creation of a public dashboard.

"The consistency in mental-health-related calls highlights the ongoing community need and the community resource unit's

engagement," Clark said. "I think it's reflective of our commitment to public engagement."

Police Chief Greg Skinner also presented the 2025 financial report, noting total expenditures of \$14.4 million, with a positive variance of \$1.54 million, or 10.4 per cent of the budget.

Salaries and benefits accounted for 88 per cent of total spending, with utilization rates of 94.35 per cent for full-time and 87.31 per cent for part-time positions. Long-term absences and overtime resulted in a 20 per cent overspend in other payroll expenses.

Skinner said the service plans to address staffing shortages through the use of special constables and auxiliary roles and is

continuing to develop succession planning.

He added training and conference costs have increased due to the relatively young demographic of the service.

"We have become a very young police service, with approximately 75 per cent of our frontline uniform staff having less than 10 years of service," Skinner said. "To support operations and investigative excellence, we will need to continue investing in training to ensure our members have the knowledge, skills and ability to meet legislative requirements."

Skinner also noted the service saved approximately \$25,000 in fuel and \$25,000 in vehicle repairs due to the introduction of a hybrid fleet.

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# Survivor to run half marathon to support Optimism Place and raise awareness of intimate partner violence

AMANDA NELSON

Independent Reporter

On the morning of Feb. 14, 2026, Sydney Touzel will lace up her running shoes and begin a 21-kilometre run from Little Falls Elementary School in St. Marys to Optimism Place in Stratford.

Touzel's run will begin at 9 a.m. and is expected to end at Optimism Place around 11 a.m. The route is symbolic; it starts at the same school where, six years earlier, Touzel was nearly killed by her former partner.

On Feb. 12, 2020, Touzel dropped her son off at Little Falls Elementary as she did every day. After she returned to her car, her ex-boyfriend opened the door, and with a knife in his hand, told her he was going to kill her.

"Next thing I knew, I was lying across the front seat of my car, fighting him," Touzel said. "I was screaming, doing everything I could to get him off of me, and then I ended up getting the knife away from him and getting out the passenger door."

"I didn't know where my son was. I didn't know if he was inside," she said. "All I could think about in that moment was, don't let him take my son."

Touzel survived the attack and has since physically and emotionally recovered, but she says the experience — and the years of abuse leading up to it — continue to shape her life and purpose.

"The relationship I was in was not a healthy one at all, and I felt isolated with where I was in that relationship and didn't really know what resources were available to me," she said. "I'm hoping, by doing this run, it brings awareness to Optimism Place — what they do, the programs that they have and how they can help women and children."

Touzel said the abuse followed a familiar cycle.

"They say you leave eight times before you actually leave for good," she said. "That was me. I tried to leave, I got scared,

I came back and he was very good at the abuse cycle. He would hurt me, give me a gift, everything's fine for a while, hurt me, give me a gift. So, I was living that cycle and I honestly thought I had no way out."

She described feeling completely cut off from her support system.

"I just remember how isolated I felt when I was in the relationship," she said. "My parents didn't know, my friends didn't know and I felt very, very isolated and alone. And when you've been in a situation like that for multiple years, you kind of become a shell of yourself."

Touzel said she was so conditioned that she stopped questioning reality.

"I always kind of joke that he had me so conditioned that if he had told me the sky was green, I would have just said, 'Yes, you're right,' because it was easier than fighting back."

The court process that followed the attack was long and exhausting, but Touzel said one moment stands out.

"The judge looked me right in the eyes and said, 'What you've been through is being recognized today, and I'm making an example of what needs to happen in the future for domestic violence victims,'" she said. "And I never felt more seen and heard than I did that day."

Touzel said while the stabbing left physical scars, the emotional damage from years of abuse was just as profound.

"Being stabbed sounds horrendous, and yes, I have scars and I'm affected, but I'm also affected from the three years I was with him before that," she said. "I want to be a reassurance for women who are going through this that it's going to be the most gruelling process you'll ever go through, but it's so worth it in the end."

The idea for the fundraising run came to her unexpectedly.

"I've always felt like I wanted to do something to bring awareness to domestic violence," she said. "I just wasn't really sure how I could do it. And then I was hon-

estly just sitting at work in my office one day, thinking about it, and I thought, what if I did a fundraising run and I could end it at Optimism Place?"

Though Touzel did not personally use Optimism Place's services, she said the shelter has deep personal meaning.

"When I was a baby, my mom used their resources," she said. "So, raising donations for a space like this was special, knowing that my mother had been through something similar and was able to seek help there."

Touzel, a longtime fitness enthusiast, said the run itself has been a challenge.

"I'm a big fitness enthusiast; I do CrossFit, I've worked out for years, I even used to be a personal trainer, but running was never really my thing," she said. "This past summer, I couldn't even make it five kilometres, but I've been training for this. It's been a little bit of a journey."

So far, Touzel has raised more than \$2,000. Supporters can donate per kilometre or make a one-time contribution with all proceeds supporting Optimism Place Women's Shelter and Support Services in Perth County.

In addition to financial donations, Touzel is also collecting hygiene items, including tampons, at both the start and finish of her run. A truck will follow her route to collect donations along the way.

"What Sydney is doing is not only empowering to other women who are experiencing abuse, but it's an example to our whole community that we can all do something to end violence against women," said Donna Jean Forster, executive director of Optimism Place.

For Touzel, the run is also about the future — particularly the one she is building with her son.

"It gives me hope that I'm raising a son who is everything that Derek wasn't," she said. "I'm teaching him how to respect people of every colour, race and gender and teaching him that violence is absolute-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Sydney Touzel will lace up her running shoes and begin a 21-kilometre run from Little Falls Elementary School in St. Marys to Optimism Place in Stratford to help raise funds for domestic violence support

ly never an answer for anything."

She hopes her story encourages other women to trust themselves and seek help.

"Listen to your gut. The second you feel like someone is trying to make a decision for you, you're right, you need to get out," she said. "The one thing that I kept telling myself over and over is that he's changed; they are not going to change, they never do. Get out before you end up fighting for your life or losing it."

Donations can be made online at [give-can.keela.co/rise-and-run](http://give-can.keela.co/rise-and-run) or dropped off in person at Optimism Place, marked to support Sydney's Rise and Run.

## Straight from the Shelves

LAURA MCASH

St. Marys Public Library

Feel the love with our next Make and Take craft! Come to the Library on Wednesday, February 4 at 6 p.m. to create a fabric heart! Make it for yourself, a loved one, or just because. To register for this program, please visit the following link: [tinyurl.com/HEART-FELT](http://tinyurl.com/HEART-FELT). Alternatively, you can check out the Community Calendar on the Town website to find the link. We recommend that participants donate \$10 on the night of the program if they are able. Please note that this program is for patrons 18 and over, and that children are not permitted to attend.

### Up This Week

Fri., Jan. 30: Open 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Sat., Jan. 31: Open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Mon., Feb. 2: Learn to Play Bridge (1:30-3 p.m.)

Tues., Feb. 3: Open 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Wed., Feb. 4: EarlyON Play & Read (9:30-10:30 a.m.), Mahjong (1-4 p.m.), Make & Take – "Heart Felt" Craft\* (6 p.m.)

Thurs., Feb. 5: Open 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.

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# Harold Douglas honoured with a special award at St. James-Tecumseh Lodge No.73 monthly meeting

WENDY LAMOND

Independent Reporter

I was very honoured to watch as the St. James-Tecumseh Masonic Lodge No. 73 honoured my father, Harold Douglas, with a certificate of achievement for outstanding contributions to the community and making a positive impact through interactions with people of many diverse backgrounds.

Huron District Deputy Grand Master Jamie McFadden and Worshipful Master

Clint Mock presented Douglas with the award. McFadden thanked him for all the work he does for the lodge, for their fundraising dinners and time spent helping to make the lodge a better place.

Douglas thanked the club for the award and accepted it on their behalf as well for their fellowship and teamwork.

With fellow Masons and some family in attendance, Douglas was recognized with a certificate and book celebrating his achievements. Congratulations!



(WENDY LAMOND PHOTO)

Huron District Deputy Grand Master Jamie McFadden, Mason Harold Douglas and Worshipful Master Clint Mock at their monthly meeting where Douglas was presented with a special award honouring his hard work with the St. James-Tecumseh Masonic Lodge No. 73.

# Town of St. Marys launches community video series highlighting attainable housing solutions

ST. MARYS INDEPENDENT

Staff Contribution

The Town of St. Marys has launched a new video series that puts real people and real housing solutions at the centre of an important community conversation.

The series features local residents, builders and developers sharing their experiences and perspectives on attainable housing and how thoughtful planning can support a growing and inclusive community.

Through personal stories and practical examples, the videos explore a range of housing options already taking shape in St. Marys. Viewers will learn how creative solutions such as accessory dwelling units, multigenerational living, flexible home design, infill development and long-term community focused building can help address housing needs at different stages of life.

The series also highlights the role the town plays in supporting these initiatives by working collaboratively with homeowners, builders and developers to remove barriers and encourage innovative housing approaches.

The video series connects directly to the Town of St. Marys Attainable Housing Action Plan, known as Opening Doors, which demonstrates the town's commitment to increasing housing supply and choice. De-

veloped by a housing expert and shaped through consultation with developers, builders and community members, the plan was approved by council and sets a clear vision for the future of housing in St. Marys.

Opening Doors establishes a goal of creating 200 new rental units in the community by 2027, with 30 of those units falling into the attainable housing category. The plan identifies four key focus areas that guide action and progress. These include policies, programs and incentives, land, and an implementation team dedicated to advancing housing initiatives.

Together, the video series and the Opening Doors plan show how St. Marys is taking a proactive, balanced approach to housing by listening to the community, encouraging innovation and using every available tool to support sustainable growth.

Residents are encouraged to watch the video series and learn more about how attainable housing is shaping the future of St. Marys on the Town of St. Marys YouTube channel.

To learn more, get updates, or ask questions, reach out to Grant Brouwer, St. Marys director of building and development, at gbrouwer@town.stmarys.on.ca or visit the Town of St. Marys Attainable Housing Action Plan webpage at www.townofstmarys.com/housing.

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# St. Marys Independent **SPORTS**

## Colquhoun shines in return as Lincs blank Siskins

SPENCER SEYMOUR

*Independent Sports Reporter*

It's one thing to look good in your return to action after missing three weeks with an injury.

It's another to look like you never missed a game.

On Jan. 23, Brogan Colquhoun made it seem as if Jan. 3, his last appearance in the St. Marys Lincolns' crease, was but a moment ago, rather than almost a month between games, as he turned in a 31-save shutout in the Lincolns' 1-0 victory over the Waterloo Siskins.

Head coach Jeff Bradley told the Independent Colquhoun was the biggest reason the Lincolns came away with their 13th consecutive win.

"The star was definitely Brogan (Colquhoun) for sure," said Bradley. "I'm happy for him, but it's not much of a surprise. It gives you a certain level of confidence for sure, and not only that, I'm sure it gives the guys in front of him a little bit of guilt when they're not playing well, not that we played poorly against Waterloo, but it's nice to know that you're going to be safe back there. When you have to step it up a notch and you see your goalie's doing everything he can to keep you in the game, you start playing a little guilty, which can be good."

Bradley added he was pleased with how his team battled back after a feisty opening frame from the visiting Siskins.

"I was really happy with how we played. I certainly think we competed hard. We were better with the puck. We were really good defensively. It's always nice to get a shutout. I thought we rebounded really well after the first. Although they did put up a lot of shots, there weren't many that were dangerous. We were keeping them to the outside.

"It's not that we got pushed around in



(TURNER ROTH PHOTO)

**Brogan Colquhoun prepares to lead the St. Marys Lincolns out of the dressing room. Colquhoun backstopped the Lincolns to a 1-0 win in a 31-save shutout on Jan. 23 against the Waterloo Siskins.**

the first, but Waterloo definitely came in trying to put us on our heels a bit," Bradley continued. "But, in the second and third periods, we were definitely the aggressors, and we had some huge hits. I think that built some momentum for us, and they unravelled a little bit."

Waterloo outshot St. Marys 17-9 in the opening 20 minutes, but the Lincolns took control of the shot clock in the second, outshooting the Siskins 12-7 in the middle stanza. It was in the second period that Jack Clarke finally found the game's first goal, which also ended up being the last, when he whacked a bouncing past goaltender Brock Grein. Blake Elzinga and Declan Ready picked up the helpers.

Clarke, along with Chase McDougall and Devun Colebrook, were praised for their impact on the game.

"I think that's a game where guys like Jack (Clarke), Chase (McDougall) and Devun (Colebrook) up front specifically could really turn the game in our favour," Bradley said. "They compete and they're not scared at all. They are heart-and-soul guys, tip-of-the-spear type of guys. We really wish we could have had these guys last year, and we had Chase as a 16 year old, but he's reached a better comfort level with more experience in the league. So, being able to have those three, they're a huge part of our identity."

Bradley also had high praise for three members of the Lincolns' blueline – Cam Kean, Luke McMillan and James MacGregor.

"Cam (Kean), Luke (McMillan) and James (MacGregor) were unbelievable for us," Bradley said. "You look at Luke, he

dislocates his finger halfway through the game, misses one shift, gets it put back into place and finishes the game. He's a warrior. All three of those guys are warriors. We need warriors like that, and thankfully, we have those in spades. Luke and James may not always jump off the page, but I haven't seen rookies play like that on the back end for us since I've been here, and I can't think of seeing it when I was coaching in London either.

"And then with Cam, he can do it all. He does whatever he can to help us win. We're on the ice almost every day, but that's not enough for him, and he's at the gym every day as well. Cam is a beast. There's a poise and maturity with Cam that reminds me of Adam Barkley. They are different players, but they can both control the game, and there's no panic at all. Having a veteran guy like that who looks like a 30-year-old man amongst kids is certainly a luxury."

Though viewed largely as a positive, the Lincolns continue to see some struggles on the powerplay, which the bench boss emphasized as a part of the team's game they need to get back in order.

"Whether it's one unit or the other, they play the same system. It's just a matter of if they're willing to execute it or not. In the game against Strathroy (on Jan. 17), we scored three goals on the powerplay, and I think the difference between that game and this game against Waterloo was our willingness to execute, and we didn't show that against Waterloo at all.

"We had a game plan," Bradley added. "We had a meeting before the game about our breakouts, faceoffs and in-zone, and we didn't execute any of it. It was uncharacteristic for us in that guys who don't typically try to do their own thing were trying to do their own thing. The five-on-three was a good example of that where we were basically just playing shinny, and it wasn't effective whatsoever."

## Minor Hockey teams Rock the Rink at Lincolns' game



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS)

Pictured on the left are members of the Nicholson Concrete U11 LL Boys Blue St. Marys Rock. On the right are members of the Cascades U13 BB Girls St. Marys Rock and Dunny's Source For Sports U10 A Boys St. Marys Rock. The minor hockey teams were some of the representatives of St. Marys Minor Hockey in attendance at the St. Marys Lincolns' annual Rock The Rink night on Jan. 23.

# U13 LL Boys Blue capture Stonetown Classic silver

SPENCER SEYMOUR

Independent Sports Reporter

The U13 LL Boys Blue St. Marys Rock took the silver medals at the Stonetown Classic tournament held in St. Marys Jan. 15-18.

Head coach Eric Sampson told the Independent his squad displayed an incredible cohesiveness and determination to win on home ice.

“The team really gelled together during this tournament,” said Sampson. “They were driven to show the hometown spirit by making everyone proud in such a deep run in the Stonetown Classic. There is nothing like heading to the finals to make your hometown proud. From a coach’s standpoint, when a team truly gels together and plays for each other, there aren’t many better feelings, in my opinion. Smiles were abundant all weekend, and that’s really what hockey is truly about.”

The Rock finished atop their pool after the three-game round-robin with two wins and a tie, setting them up for a semi-final clash against the Schomberg Red Wings. Sampson noted the team’s ability to blow by their defenders on the rush kept Schomberg agitated throughout the semi-final.

“Schomberg is a big team with a big goalie who covered a lot of the net,” Sampson said. “We fired the boys up in the dressing room, playing ‘Thunderstruck’ by AC/DC, and pushed them to come out strong like Midland did against us in the previous game, which also ended as a 3-3 tie. Schomberg was visibly frustrated as we kept using our speed to beat their defence wide like we had planned in our pre-game conversations.”

Sampson added there were several key



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

The Easy Lift Doors U13 LL Boys St. Marys Rock earned the silver medal at the Stonetown Classic tournament Jan. 15-18. Pictured in the first row, from left to right, are Theo Shute, Daxton Thistle, Cole Devries, Harvey Terpstra, Talon Sampson, Jonathon Muhtar, Tristan Fraser and Franklin Anderson laying in front. In the back row, from left, are assistant coach Gavin Anderson, trainer Drew Corneil, Oscar Brown, Kyle McKichan, Owen Corneil, Hudson Terpstra, Sheamus Ross, Brayden Rumble, Clark Monteith, assistant coach Harry Devries and head coach Eric Sampson.

performers to help the Rock come away with a 5-2 victory in the semis and earn a spot in the championship game.

“Clark (Monteith) led the way with a natural hat-trick in the first 20 minutes of the game. We gave specific tasks to our wingers to stand in the tough spots out front of the net. Kyle (McKichan), Owen (Corniel) and Talon (Sampson) braved the net-front presence and took a beating from Schomberg’s big defensive core. It was clear their big goalie wasn’t a fan right from the start, which enabled many rebounds and the added goals that followed by second efforts from Tristan (Fraser) and Sheamus (Ross) to put the nail in the coffin.”

Monteith scored his first of three straight goals just 14 seconds into the semis, scoring again a little over two-and-a-half minutes later, and then completing the natural hat-trick late in the second frame. Daxton Thistle and Oscar Brown assisted on Monteith’s third goal.

Fraser scored just 18 seconds into

the third, assisted by Monteith, before Sheamus Ross one-timed home another insurance marker from a set play off the faceoff, with the assist going to Talon Sampson.

Against a high-powered Midland team in the gold-medal game, Franklin Anderson was the backbone in between the pipes, leading the Rock in an underdog battle, which saw the game tied at one apiece late in the third and St. Marys having several chances to score that just barely stayed out of the net. Midland eventually found the game-winner in overtime, giving the Rock the silver medal.

However, Eric Sampson noted there was nothing to be ashamed of for the Rock.

“Midland was the team to beat right from the start of the tournament. They had several strong wins and 18 goals in three games played. We knew we would have to play a tight game defensively and rely on our goalie, Franklin (Anderson), to stand on his head, which he did all game. They had 30-plus shots on goal with many

scrambles out front of our net, one of which Hudson (Terpstra) had dug a puck off the goal line.

“The heart that all our boys showcased, coupled with the tenacity of our defense-men, really showed through,” added Eric Sampson. “Oscar (Brown), Jon (Muhtar), Cole (De Vries), Brayden Rumble and Hudson all proudly showed bruises from blocked shots after the game. Our forwards answered the coaches’ requests to backcheck harder than they ever had. Daxton (Thistle), Harvey (Terpstra) and Tristan (Fraser) showed wheels like never seen before by adding key-timed poke checks whilst backchecking during several of Midland’s rushes. Midland was great at finding open ice, but we managed to keep them to one goal headed into overtime.”

Eric Sampson credited his players’ resilience, saying he hopes the team gains a big confidence boost from their tournament result.

“They know they can play with the top teams. If they’re up against a tough opponent, they’ll come alive. We’ve aptly been nicknamed the ‘giant killers.’ There seems to be a deep-rooted drive within all of them, almost like they hate losing more than they like winning. They do their own research online these days with regards to how they compare to the team we are playing against, and if they find out the other team looks better on paper, they amp up and tell each other to ‘lock in.’ It’s a beautiful thing to watch from a coach’s perspective.”

Eric Sampson also stated the tournament being on home ice made the experience more special for the group.

“You could see the pride on all of their faces,” Eric Sampson said. “They did it for each other, they did it for the pride of the town and they did it to show what they’re all capable of. They share a competitive joy of being a team, and they share heart, pride and perseverance.”



## RAFFLE DRAW RESULTS

*Winners*  
(LICENSE #868850)

**TICKET # - PRIZE - NAME**

317	EARLY BIRD - \$1,000 - ROB BELL
275	1ST TICKET - \$200 - CATHY FORSTER
104	2ND TICKET - \$200 - GLORIA STRATHDEE
70	3RD TICKET - \$200 - ROY READY
470	4TH TICKET - \$200 - AMANDA PAYTON
245	5TH TICKET - \$200 - KEVIN STEPHENS
88	6TH TICKET - \$500 - MARK ARMSTRONG
438	7TH TICKET - \$500 - KEVIN BRADLEY
180	8TH TICKET - \$500 - JOANNE WINCHESTER
335	9TH TICKET - \$1,000 - ING GERIS
236	10TH TICKET - \$1,000 - MIKE ROCK
458	11TH TICKET - \$15,000 - JIM & ALLIE HOLLIDAY

*Congrats!*



# STATS AND STANDINGS

**St. Marys Lincolns Player Stats**  
(as of Jan. 27, 2026)

Player	Pos	GP	G	A	PTS
Ryan Hodkinson	F	33	13	38	51
Lincoln Moore	F	32	18	22	40
Chase MacQueen-Spence	F	34	15	23	38
Owen Voortman	F	35	11	24	35
Blake Elzinga	F	35	10	17	27
Ethan Weir	F	33	14	12	26
Owen Kalp	D	35	6	17	23
Declan Ready	F	35	9	13	22
Jack Clarke	F	26	9	9	18
Devun Colebrook	F	34	11	4	15
Oliver Lacko	F	17	6	9	15
Callum McAuley	F	10	7	5	12
Chase McDougall	F	34	3	8	11
James MacGregor	D	33	3	7	10
Jacob Montes	D	27	1	6	7
Luke McMillan	D	32	1	6	7
Jakob Drobny	D	25	0	6	6
Cam Kean	D	16	2	2	4
Pearse Huey	D	3	1	0	1

**GOHL Western Conference Standings**  
(as of Jan. 27, 2026)

Team	W	L	OTL	SOL	PTS	GF	GA
Chatham Maroons	26	8	2	3	57	180	123
Elmira Sugar Kings	27	6	2	0	56	162	88
<b>St. Marys Lincolns</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>77</b>
London Nationals	25	11	1	0	51	168	117
Stratford Warriors	23	7	2	2	50	136	92
St. Thomas Stars	18	16	2	1	39	142	141
LaSalle Vipers	18	18	3	0	39	136	147
Waterloo Siskins	16	14	4	2	38	114	107
Strathroy Rockets	17	17	2	0	36	138	138
Listowel Cyclones	15	19	1	1	32	103	117
Komoka Kings	13	22	2	1	29	127	157
Sarnia Legionnaires	0	37	0	0	0	61	248

Goalies	Record	GAA	SV-%
Brogan Colquhoun	15-4-1-0	1.97	0.936
Vaughn Barr	10-2-1-0	2.16	0.923
Colby Booth-Housego	2-0-0-0	3.50	0.877

# U18 LL Boys take silver at Stonetown Classic

SPENCER SEYMOUR

Independent Sports Reporter

The St. Marys GMC U18 LL Boys St. Marys Rock earned the silver medal at the Jan. 15-18 Stonetown Classic tournament in St. Marys.

Head coach Joe Robson said the team made significant strides with each passing game.

“Our team felt like the underdog, particularly in the last three games,” said Robson. “Despite this, the boys showed significant improvements with each game, gaining confidence and playing more cohesively. They were making cleaner passes across the ice, opening up the rushing lanes, keeping the opposition to the outside of our defensive zone and generating better-quality scoring chances in the offensive zone.”

The Rock ended up second in their pool despite finishing with three losses in their three-game round-robin, but in the semi-final against the Strathroy Junior Rockets, the Rock was able to grind out a 2-1 victory to punch their ticket to the gold-medal game. St. Marys outshot Strathroy 34-20, and both of the Rock’s goals came early in the third, first off the stick of Peyton Wynands, followed by a goal from Will Jacobs.



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

The St. Marys GMC U18 LL Boys St. Marys Rock claimed the silver medal at the Stonetown Classic tournament Jan. 15-18 in St. Marys. Pictured in the front row, from left to right, are Malaika Kibedi, Chase Jeffrey, Aiden De Vries, Adam Peachey, Will Jacobs, Rowan Pickel and Carter Innes. In the back row, from left, are head coach Joe Robson, assistant coach Shawn Oke, Connor McKichan, Brayden Barclay, Dylan Chateauvert, Tristan McIntosh, Peyton Wynands, Ben Robson, Logan Oke, Mac Hern, Gibson Agar, trainer Harry De Vries and assistant coach Dan McIntosh.

According to Robson, the team’s lockdown defence led them to win the semi-final.

“This win was a thrilling moment, and the excitement was contagious. Having played Strathroy in our first regular-season game, which resulted in a tie, we knew we could play with them. There was some intimidation when looking at their earlier games in the tournament, as they had some solid wins, particularly against Mitch-

ell, who has a very strong team. We had grown significantly as a team since that first meeting, so we went into it fresh and ready to play.

“We kept level heads and kept our game clean, allowing Strathroy to generate the majority of the game’s penalties,” Robson continued. “Our defensive play was very strong. We weren’t allowing their players or passes anywhere near the net. Almost all of their shots were from out-

side of the ringette line, and our guys were exceptionally good at repeatedly blocking their shots and taking control of the puck. Carter (Innes) played an incredible game, allowing only one goal on 20 shots. The Strathroy players were visibly frustrated.”

Robson added the team executed well on the key aspects of the game they had been working on going into the weekend, their special teams and their defensive structure.

“Going into the tournament, we had been working extensively on penalty kills and powerplays, and blocking the shooting lane in the defensive zone. This paid off significantly, particularly in our semi-final and final games. We look forward to continuing to build on this for the remainder of our season.”

Though the Rock couldn’t find another upset win in the championship contest against Ingersoll, Robson explained the value he hopes advancing to the final game of the tournament offers the group going forward.

“There is a great deal of pride making it to the finals in a hometown tournament in front of a large hometown crowd,” Robson told the Independent. “We are very proud of the solid effort these boys put forward and can’t wait to see how they perform going forward.”

# St. Marys bowlers compete in YBO Triples Tournament



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

On Jan. 18, nine youth bowlers from St. Marys travelled to Echo Bowl in Brantford for the YBO Triple Tournament. The tournament was a three-game, pins-over-average format, and teams were made up of a senior, junior, and bantam bowler. Pictured on the left, from left to right, are coach Scott Louwagie, Felix Louwagie, Aisla Fisher, and Nathan McKeen, who made up the mixed team from St. Marys. The mixed team placed fourth with 202 pins over average, and will head to Provincials at Neb’s Fun World in Oshawa on May 31. The girls team, comprising, as pictured in the middle from left, Natalie McKeen, coach Michelle McKeen, Amanada Kittmer, and Rory Brockman, took eighth place with 149 points over average. Along with Michelle, the team was also coached by Melissa Kittmer. Pictured on the right is the boys team, who are, from left, Asher Gregory, Nate Sims, coach Shawna Sims, and Landon Ball. The boys team finished in ninth place with 90 pins over average. Gregory bowled his first-ever turkey and an all-time high score of 181.

# St. Marys hosts men’s doubles tournament



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

The St. Marys Bowling Lanes hosted the Men’s High-Low Doubles Tournament on Jan. 16. The format was three games and combined pins over average. First place and a \$300 prize went to Mike Gregory and Bill Zufelt, pictured on the left from left to right, with 116 points over average. Pictured in the middle, from left, are Kyle Kosluk and Jesse Brockman, who won the \$200 second-place prize after scoring 74 points over average. Third place and \$100 went to Gerry Brockman and Peter Brinley, pictured on the right from left, with 54 points over average.

# MINOR SPORTS **SCRAPBOOK**



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

Nathan Campbell launches the puck towards the net during the Finnbilt Construction U9 MD Boys St. Marys Rock game last Saturday.



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

Joey Bilyea fires a shot through traffic during last Saturday's St. Marys Kinsmen U9 C Girls St. Marys Rock game.



(TURNER ROTH PHOTO)

Landon McIntosh rockets a shot from the point during the Dunny's Source For Sports U10 A Boys St. Marys Rock game last Wednesday.



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

Liam Barker releases a long-range shot during last Thursday's Frayne's Custom Cabinets U14 A Boys St. Marys Rock game.



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

James Holliday blasts a slap-shot on target during the Armstrong Motors U15 LL Boys St. Marys Rock game last Thursday.



(SPENCER SEYMOUR PHOTO)

Charlotte Holliday slides the ring on goal during this past Sunday's Cherry Hill Carpentry-McKinley Hatchery FUN3 St. Marys Snipers game.

# COLUMNS

## UKRAINIAN CORNER: The January awakening – breaking the freeze with fresh starts

ALONA VASYLIEVA

*Independent Columnist*

It's still January in St. Marys. Outside, the world looks like a black-and-white movie with the "freeze" button stuck. Most people are currently bonded to their couches by a thick layer of blankets and seasonal despair. But most Ukrainian newcomers in St. Marys have apparently decided that "hibernation" is a suggestion they choose to ignore.

While the town looks like a giant, frozen postcard where nothing is happening, behind closed doors, there is a flurry of tattoos, eyelashes, borsch-related blueprints and people trying to stand on their heads.

If you've wandered downtown lately, you might have noticed a spark of life that isn't just a snowplow.

First up, the local legend of ink, Val, has officially moved his tattoo studio into a freshly renovated space. If you've been looking for a sign to finally get that sleeve started, this is it – it's much easier to hide a healing tattoo under three layers of wool sweaters anyway.

But the beauty boom doesn't stop at ink. Val's spouse, Ira, and her friend, Nadia, have recently conquered the world of eyelash extensions. They are currently in that magical "certified but craving experience"

phase, which is fantastic news for our local eyes. They are offering sessions for free to gain experience – giving the women of St. Marys a golden opportunity to look like they've had 10 hours of sleep, even if they've had three.

I recently got a "behind-the-velvet-rope" preview of the future home of a brand-new Ukrainian-European restaurant.

Kolia and Tania Romaniuk are currently elbow-deep in renovations, pouring their hearts into this family-owned venture. This isn't just a place to eat; it's a meticulously planned sanctuary. Whether you need a place for a productive lunch meeting or a spot to eat your weight in traditional dishes with friends, the Romaniuks have you covered.

They are aiming for a spring opening, which gives us just enough time to burn off our holiday calories before we replace them with authentic Ukrainian hospitality.

January is my birthday month, which I treat like a personal "software update." While the snow falls, I've decided to fight the winter blues with a cocktail of neuroscience and discipline.

Did you know that just planning a goal releases dopamine? My brain is currently throwing a party because I've committed to two very specific, very difficult goals:

mastering a handstand and learning French.

Why French? Well, in an unstable world, being multilingual is like having a secret escape hatch. English is great, but as it turns out, there aren't many countries in Europe where it's the first language. Plus, if I ever end up in a fancy Parisian café, I'd like to be able to order something other than "water."

Why the handstand? Because if the world is going to be chaotic, I might as well learn how to see it from a different perspective. If I can't control the global political climate or the snowdrifts in my driveway, I can at least control whether or not I'm upside down.

These aren't "quick fix" goals; they are about consistency. It's about having a "win" inside the house while the weather outside is a total "loss."

I've noticed a hilarious cultural divide: Canadians love a basement gym, while Ukrainians tend to have a gym membership.

Ten years ago, when I was a flight attendant in Ukraine, I was a gym member devotee. I had the membership, the cute outfit and – to be honest – zero idea what I was doing. Back then, the gym was a sacrifice you made for "big city living."

Fast forward to today and I've been offi-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

**Ukrainian newcomers are turning a chilly January into a season of productivity and growth.**

cially "Canadian-ized." I am now a proud member of the Home Fitness Club. My morning routine starts at 5 a.m., my "magical time" of serenity and strength. While the rest of St. Marys is dreaming of summer, I'm in my basement working on my French and my handstands, proving that winter only wins if you let it.

## SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO OUTDOORS: What's going on with Great Lakes water levels?



JEFF HELSDON

*Independent Columnist*

What happened to all the water?

That's the big question from anyone who spends much time on the Great Lakes, including boaters, anglers, waterfowl hunters and kayakers. In short, the Great Lakes have fallen dramatically from record-high levels only six years ago.

Lake levels are a combination of local precipitation and water coming from other lakes. In the case of Lake Erie, this means water feeds it from Lakes Superior, Huron and Michigan. Looking in more detail, Erie's water levels are determined 21 per cent by local precipitation and runoff, and 79 per cent from water fed from the upper lakes. Moving to Lake

Ontario, these numbers slide to 15 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively. This means the levels of the lower lakes are influenced by those of the upper lakes.

Frank Seglenieks, a water resources engineer with the National Hydrological Service, reported all five of the Great Lakes are below average when he was interviewed in November. He noted the upper lakes, Superior and Huron-Michigan, are much lower than lakes Erie and Ontario. Seglenieks explained that a drought encompassing the American Midwest was hitting the western Great Lakes.

The current levels are the lowest since 2013 and are nothing out of the ordinary.

"When you look back at the history, going back 100 years, it's been lower," he said. "It's not like they are historically low or anything."

Since Seglenieks said that, lake levels continued to decline in December. Predictions, based on ranges that cover extremely wet and extremely dry years, show Lake Huron staying below average across all scenarios. With Lake Erie, extremely wet condi-

tions could raise the lake slightly above the long-term average, but most scenarios for the next few months keep Erie below average.

At Long Point, the lower water is clearly visible. Water levels on the sea walls in the marinas tell a tale of where the water is and has been, and are three feet below the high-water marks from a few years ago. At the Long Point Waterfowl Unit, staff told hunters they would need a mud motor to access many blinds due to low water.

Angie Woodward of Marina Shores said she has never seen the levels this low. This is something marina owners need to keep an eye on as erosion increases when the water levels are low and closer to the bottom of the sea wall.

Although the numbers show the level was lower in the last 20 years, Woodward said that could have happened for a short time, but not for such a long period.

Glen Rohrer of Tillsonburg, who owns Coletta Bay Guides and has hunted Long Point Bay since 1989, also hasn't seen levels this low. He hunts several different places on Long Point Bay and said he couldn't reach two or

three of his spots this fall.

"Back in the mid- to early 1990s, the water was low, but not as low as it is right now," he said, adding his log showed the low water in the 1990s lasted a couple of years.

Seglenieks said siltation or wind could be impacting shallow bays such as Long Point beyond the broader lake levels.

With water levels dropping quickly through the fall in many years, many swear there is some control over Lake Erie's water levels, but this is not the case.

"There is no control of the majority of the flow out of Lake Erie; most of it goes over Niagara Falls," Seglenieks said, adding the Welland Canal is emptied each year after Jan. 1 for maintenance. "This has a negligible impact on the water levels of Lake Erie. There is also some flow of the Niagara River that is diverted to be used in hydroelectric plants, but this water is released back to the river a few hours later. So, the overall daily outflow from Lake Erie is not affected by this diversion."

Having written stories about water levels for more than two

decades, I can recall the days of lower water levels as well. In the last low-water spell, Lake Erie fared better, and Lake Huron-Michigan (the lakes have the same level as they are joined in the Straits of Mackinac) was the lowest. Looking back in my files, I wrote this in 2015:

"Levels in Lake Huron and Michigan have been below average since December 1998. The level was low enough that docks were left high and dry, wetlands dried up and cottagers were clamoring for an investigation into what caused the levels to dive. The lowest point was in January 2013, when the level was 73 centimetres below average."

I also recall cottager's associations on Lake Huron were calling for measures to slow the water in the St. Clair River with the hope it would bring the water levels back up. That changed less than five years later as record highs were seen.

What the near future holds is uncertain, but water levels will rise as part of an endless cycle.

# HISTORIC ST. MARYS: Mortgaging the homestead

MARY SMITH

*Independent Columnist*

In 1967, Dr. William S. A. Dale, was appointed head of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Western Ontario. Dr. Dale had been born in Toronto. His degrees were from the University of Toronto and Harvard. He had worked in the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Vancouver Art Gallery. When Dr. Dale accepted a position as a professor and founding Chair of the Fine Arts (Visual Arts) Department at Western, he and his wife, Jane, moved to London. During their free time, they drove around the countryside, visiting communities near the city to learn more about this part of Ontario.

Their explorations took them to St. Marys and to the town's community museum. The St. Marys Museum had been founded in the early 1950s by the local branch of the Women's Institute. The WI had formed a museum committee to preserve local history by collecting artifacts from local families, businesses and institutions. The committee members housed their growing collection in part of the old Tracy House in Cadzow Park. While the south half of the house was rented as an apartment, the rooms in the north part, including the original dining room, kitchen and some upstairs bedrooms, were used to exhibit the collection. The largest was the dining room. By the 1960s, it was full of donated items: two sofas, chairs, tables, knick-knack shelves, a chest of drawers, a writing desk, a large piano, china dishes, figurines, decorative glassware, and antique parlour clocks. The walls were covered with pictures. Some featured Queen Victoria and members of her family. Other framed prints had once hung in local homes but had been discarded as too old-fashioned. There were a few original oils and watercolours by long-ago amateur artists from the area.

The Dales would have been greeted by a volunteer at the front door and invited to look around. As an art historian, Dr. Dale examined the hanging pictures. His eye was drawn to one painting in particular. This one was not the work of a local amateur. The signature in the bottom lefthand corner read: "G. A. Reid 1890." Dr. Dale recognized it immediately as a preliminary sketch for Canadian artist George Agnew Reid's much larger, famous work, *Mortgaging the Homestead*, owned by the National Gallery of Canada. How had his sketch found its way to the St. Marys Museum?

George Agnew Reid was born in 1860 in Wawanosh Township, Huron County, on a farm just west of Wingham. His parents, Adam Reid and Eliza Agnew, had both been born in Ireland and had come to Canada with their parents. George was the fourth of their eleven children – four sons and seven daughters. As a boy, he showed an early talent for drawing and wanted to study art. His father, however, believed



(PHOTO COURTESY THE GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO ART COLLECTION)

**George Agnew Reid's preliminary sketch for his famous painting, *Mortgaging the Homestead*. An internet search quickly brings up his final painting, showing much more detail that this early working sketch contains.**

that instead young George should learn to do something "useful" and arranged for his apprenticeship to a Wingham architect. The apprenticeship was brief because the architect went bankrupt. Times were also difficult for the Reid family. George's mother died in 1877, a blow to her young family. At some point in the 1870s, his father had to mortgage the farm and George always remembered how desperate this had made the entire family feel.

George learned that the Ontario Society of Artists had opened a new art school in Toronto and he finally persuaded his father to let him enroll. In the city, he worked by day in a factory to pay for night classes at art school. He struggled to find time to study as much as he wanted but still returned home in 1880 with a silver medal in drawing. He opened a small studio in Wingham and painted oil portraits of area people until, in 1882, he had made enough money to return to the Toronto School of Arts. After a year there, Reid continued his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts where he met Mary Hiester, another student. They were married in May 1885 in her hometown, Reading, Pennsylvania. On their honeymoon, they travelled to Europe to visit museums and architectural landmarks – the first of several visits. When they returned to Toronto, they set up a studio, and both worked as professional artists. George, drawing on his boyhood experiences, soon built a reputation for his realistic paintings of everyday life in rural Ontario. He was elected as an associate of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in

1888. In 1890, he submitted his academy piece, *Mortgaging the Homestead*, and became a full member of the Academy. The paintings donated through the 1880s by Canadian artists – the early academicians – became the nucleus of the collection in the National Gallery of Canada.

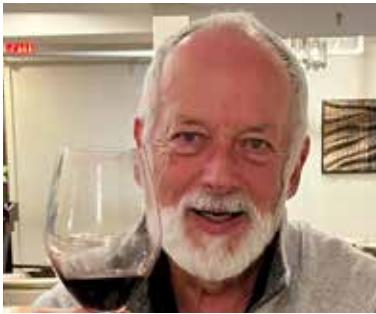
Although the preliminary sketch in oils that Dr. Dale discovered at the St. Marys Museum is a modest 27.9 cm, by 43.2 cm, or approximately 11 by 17 inches, the finished version in the National Gallery is five times larger. In the early study, the faces of the people around the table are only vaguely roughed in. For his finished academy piece, George Reid took great care with the expressions on all the faces. The painting shows three generations of the family. On the right, the elderly grandparents are sitting with their eyes cast down and their shoulders slumped. They might be thinking back on a lifetime of hardship as they worked to make a home and a future for their family – a future that is now in jeopardy. The banker shows no emotion whatsoever. Dressed in a tailored business suit, he has laid out the documents for the father to sign. Dressed in his homespun jacket, the father holds the pen in his hand and leans over to sign away the control of his farm. His wife, with their youngest baby, looks the other way, almost directly at the viewer, her face showing both resignation and anger. The younger man across the table, perhaps the oldest son, has his face in his hands. The little girl at her mother's feet may not understand exactly what is happening but is aware that this is an unhappy

occasion.

In the 1890s, *Mortgaging the Homestead* made an impact, not only as a work of art but also as a social statement. It told a story of the economic hardships faced by farmers and other working-class Canadians. Both the federal Liberals and Conservatives used versions of the painting as political propaganda, each party claiming that the other one was responsible for those hard times. In 1980, the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts celebrated the 100th anniversary of its founding. As part of the centennial exhibition, the paintings of the earliest academicians were on display. Through Dr. Dale, the curator was aware of the small, preliminary sketch in St. Marys and asked to borrow it to hang with the final painting. It helped explain Reid's process and approach to his work. The sketch went off to Ottawa and was there through the Academy's centennial. The St. Marys Museum earned a mention in the official catalogue as the owner of the picture.

When the sketch, *Mortgaging the Homestead*, was returned to St. Marys, it had been cleaned and remounted and its old, rather battered frame had been replaced. It looked wonderful and was re-hung in the dining room in a secure location where its story could still make an impact on viewers. But the Museum paid a price for its moment in the limelight as the owner of the George Reid sketch. It lost custody of the painting. How *Mortgaging the Homestead* was claimed as the property of the Government of Ontario will be explained in next week's column.

# OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: My first and last trip to the Dominican Republic



PAUL KNOWLES

*Independent Columnist*

There are obviously a number of ways to experience the Dominican Republic. A lot of visitors opt for the all-inclusive-resort approach and spend a relaxing (and often well-lubricated) holiday at the beach and poolside in one of the hundreds of such resorts. Others go for more excitement, choosing on-water and underwater adventures, motorized buggy expeditions, zip-lining or waterfall experiences. And still others spend their time on some of the more than two dozen golf courses (a relative rarity in the Caribbean, where some islands have only one or two).

I went with plan C, golf, while staying at an all-inclusive. A buddy of mine who has previously spent cold months in Florida was looking for another option, and we decided to spend eight days at the Meliá Caribe Beach resort in Punta Cana. Our package there (and yes, I paid full freight, unusual for a travel writer) included half-price golf at the nearby, 27-hole Cocotal Golf course.

My post-trip assessment? Well, to adopt a well-worn cliché, there was the good, the bad and the ugly. (Let me be clear; we're not

talking about the lovely island of Dominica.)

Let's start with the good. That would be the golf. The course was in quite good shape, except for the bunkers, some of which had been turned into mud or something close to concrete by recent rains, but the fairways and the often tiny, tricky greens were good.

We played six days straight – which was a lot, to be honest. The 27 holes allowed us to play a different combination most days. And the courses were essentially empty; we played 18 on several days without waiting for other golfers or seeing anyone behind us. That is a golfer's dream.

The final day of play was a Saturday and it was busier, so we actually skipped by a couple of lined-up holes, and then added make-up holes on the third nine, so we got in an 18-hole layout of our own devising.

But be warned, golf there isn't cheap. We paid just under \$150 Canadian per round, and that was on our half-price deal. We talked to other golfers who were paying \$300 Canadian. That's a pretty hefty price tag for a golf course that is okay, but certainly not a signature golf destination. As well, we were told the courses were not crowded because it was January – November, December, February and March see a lot more visitors, and much busier golf courses.

Now, the bad – or at least, the disappointing. Our resort is rated 4.5 out of five stars. Nope.

Start with my room. All of the drawers on the dresser were broken in some way; one would never close properly. I personally fixed



(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTOS)

**The Cocotal course was beautiful and generally in good shape.**

the perpetually running toilet and tightened the toilet seat. My one bar of shower soap was not replaced once in eight days. The air conditioning roared like a 747 on takeoff. There were two straight-backed chairs in the room, and instead of a couch, a single daybed, so nowhere actually comfortable to sit. My safe didn't work until a staffer came to fix it.

When we checked in, we were given little or no helpful information. For example, no one mentioned there were tablets located in two places on which you could book reservations at the usually busy restaurants. There was also one concierge desk which always had a lineup at least half an hour long.

We discovered you could get certain services – like a golf-cart ride to your room – but only if you asked. No one had told us to ask.

The only bar or lounge where you could get a drink after dinner on this gigantic resort was the lobby bar, where loud, disco-style music was a mainstay.

None of these are life-changing problems. If the resort was rated three stars, it would make sense, but not 4.5.

The ugly? We both got sick. Sick enough that on a couple of days, golfing was a challenge, but we'd paid the big bucks, so we mostly stuck that out, but some meals were skipped, evenings were spent in our rooms and the trip home was on two wings and a prayer we would get back to Canada without any health crises.

I know not everyone would agree. I have talked to a number of friends since returning, and they have been surprised by my stories. They love the Dominican Republic and would return there in a moment. We also met a lot of

Canadians there who had made the trip to the DR many times and are big fans.

By the way, my observation was that there were a lot of Canadians, some Europeans including British folk, a lot of Spanish speaking guests and almost no Americans. The one person from the U.S. we talked to was wearing a button which read, "I didn't vote for him." I commended her for her courage.

I don't think travel to the Dominican Republic is going to decrease because of this particular article, but if you do choose to go, feel free to ask for my room – I won't be using it.

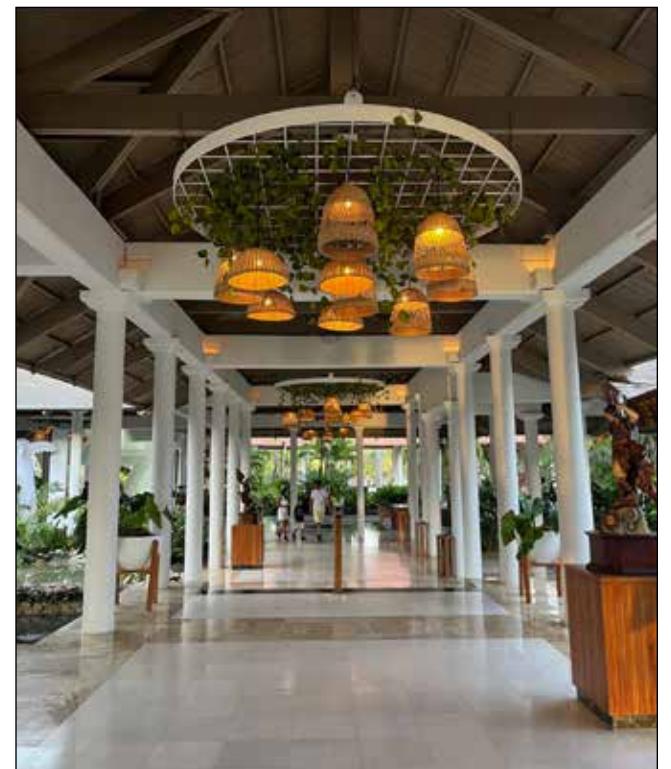
*Paul Knowles is an author and travel writer, and past president of the Travel Media Association of Canada. To contact Paul about travel, his books, or speaking engagements, email [pknowles@golden.net](mailto:pknowles@golden.net).*



The course was well-populated with beautiful, tropical birds like this egret.



Flowers abounded on the course, including lots of bougainvillea. In fact, one of the three nines was named for that plant. (The others were hibiscus and benjamina).



The lobby of the resort gives little clue of how tired the rooms are.

# EAT AT OUR HOUSE: Impressive yet simplified



LAUREN EEDY

Independent Columnist

Preparing a satisfying week-night meal does not have to be a feat.

I often look for recipes that require minimum preparation time but yield big flavour; bonus if I can repurpose it into lunches the following day as my better half prefers a hot lunch in the colder months to a classic sandwich.

A Sunday night pork roast does not entail any level of difficulty, nor should it; the following recipe resulted in a luscious pork roast which demanded a second serving. If that isn't the definition of satisfaction, I'm not sure what is. The crispy chicken recipe is an approachable take on chicken parmesan with, again, minimal effort but impressive results.

Both dishes can be served with a heartier side such as mashed potatoes or pasta of your choice, but we like a refreshing spring salad with a vinaigrette.

## Tuscan roast pork tenderloin

Serves: 6-8; Prep: 10 minutes; Cook: 45 minutes; Confit Garlic: 1.5-2 hours

### Pre-make confit garlic:

2-3 bulbs local garlic, cloves peeled

Extra virgin olive oil, enough to cover garlic

Oven-safe dish

### Method:

- Preheat oven to 250°F, place in oven-safe dish and cook uncovered for about 1.5-2 hours until cloves are golden brown and tender. Let cool, store in glass, airtight container and refrigerate one or two weeks.

### The pork:

2 pork tenderloin

Baguette

Grainy mustard

Fresh sage

Fresh rosemary

Salt

### Method:

- Preheat oven to 375°F. Salt tenderloins and let sit 10 minutes. Sear all sides, set aside. It's okay if they're still raw; they'll finish cooking in the oven.

- Chop enough fresh sage and rosemary to cover all sides of the pork. Cover the outside of tenderloins with grainy mustard (I use a kitchen brush) and roll in chopped herbs.

- Cut out the centre of a baguette (I did a rectangular cut-out) large enough to fit the tenderloins. Paint with olive oil from garlic confit and spread 5-6 cloves along the bottom and sides of baguette.

- Insert tenderloins into the centre of baguette and secure with butcher's twine. Bake in oven approximately 30 minutes or until internal temperature is at least 145°F. Remove butcher's twine and let rest 10 minutes. I serve sliced with a spring salad and maple/Dijon vinaigrette.

## Parmesan-crusted chicken with creamy garlic sauce

Serves: 4; Prep: 15 minutes; Cook: 25 minutes; Total: 40 minutes

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts

½ cup grated parmesan cheese

½ cup Italian-style breadcrumbs

½ tsp garlic powder

½ tsp paprika

Salt and pepper to taste

2 large eggs, beaten

¼ cup all-purpose flour

2 tbsp olive oil for frying

### For the creamy garlic sauce:

2 tbsp butter

4 garlic cloves, minced

1 tbsp all-purpose flour

1 cup chicken broth, low sodium

1 cup heavy cream

½ cup parmesan cheese



(LAUREN EEDY PHOTOS)

## A Tuscan roast pork tenderloin with a spring salad and maple/Dijon vinaigrette.

Salt and pepper

Fresh parsley, chopped

### Method:

- Set up breading station; in first dish mix parmesan, breadcrumbs, garlic powder, paprika, salt and pepper. Put flour in second dish. Add beaten eggs to the third.

- Pat the chicken dry. Dip each breast in flour first, then eggs, finally press into the parmesan mixture ensuring it's evenly coated.

- Pan fry until golden: heat olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Cook chicken 6-8 minutes per side until crust is golden and chicken is cooked though, 160°F inside. Transfer

to plate to keep warm.

- Start the garlic sauce by using the same skillet; don't wipe it out. Melt butter, add minced garlic and sauté for about 1 minute. Stir in flour and cook another minute, stirring constantly until smooth paste is formed.

- Slowly whisk in chicken broth and add heavy cream. Let simmer 2-3 minutes to thicken.

- Add parmesan cheese and finish with salt and pepper. Keep stirring. Add chicken back to the skillet and spoon the sauce over letting everything simmer together for 2-3 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley and serve immediately.

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# Riddles

What five-letter word becomes shorter when you add two letters to it?  
Answer: Short

A word I know, six letters it contains, remove one letter and 12 remains. What is it?  
Answer: Dozens

What would you find in the middle of Toronto?  
Answer: The letter "o"

You see me once in June, twice in November and not at all in May. What am I?  
Answer: The letter "e"

What 4-letter word can be written forward, backward or upside down, and can still be read from left to right?  
Answer: NOON

What do you call a groundhog who drives in the center of the road?  
Answer: A road hog.

What do you call a groundhog who eats too much?  
Answer: A round hog

How does the groundhog know when to look for his shadow?  
Answer: They tell him to gopher it.

Which animal selfishly takes up a lot of space?  
Answer: A groundhog

# - Word Search -



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## GROUNDHOG DAY

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

- Annual event
- February
- Shadow
- Prediction
- Warton Willie
- Punxsutawney Phil
- Marmot
- Burrow
- Weather
- Tradition
- Superstition
- Forecast
- Bill Murray



The **Riddle Kid**  
OF THE WEEK

What does a cow read in the morning?



A moos-paper!

**Emma Borgijink (6)**

Hey Kids... Every Riddle Kid that appears in the paper gets a FREE MILKSHAKE at the Sunset Diner!

St. Marys Veterinary Clinic is pleased to be the sponsor of the

## PET OF THE WEEK



### KEEP YOUR PETS SAFE FROM THE COLD

Winter weather can be dangerous for pets. Watch for signs like shivering, weakness, and lethargy, which may indicate hypothermia. Limit outdoor time, keep pets warm and dry, and reach out to your veterinarian if you have any concerns.



### STEVEN A. SWITZER.

Our Pet of the Week is two-year-old Steven A. Switzer. He is a Maine Coon/Ragdoll mix. You may have seen him walking the grand trunk trail on his harness. He's a beautiful lump of fluffiness and fits in perfectly with the Switzer family.



# Thorndale News

A section within the  
St. Marys Independent

**THORNDALE  
WEEKLY  
NEWS**

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**Mon. Feb. 2nd at 7:00 pm**  
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Thorndale Lions Community Centre

## Thorndale Lions' breakfast brings community together



(NANCY ABRA PHOTO)

Thorndale Lions Les Youngson, Norm Jary and John Ross braved the winter elements to cook at the Thorndale Lions Club's annual Winter Community Breakfast.

NANCY ABRA

Independent Reporter

The snowstorm warning didn't seem to deter the many residents who came out to the Thorndale Lions annual winter community breakfast last Sunday, Jan. 25.

A hearty morning meal of scrambled eggs, pancakes, French toast, bacon, sausage, hashbrown potatoes and fruit cups along with coffee, tea, orange juice and sparkling apple juice was the perfect draw for the approximately 300 people who attended.

"This breakfast is basically not a fundraiser for our Lions club, but it is a way to bring our community together to enjoy a reasonably priced breakfast with family, friends and neighbours," said Thorndale Lions member Ryan Jary, who oversees the organizing effort.

"Many thanks to all the residents in our community who support the Thorndale Lions Club and our many activities, which enables us to serve in projects locally. We greatly appreciate it," added Tony Siroen, president of the Thorndale Lion's Club.

## Thorndale native's book, *The Cure for Drowning*, on the short list for 2026 Canada Reads

NANCY ABRA

Independent Reporter

*The Cure for Drowning* by Loghan Paylor, formerly of Thorndale, is brilliantly written in the vivid voices of the two protagonists, Kit and Rebekah.

This novel is a powerful work of historical fiction set in southern Ontario and spans over two decades from 1931-1953. Paylor's magnificent writing weaves together various themes of emotional truth, love and identity.

Paylor, a queer and trans author raised in the Thorndale area, now resides in Abbotsford, B.C. As a young child, Paylor attended Plover Mills Public School and then went to schools in London, later attending the University of British Columbia and achieving a Masters in creative writing.

Over the years, Paylor has received notable awards for published short fiction and essays. *The Cure for Drowning* is Paylor's first novel, which made its debut at the Thorndale Library in March 2024. Later that year, Paylor made the longlist for the

## Caring Hands ready to assist in the Thorndale area

NANCY ABRA

Independent Reporter

Occasionally, locals may require assistance but are uncertain about where to seek support or who to consult. An unexpected accident, illness, or surgery can disrupt one's routine and quality of life, often necessitating additional help at home throughout the recovery period.

Caring Hands Home Health Care is a sole proprietorship business owned and operated by Sandi Connell, a registered nurse. After graduating with a diploma in nursing from Conestoga College in 1980, Connell began her nursing career at Sunnyside Hospital and then at York Central Hospital in the cardiac wing.

She then ventured into the private sector and founded React Seminars in the mid 1990s as an authorized provider for the Canadian Red Cross and Heart & Stroke Foundation, training individuals in vital lifesaving techniques.

In 2010, recognizing the growing needs of individuals caring for family and friends, Connell and another registered nurse founded Caring Hands Home Health Care. Initially, they specialized in senior health care but have extended their service to provide care for all ages. Since 2017, Connell has been in Thorndale, where she resides and currently has an office at 160 King St.

After an initial call to start the process, Connell sets up a meeting to access what is needed for each of her clients. With her passion for helping people, she creates a personal care plan that best accommodates their needs, whether a client is living at home or in a long-term care facility. Services offered range from light housekeeping, laundry and help with



(NANCY ABRA PHOTO)

Sandi Connell spoke about her business, Caring Hands Home Health Care, at the seniors' coffee hour Jan. 21 at the Thorndale Lions Community Centre.

meal preparations to more medical care such as post-surgical care, occupational therapy or respite relief for family members. She has both caregivers and personal support workers (PSW) on staff to help restore quality of life for each client while maintaining dignity and providing a safe, healthy environment.

"We are also familiar with the services and assistance available within the public health-care system," said Connell. "We can coordinate these services as part of our customized health-care plan for the client."

For more information, visit [www.ilovethorndale.ca/business/caring-hands-home-health-care-inc/](http://www.ilovethorndale.ca/business/caring-hands-home-health-care-inc/) or the Caring Hands Home Health Care website at [www.caringhandshhc.ca](http://www.caringhandshhc.ca).

2024 Giller Prize. Most recently, *The Cure for Drowning* was chosen for the shortlist for the 2026 Canada Reads.

"I am delighted and honoured to have been shortlisted for Canada Reads," said Paylor. "For the past 25 years, Canada Reads has brought together readers from coast to coast and provided a platform for engaging, lively debates about Canadian books. Reading connects us and opens doors, and I am thrilled that *The Cure for*

*Drowning* will be joining the conversation this year."

Paylor also wanted to share there are Canada Reads engagement kits and educational packages available for high school teachers and libraries across the country, as well as posters for independent bookstores. Anyone interested can visit the Canada Reads website at [www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads](http://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads) for more information.

## OBITUARY

### Freeman



Merry Lee Freeman (nee Murray) passed peacefully at University Hospital after a brief illness on January 20, 2026 at the age of 56. Cherished momma of William "BJ" Roger (Krissy) and Dan Roger, sister of Jamie, and daughter of Wilma and the late Jim Murray. Loving

Grandma of Bishop and Corbin. Merry was only 5'2" tall, but her energy and the love she radiated made her seem larger than life. Beloved by pretty much everyone who met her, Merry will be especially missed by her friends, and her colleagues and the children she cared for at Perth Care for Kids. Please join Merry's family for a Celebration of Life Open House at GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH, 16 Hillside Ct, St. Marys, on January 31, 2026, from 1pm - 4pm, with words of remembrance at 2pm. Memorial donations may be made to the Ontario Heart & Stroke Foundation. Online tributes at [www.hodgesfunerahome.ca](http://www.hodgesfunerahome.ca).

May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face; the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.



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	7						9	
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9	3	1	2			4		6
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			6					8

Solutions on pg. 31

## OBITUARY

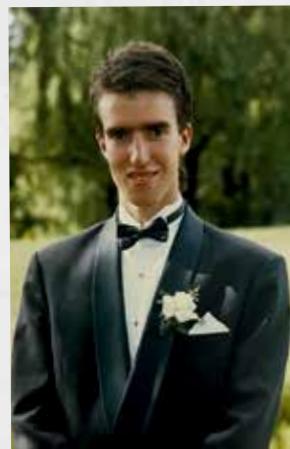
### Hayes



It is with deep sorrow our family announces the sudden passing of our beloved mother and wife Marlene Hayes, 77. Marlene will be remembered for her sharp sense of humor, her resilience, and her deep commitment to her family. She may not have sugar-coated things,

but her love was absolute—and that love will live on through those she leaves behind. She is survived by her loving husband of 55 years, George Hayes. Her adoring children Christopher (Karen), James (Ashley), Jennifer (Keith), and Cathy (Jeff). Grandchildren Haylie (Austin), Jenna (Tim), Jacob, Sawyer, Kurtis, Lauren and Bexley, and her beloved little boy, her dog Chipper. Marlene loved her family deeply. Her greatest joy was in her grandchildren who she loved and supported, she was always in their corner. Marlene worked hard, and spent the majority of her working life at M&M Variety, finally retiring in 2019. She loved deeply, spoke honestly, and was never afraid to express exactly how she felt—often without saying a word at all. Though she is no longer with us, the emptiness she leaves in our hearts is a testament to the love she shared so freely. Her memory & love will live on forever. Cremation has taken place. No public funeral service will be held. Donations to George Hayes would be greatly appreciated by Marlene's family. Online condolences at [www.hodgesfuneralhome.ca](http://www.hodgesfuneralhome.ca).

## IN MEMORIAM



IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
**MIKE ESSON**  
June 10, 1970 - January 28, 2001

Today marks 25 years of remembering you, missing you, and honouring a life well-lived.

Forever in our hearts,  
Your family

## OBITUARY

### Helen Josephine "Jo" Zvonkin

April 23, 1930 - January 9, 2026



Helen Josephine Zvonkin, lovingly known as Jo, was born in Hamilton on April 30, 1930, and passed away at the Blue Water Rest Home, Zurich. She was the devoted wife and best friend of Carl, with whom she married in 1953. Mother to Gerry (Bernadette), Vince (Francis), Jeannie (Floyd), Deb,

and Jason (Michelle). Grandmother to Leslie (Jimi), Josh, Kaedi, Nicholas (Kelly), Jay (Brandi), Nathan (Mandy), Jonathan (Tara), Ryon, and Page, and great-grandmother to Corbin (Katie), Griffin, Hudson, Cohen, McKinlee, Lia, Jamison. Emma, Gavin, Taylor, Jacob, Ariella, Linnea, Aiden, Liam, and Zoe. She is survived by her siblings Phyllis, Tom (Mary), Claire, and Paul (Ann), and will be remembered by her many nieces and nephews. Jo was predeceased by her parents, Joseph and Helen Mathews; her grandchildren, Carly and Dana; daughter-in-law Cheryl and her son-in-law Elvey; her siblings and in-laws, Abe and Jean Zvonkin, John (Vickey), Elaine (Bob), Dolores, Francis (Ralph), Eleanor, Meco, and Samuel. The family would like to invite friends and relatives to join at Brock and Visser Funeral Home, 845 Devonshire Ave., Woodstock (519-539-0004) on Saturday, April 4, 2026, from 1 to 3 pm for a Celebration of Jo's Life. If desired, memorial contributions to the Alzheimer's Society or to the Heart and Stroke Foundation would be greatly appreciated.

## IN MEMORIAM



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**Dianne Smale**

January 26, 2021

Life is usually made up of choices. Sometimes there are no choices, which happened 5 years ago. It was devastating not only to the entire family, but to many people in several communities, leaving a deep wound in each and every one of us.

Being married to you made me the happiest man on this planet. You were the best wife, best mother, best friend that I could have ever asked for and I thanked the Lord daily for bringing us together.

Since that fateful day many people have come forward to help recover from the shock. Some are longtime friends but also new friends have emerged to all of whom I will be forever grateful. Their help and sincerity is truly appreciated.

The wound has healed although the scar remains. We miss you always.

*Ken and Family*

## BIRTHDAY

### 100<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

The family of  
**Mabel Ballantyne**  
invite you to join us in celebrating her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on  
**Saturday, February 7<sup>th</sup>**  
at the Pyramid Recreation Centre, Entrance D,  
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## Looking Back

AMY CUBBERLEY

*Independent Columnist*



### A call for ball

#### 25 years ago (2001)

When the Southern Ontario Men's Curling Championship is held next month, a St. Marys man will be one of the volunteers making sure that the ice is just right. Ron Hunter, Senior Ice Technician at the St. Marys Curling Club, will be a member of one of the ice crews working at the Nokia Cup at the Woodstock District Community Complex.

The student council at St. Marys DCVI decided to recognize AIDS Awareness Week this year. Student Council member Shannon McFadyen said that they wanted to have AIDS Awareness Week because they felt that it was important for students to understand that this is a disease that anyone can get.

#### 50 years ago (1976)

Residents of the East Ward "Camp Swampy" area will no doubt mark Tuesday, Feb. 10 as a red-letter day on their calendars. On that date, tenders close for the construction of the East Ward storm drain and street construction along Elgin East.

There are rumours that the St. Marys Minor Ball Association may fold unless plenty of interest, along with plenty of people willing to assist, turn out at the annual meeting of the Association which is scheduled for this coming Sunday evening at the Town Hall.

#### 75 years ago (1951)

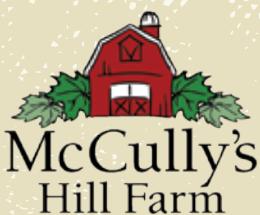
Percy Switzer and son John were on a trip to Kentucky and Tennessee last week where they delivered some registered hog breeding stock to U.S. buyers.

The number of workmen reporting for duty in St. Marys with the contracting firms handling the St. Marys Cement Company enlargement and with the H.E.P.C. and Comstock changeover crews is severely taxing the board and room accommodations in the town.

#### 100 years ago (1926)

Robert Hobbs of West Nissouri had his hand so badly mangled in a cutting box on his farm yesterday afternoon that it was necessary to take him to Victoria Hospital in London where three of his fingers were amputated.

Horatio Skelton, the 17-year-old Thorndale youth who spent a night in the London hospital this week after walking 107 miles, making a tour of Kintore, Ingersoll, Tillsonburg, and Corinth, is now back in his feather bed allowing his feet to shed their callouses. His feat of walking 37 miles in a day had nothing on the two Thedford fiddlers who walked 51 miles in one night last week and are now in St. Marys on a visit.



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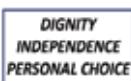
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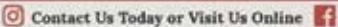
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1	6	4	5	3	9	2	8	7
7	2	5	4	8	6	3	1	9
8	9	3	7	2	1	6	4	5
6	1	8	3	9	2	7	5	4
4	7	2	1	6	5	8	9	3
3	5	9	8	4	7	1	6	2
9	3	1	2	5	8	4	7	6
2	8	6	9	7	4	5	3	1
5	4	7	6	1	3	9	2	8



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