

STRATFORD TIMES

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Police looking to boost mall safety in 2026

AMANDA NELSON

Times Reporter

At the recent Police Service Board meeting, safety at the local mall was a top concern.

Due to heightened theft and criminal activity at the Stratford Mall, Stratford police have met with mall representatives to discuss how they can help reduce the issue and improve safety for residents.

Chief Greg Skinner said he met with representatives from the Stratford Mall to discuss ongoing crime and theft, specifically at Paris Jewellers, as well as security and criminal activity that has occurred in the mall over the past 18 months.

Skinner said his discussion focused on several aspects of safety and increasing police presence, which he said will deter criminals and improve safety.

One strategy is to increase patrols by having police presence on site more often. Skinner said this is one approach that has already begun and has so far helped reduce ongoing theft and robberies.

"We have increased the presence of officers parked in the parking lots with a cruiser or walking through the mall," he said. "We have been doing that since the last couple of robberies, and they are very grateful for the work that has been done by the members of our police force in increasing their visibility as a preventative piece."

Another option discussed to increase safety, Skinner said, was the potential for a police kiosk in the mall to promote safety and reduce risk. He noted that sever-

CONTINUED TO PAGE 3



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Organizers MJ Thomson, Barb Cottle, Jamie Cottle, Alison Robinson, Gerry Bell and Kelan Herr pose behind Susan Graham and Jeremy Hunt at this year's Winterfest celebration on Jan. 24. Not pictured are organizers Kate Ahrens, Lance Gibson, Tammy Stoddart and Cameron Ohlman.

Winterfest 2026 continues to be a web for community

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

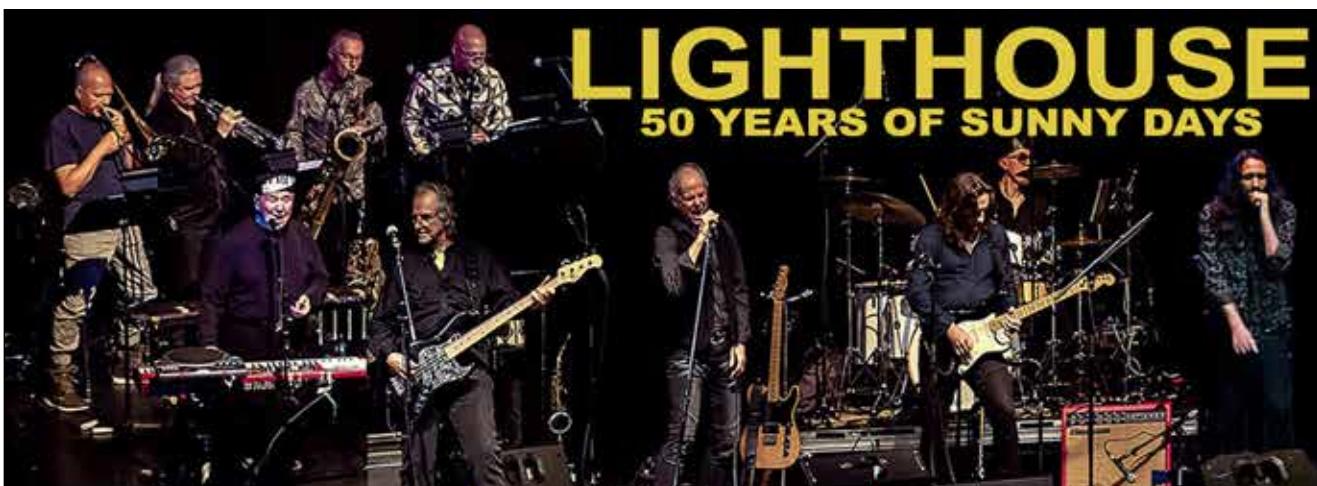
The forecast for Saturday, Jan. 24 called for a low of -22° Celsius, one of the coldest days of January. That didn't stop this year's Stratford Winterfest.

"We do it because we love our community," organizer MJ Thomson told the Times. "We do it for two reasons. One, we all really get along well and we work well as a team. And secondly, we love our community and we think that we make a difference in the winter. I think we

make an incredible difference in how people perceive the long winter and having it at the end of January, when it's well past the Christmas buzz, and we're still six weeks out from feeling any kind of warmth, especially this year, I think we make a big difference."

Originally started in the late '90s, Winterfest has been a Stratford staple for nearly 30 years. Over that time, the show has morphed and changed, and Thomson (who is celebrating 18 years as a volunteer) said the most interesting changes have been the people. As families have come

CONTINUED TO PAGE 2



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Winterfest 2026 continues to be a web of community – even in the most frigid of days

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

and enjoyed the festivities, the kids have grown up and are now volunteers – or the teenagers that used to volunteer are coming back with their own kids.

Additionally, the features of Winterfest have changed. This year, among other shows and stations, John Walker from Fallen Willow Forge did demonstrations throughout the day, as he has in years past. Danielle O'Rourke returned with her ice sculpture demonstrations, carving blocks of ice with a chainsaw throughout the day. Maple Taffy returned, allowing those braving the elements to create their own lollipops from the ice.

Many local businesses and groups were also on hand. Laurie Leduc of Stratford Walking Tours conducted regular tours around Upper Queen's Park. Rise Run Club held a special Winterfest run.

"It isn't just about getting out and hav-

ing fun, it's about getting out, having fun and learning something at the same time," Thomson explained. "The (Stratford) Public Library did an amazing, amazing walking tour this year and was incredibly creative. That was fun. And then there's also the Upper Thames Conservation Authority. They had a representative there with a bunch of animal skins, and they had footprints and all kinds of stuff that were local animals.

"The other thing that's interesting, we've had snowshoes before ... and we partner with the Stratford Perth Museum, they provide the snowshoes. And interestingly enough, we put them on a walking path so that they were very visible. They were used more this year than ever."

Additionally, more organizations helped out than ever. Gallery Stratford allowed use of the shed for the day, allowing Little Tracks Small Animal Zoo to set up shop in a place away from the frigid temperatures.

On that note, Thomson said the aspect that sets Winterfest apart is the buy-in from not only the community, but all the organizations who contribute. From the aforementioned organizations to the other countless organizations which volunteered, Thomson expressed her thanks.

"We couldn't do the event without them," Thomson professed. "When you look at the partners that we have, it's local and these



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Organizer MJ Thomson poses with a chinchilla courtesy of Little Tracks Small Animal Zoo, one of the many exhibits at this year's Winterfest celebrations.

people participate. We don't pay for them to come. They do it because they can."

And despite the cold weather that morning, Thomson said people were happy to be braving the weather.

"People had an amazing time ... We got a lot of comments near the end of the day how amazing the event was, and that they were really glad that we held it."

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Looking to boost mall safety

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

al other malls, such as Conestoga Mall in Waterloo and several Toronto malls, also have similar kiosks.

“We will have to talk about what the visibility, expectations, and what we can provide on an ongoing basis to support that initiative could be,” said Skinner. “That’s still under review, and once we have some firm decisions and directions, then we can come back to the board and talk about our next steps.”

Skinner said the mall has shared that they are comfortable covering the cost of the kiosk, which would not impact the local police budget. However, the cost of policing the location on a regular basis would need to be discussed further.

“We can’t afford, at this point, to have an officer there during all hours,” Skinner said. “What we would have to do is have it as a drop-in, so an officer can go out, be assigned there as part of their patrol area, to go in and be visible. If, through the data analysis, we see that the visibility is needed near the end of the business day or on weekends, then we can certainly be a little bit more strategic about when we increase the visibility.”

“The point is to provide some sense of greater safety and security for everybody

in the mall, and as a deterrent to people as they drive into the mall. If somebody was thinking about a robbery, and they see a cruiser parked in the parking lot, hopefully that will be enough of a deterrent to cause them to not come in and do whatever they were planning to do.”

He also discussed strategies and communication between different malls, and how having contact with other similar locations can help put stores such as Paris Jewellers on guard so they are aware of potential threats.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) was another way discussed to help prevent theft. CPTED is a set of principles used in urban planning, architecture, and community design to reduce crime and increase people’s sense of safety by shaping the physical environment. Essentially, it focuses on how the design of a space can influence behaviour.

Mayor Martin Ritsma added that he had spoken to the owners and staff of Paris Jewellers, who said that the current corner location is strategic and considered safer, as staff have quicker access to exits. He said a central location could leave staff more vulnerable if they were pushed to the back of the store without easy access to an exit.

Solving for X: Council begins workshop series on Grand Trunk

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

If the Grand Trunk renewal (GTR) project is an algebraic formula, there would be multiple X’s to solve for: the superstructure, the land, the contamination, the markets and the community needs, to name only a few.

In an effort to get closer to an answer, City of Stratford chief administrative officer (CAO) André Morin is holding a series of workshops for members of council and the public. The first was held on Jan. 27 and was focused broadly on municipal development projects and the type of factors that influence them.

Consultants Joe Svec and Rock Wang of Svec Group detailed the proforma process of evaluating a site’s financial feasibility. Melanie Hare, a former member of the ad hoc GTR committee and an accomplished planner, stressed the importance of leveraging the site’s potential for community benefit. Cory Bluhm, executive director of economic development for the City of Kitchener, detailed that city’s land development practices of the past and current and potentially future trends. Marcus Hammoud, project manager and environmental scientist at WSP Canada, advised

about the pitfalls of brownfield redevelopment.

Speaking ahead of the meeting, Morin told the Times that now that the ad hoc committee completed its mandate, these sessions are an exercise in backing up and doing a little of what was done for the committee for council members.

“We’re bringing in a few experts that we had brought in for the ad hoc committee to just talk generally and allow council to ask some questions specifically around ‘What do you think about this?’ or ‘How would this process work?’” Morin explained. “... The idea is not to make decisions, but give them some good information and that solid background that we’ve already done through the process with the ad hoc committee.”

A second workshop is scheduled for the end of February that will delve into specific Grand Trunk-related topics. If needed, a third workshop will be scheduled as well.

“But sometime in March or April, then we’ll be really at a decision making point as to what the next 12 to 18 months look like on this project,” Morin said.

For those interested in the workshop, a recording will be made available on the city’s website.

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Editorial

What's going on with Great Lakes water levels?



JEFF HELSDON

Times Correspondent

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 scenar-

ios. With Lake Erie, extremely wet conditions 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 lev-

els 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.

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Quote of the Week

"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. 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."

- Sydney Touzel, intimate partner violence survivor, who is running a 21-kilometre run from St. Marys to Stratford in support of Optimism Place on Feb. 14.

STRATFORDTIMES

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Stratford Police Service Board names new chair, Mayor Ritsma and Coun. Nijjar as new chair, vice-chair

AMANDA NELSON

Times Reporter

A busy start to the new year for the Stratford Police Service 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 matters brought before the board.

The Stratford Police Service Board is responsible for providing civilian over-

sight of local policing, including setting priorities, monitoring performance and ensuring the police service 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 Mathieson 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 service 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," he said. "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 mov-

ing 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 front-line 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.



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Heartburn Day chili-cookoff fundraiser returns Feb. 28 for first time since pandemic

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Though he's got less than six weeks to pull it off, local restaurateur Mike Bayer is bringing back a beloved annual fundraising event sure to warm the stomachs and hearts of locals next month.

For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Heartburn Day chili-cookoff fundraiser will return to the Stratford Rotary Complex from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Feb. 28. Having discussed the idea of bringing back the event over the past year with Kevin Miller of Automotion Repair and Tire, the event's main sponsor, and others who have fond memories of eating or cooking chili, Bayer, who owns Gilly's Pubhouse, the Erie Drive In and other local restaurants, decided just last week he and his team would begin seeking volunteers, donors, vendors and sponsors to put the fire back into Heartburn Day.

"Essentially, it's very similar in concept to Soups On," Bayer said, referring to the annual fundraiser event held each January in support of the Alzheimer Society of Perth Huron. "You have a number of vendors making different chilis. It doesn't have to be beef; it could be vegetarian, venison – there used to be all kinds of chilis. And it wasn't just businesses or restaurants who entered, it was social clubs, nursing homes, realtors, you name it. It's a chili cookoff and a love for chili,

and February's a good time to do it.

"... Everybody still talks about it, so we thought it's a great community event and it was actually bigger than Soups On. Soups On actually kind of modelled their event after the Heartburn Day originally. ... I want this to be for the community just to come out and have fun."

Like Soups On, admission is free, there will be live music and entertainment, a kids' zone, a silent auction and attendees will have the opportunity to purchase tickets for either tasters or full bowls of all the different chilis cooked up by the vendors. There is no vendor fee for those who would like cook up and serve their best chili.

Though the event was originally held as a fundraiser for the local chapter of the Heart and Stroke Foundation, hence it's name, the chapter has since left Stratford, so Bayer decided instead to raise money for another local charity, Simple Dreams Ministries – the organizer of the annual To Stratford With Love community dinner that also helps locals in need in whatever way it can.

"I love this charity and we try and support it as much as we can, so I thought this is a great way to do that," Bayer said.

"It's absolutely awesome and I was just totally humbled when Mike approached us, saying they wanted to do it," Simple Dreams co-founder Richard Kneider said. "... The need is out there and this will certainly help us do some of things we do



(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTO)

Local restaurateur Mike Bayer and Richard Kneider of Simple Dreams Ministries met at Gilly's Pubhouse in Stratford recently to discuss the return of the Heartburn Day chili-cookoff fundraiser on Feb. 28.

with Simple Dreams. Just before I came in today, I just got a phone call in the car from a lady who needs another bed. ... There's just so many different needs, and with this, we can expand the scope of what we do."

One hundred per cent of the proceeds from ticket sales and the silent auction, as well as donations of money and non-perishable food items, will go to support

Simple Dreams.

Without much time to pull this event together, Bayer is looking for volunteers, people and businesses interested in donating items for the silent auction, vendors and corporate sponsors to help alleviate some of the cost to host the event. For more information or to sign up to help with Heartburn Day, email heartburnday.simpledreams@gmail.com.

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

AMANDA NELSON

Times 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 Clarke 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," Clarke said. "Our youth crime di-

version 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 com-

munity resource unit's engagement," Clarke said. "I think it's reflective of our commitment to public engagement."

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 that 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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Adult Learning Programs of Perth brings free skills training and education to Stratford learners

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Adults in Stratford looking to upgrade their skills, return to school or gain confidence navigating today's digital world have access to a wide range of free educational supports through Adult Learning Programs of Perth.

Funded by the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, Adult Learning Programs of Perth offers no-cost education and training for adults aged 18 and older across Perth County, including Stratford. Locally, programming is delivered from two Stratford locations: the Local Community Food Centre on Thursdays and the Centre for Education and Learning at Stratford Intermediate School on Tuesdays.

"We have two really accessible spaces in Stratford," said adult learning instructor Stephanie Shute. "One is right on the bus route and connected to all the great things happening at the Local, and the other is downtown and a really good connection for people who are looking to work toward their secondary school credits."

Programs offered in Stratford include digital skills training, essential reading, writing and math, preparation for the Canadian Adult Education Credential (CAEC) and support for adults working toward their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) through the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process.

Adult Learning Programs of Perth also provides employment-related supports, including resumé building, workplace communication and digital tools used on the job, such as Microsoft Excel, Teams and Outlook.

"We really act as a connector," said Nicole Carradine, adult learning coor-



(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTO)

Adult Learning Programs of Perth adult learning instructor Stephanie Shute is at the Local Community Food Centre in Stratford every Thursday, ready to assist learners 18 and older in the city.

dinator with Adult Learning Programs of Perth. "When someone doesn't quite know where to start, they can come to us. Maybe we're where they start, or maybe we help point them in the right direction – whether that's OSSD credits, CAEC preparation, employment skills or even apprenticeship pathways."

One of the organization's strengths is its flexible, learner-centred approach. Programs can be completed in person, online or through a blended model that combines both.

"The e-channel is a really good option for people," Shute said. "Those are free online courses, and you don't have to be tech-savvy to do them. At the same time, learners can still meet with us regularly, so they're not on their own."

Carradine said that support and ac-

countability make a significant difference, especially for adults who may feel overwhelmed returning to learning.

"It's nice to have someone there to help you through it," she said. "You're not just staring at a screen thinking, 'I don't even know where to start with this.'"

Adult Learning Programs of Perth is also working to expand workshop offerings in Stratford, including cybersecurity awareness, resumé building and newcomer-focused sessions that help people understand Canadian systems and workplace culture.

"It goes beyond just learning English," Carradine said. "It's about understanding how things work here – your rights as a tenant, how systems are set

up, and where to go for help."

The organization also works directly with employers in Stratford at no cost, offering customized training for employees to help improve retention and confidence in the workplace.

"There's no cost to the employer or the employee," Shute said. "We can go onsite during work hours or bring people in, depending on what works best."

Carradine shared an example of a long-time factory employee who was able to transition into an office role after receiving Excel training through the program.

"She had been a reliable employee for years," Carradine said. "She just needed the skills. We helped her build them, and she's still in that role today."

While Adult Learning Programs of Perth has been active in Stratford for years, staff say awareness dropped during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They are now focused on reconnecting with the community.

"We just want people to feel comfortable reaching out," Carradine said. "You don't need a game plan. You just need to know you want to improve something in your life."

For more information about Adult Learning Programs of Perth in Stratford, residents can visit the organization's website at www.townofstmarys.com/recreation-community-culture/education/adult-learning/about-adult-learning/ or contact staff directly by emailing alearning@town.stmarys.on.ca or by calling 519-272-5174. Information about upcoming workshops and supports is also shared through community partners.

Police looking for surveillance footage of late-night ransacking

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

Residents near Youngs Street and Church Street are being asked to check any surveillance footage from the night and early morning of Jan. 21 and Jan. 22.

On the morning of January 22, 2026, the Stratford Police Service received several reports of vehicles that had been broken into overnight in that area. Items stolen included cash, credit and debit cards, identity cards, as well as a large amount of tools.

Anyone with video surveillance footage of interest, and anyone with any other information regarding this matter is asked to contact the police. If you wish to remain anonymous, please contact Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS, or www.p3tips.com.

At this point there are no suspects in this matter.

This incident also acts as a good reminder to ensure that vehicles are secure when unattended and all valuables are taken inside or placed out of sight.



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. 27

Perth County council approves 2026 budget in principle; 8.75% levy increase projected

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 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 it 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 connecting link expansion at the Perth County Courthouse, 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.

Perth County warden and councillors reflect on 2026 ROMA annual conference

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-submis-

sion 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 agribusiness-

es – 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.

Meet the people behind the local Salvation Army

ALEX HUNT

Times Correspondent

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 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



(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

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

"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."



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Representatives from the City of Stratford at the most recent ROMA conference in Toronto. Pictured here are Coun. Brad Beatty, Coun. Geza Wordofa, MPP Natalie Pierre, parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, Mayor Martin Ritsma, CAO André Morin and director of social services Kim McElroy.

Optimist Club of Downie Inc.

OPTI-CASH CALENDAR DRAW

Jan. 11	Mike Bannerman, St. Marys	\$50.00
Jan. 12	Daniel Gregory, Komoka	\$50.00
Jan. 13	Vanessa Beckett, St. Marys	\$50.00
Jan. 14	Martin Riddell, Granton	\$50.00
Jan. 15	Steve & Marian Van Klooster, St. Pauls	\$50.00
Jan. 16	Elise Clark, Chatham	\$50.00
Jan. 17	Mark Schwartzewtrubor, New Dundee	\$200.00
Jan. 18	Mary Jacob, Stratford	\$50.00
Jan. 19	Denise Pipe, Kitchener	\$50.00
Jan. 20	Tony McKenzie, Kitchener	\$50.00
Jan. 21	Aaron Thomson, St. Pauls	\$50.00
Jan. 22	Heather Byrge, St. Marys	\$50.00
Jan. 23	Troy Horton, Palmerston	\$50.00
Jan. 24	Brian Knowles, Stratford	\$200.00

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STRATFORD **TIMES** SPORTS

Irish flew past Bluebirds, Cavaliere earns first career NPHL shutout

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Stratford Irish headed back to the win column after shutting out the Tilbury Bluebirds 5-0 at the William Allman Memorial Arena on Jan. 24.

After a scoreless first 15-plus minutes of play, the Irish managed to break through when Jaden Peca scored his fifth of the season from Sean O'Brien and Zach Magwood with 4:11 remaining in the second period.

Stratford doubled their lead with 98 seconds remaining as Magwood notched his sixth of the season from Christian Polillo and Matthew Fuller to make it 2-0. The Irish increased their lead with 18 seconds

left in the middle frame as Peca scored his second of the game from Matthew Montgomery and Brett Thorne.

The Irish pattered their lead at the 3:51 mark when Brendan Charlton scored his fourth as a member of the Irish from Thomas Hernandez and Calvin Thomson and added one more midway through the period, as Matt Zebedee scored his third with the Irish from Magwood and Ethan Salter.

Irish netminder Mario Cavaliere picked up his first shutout in his NPHL career and recorded his third win between the pipes for Stratford. Cavaliere says it feels good to get a shutout and an important win for the Irish.

"It's exciting. We have a great team. We

have so many guys who have played in some of the most amazing places. So, to help contribute to a high-caliber team, it's special. I'm looking forward to the playoff run to go on," Cavaliere said.

Magwood says the win is good and the team is playing with a fresh mindset in preparation for the playoffs as the regular season reaches its conclusion in two weeks.

"I think just focus on having that playoff mentality going into it. We got two games left, so if we can transition now, and scrape out a couple wins here too, with the last two games, I think we're looking good going into playoffs," Magwood said.

"I think it's going to start to turn around

here. I think we're going to put up a good fight."

Like Magwood, Peca states the team's mindset for the next two weeks en route to the postseason.

"Just for our team, it's just sticking to what our game plan is and just building on that and sharing the same momentum that we've gained here tonight, into next weekend, then the weekend after that, and ready for the playoffs," Peca said.

"I think our team is already focused and ready to dial in and buy into the system that the coaches are providing."

Stratford is playing their final home game of the regular season on Jan. 31 against the Woodstock Lakers at the Allman Arena. Game time is 5:30 p.m.

Ferguson dazzles as Warriors bash Legionnaires

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

On Jan. 21, the Stratford Hunter Steel Warriors looked to get back to their winning ways as they prepared for their games against the Sarnia Legionnaires.

Head coach Dave Williams says that despite Sarnia's record, it is never a guarantee to get a win.

"You can never approach every game

like you have to play your best, best game. It should never matter who you're playing or where, when you're playing in the season, or anything like that. Every game should be played the same way," Williams said.

"I think the teams that have the most success typically play with that consistency, game in and game out, because it's that hard to win, and there's lots of parity in our league. I know they haven't won (Sarnia), but they played some teams incredibly tight here recently, so you know, we just must go in and play the way we're capable of playing, and I think we'll be fine."

Stratford made the trek through the snow-squall roads to the Pat Stapleton Arena in Sarnia for their game with the last-place Sarnia Legionnaires on Jan. 22.

The Legionnaires struck first 2:48 into the first period after the shot bounced past Warriors netminder Gage Hurst. Stratford responded at 5:24 with Drew Hodge scoring his second of the season from Evan Arnold and Max Wildfong.

Sarnia retook the lead at the 6:36 mark, but the goal at 8:47 by Dax Vader from Lucas Minard and Jonas Schmidt put the visitors level again. The Warriors heavi-

ly outshot the home side 26-6 through the first 20 minutes but were unable to score more goals in the opening frame.

Seventy-three seconds into the second period, Evan Arnold scored his 10th of the season from Wildfong to put the Warriors up 3-2. A defensive error led to Sarnia tying the game at three apiece at the 5:23 mark.

Colin Slattery's eighth of the season on the powerplay from Quinn Kipfer and Hodge put the Warriors back up by a goal at 7:15. From there, the Warriors shifted momentum and put on a relentless offensive display on the Legionnaires.

The barrage began after the Warriors were rewarded with a four-minute powerplay after the Sarnia slewfoot penalty. Aaron Green scored with 1:34 left in the middle frame, followed by Cruz Ferguson scoring his first as a member of the Warriors less than a minute later.

Stratford continued their barrage early in the third period when Ferguson scored his second goal of the game, 17 seconds into the period, followed by Schmidt tallying his 17th of the season on the powerplay, the Warriors' fourth of the game with the man advantage. Ferguson finished off his

solid performance with a hat trick at the eight-minute mark and scored his fourth of the game with 41 seconds left.

Hurst shook off a tough start and got the win with 16 saves. Ferguson led the Warriors in scoring with four goals and an assist. A total of 13 Warriors players recorded a point in the win.

After the game, Williams says he liked the production of scorers and the response from the team against Sarnia after a tough first period.

"You never like giving up the first goal and kind of getting behind here two, one, you know, they're obviously a hungry team looking for their first win," Williams said.

"It took us a little bit, maybe, to find our game, and once we did, I thought we did a number of good things offensively that hopefully we can take some confidence from -any time you have a night like tonight where you score a little bit like that, and you get some goals spread around amongst a few different guys."

Wildfong says the key to the offensive turnaround in the late stage of the second period is to provide an optimistic approach.

"I just think keep it positive with our line mates, just moving the puck well and shooting the puck and stopping at the net, I think those are key things that make us come back in the game and make us take the lead," Wildfong said.

When asked about his four-goal, five-point performance, Ferguson explained his willingness to contribute to the Warriors.

"I was brought in to be a goal scorer, but I'm here to do anything the team needs me to do. If that means adapting my playstyle, that's something I can do," Ferguson said.

With the win, the Warriors improved to 23-7-2-2 in the season, fifth in the Western Conference.

Stratford Warriors					
2025-26 Stats					
(as of January 26, 2026)					
Player	Pos	GP	G	A	PTS
Jonas Schmidt	F	27	17	15	32
Max Wildfong	F	34	17	11	28
Quinn Kipfer	F	31	11	16	27
Coen Galbraith	F	32	10	15	25
Colin Slattery	F	30	8	17	25
Lucas Minard	F	33	11	10	21
Evan Arnold	F	25	10	7	17
Joseph Curtin	D	33	4	13	17
Dax Vader	F	31	5	11	16
Will Coward	D	31	1	14	15
Aaron Green	D	27	6	8	14
Drew Hodge	D	33	2	12	14
Dominic Marshall	F	34	9	4	13
McQuen Haylock	F	32	2	9	11
Grady Murphy	F	29	6	4	10
Rhyse Brown	F	30	3	7	10
Haden Frayne	D	31	2	8	10
Jaxon Broda	D	7	1	7	8
Cruz Ferguson	F	2	4	1	5
Mateo Craievich	D	23	0	5	5
Goalies	Record	GAA	SV-%		
Noah Bender	13-6-0-1	2.65	0.903		
Gage Hurst	9-0-1-1	2.03	0.909		

GOHL Western Conference Standings							
(as of January 26, 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
St. Marys Lincolns	27	6	2	0	56	146	77
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	36	0	0	0	59	245

Stratford Aces fighting for a postseason spot, Hawkins commits to Michigan

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Stratford Humphrey Fleet Service U18 AA Aces are in a battle for a playoff spot as the OWHA-Southern regular season winds down to the final month.

Kylin Wilson, Meghan Graham and Brooklynn Ahrens explained to the Times what it means to be in the Aces' leadership group.

"It's honestly such an honour. Like, I came into the organization last year. I came in with a bunch of older girls, and I looked up to them a lot. And to be able to fill a spot like they did last year is just an honour to me, and I'm trying my best to fill it coming in so young," Wilson said.

"I was really honoured to be part of the leadership group this year. Last year, we had some really strong people that I definitely look up to. I really want to kind of put into action what they laid down last year, which is just the idea of humility and hard work and just lifting each other up and just a real competitiveness and wanting to win, but we still like winning together as a group," Graham said.

"I got here this year. It's my first year on the Aces team and I'm really enjoying it. Everyone's just a big family. We all work together well, the dressing room dynamics are awesome, and everyone's super nice, especially the coaches. So, I'm really enjoying it," Ahrens said.

"It's great being a role model for the

other girls on our team. I've been really enjoying that."

On Jan. 21, the Aces announced defenceman Bronwyn Hawkins has committed to play for the University of Michigan-Dearborn next year. Hawkins commented on joining the university program.

"I'm very grateful for all the support I've gotten from all my coaches over the years and teammates and everything. I'm just excited to go there next year and just see what the next chapter holds for me," Hawkins said.

Heading into the weekend game against the first-place Waterloo Ravens at the Stratford Rotary Complex on Jan. 24, the Aces are in the eighth and final playoff spot, one point ahead of the Owen Sound Ice Hawks, with a record of 4-8-3.

The Aces are coming off a critical 1-1 draw against the Kitchener Lady Rangers on Jan. 18. Head coach Sean Cameron says the team is feeling confident going into another pivotal test against

Waterloo.

"We're battling for a playoff spot and every point that we can get is important to us. I was so impressed with the girls last week. That's a big point to pick up, and we're trying to make a push for the playoffs, and every point counts," Cameron said.

"So, this week at practice, we were focusing on some fundamentals. It's just executing the game plan, and as we've kind of grown, we had a new team, and as we've been growing, the girls are getting used to the system. They're starting to execute in the system, and we're seeing results. It's been great, and Waterloo is going to be a tough game for us, for sure."

Wilson says the team expects to improve and secure a playoff spot.

"The focus for our upcoming games is to get seven points to get into the playoffs and not have to worry about other teams helping us out. I think with the work we're putting in at practice, we should be

able to get there. Girls have been working hard, putting in the work, so we should be good," Wilson said.

The Ravens opened the scoring halfway through the first period. Stratford had two powerplay opportunities in the opening frame but were unable to generate a goal.

The game remained 1-0 through two periods until Graham, on the powerplay, buried the loose puck past the Waterloo net to tie the game with 2:45 left. But heartbreak ensued over 30 seconds later as Waterloo scored from a tight angle near the Stratford blueline for the winning goal. Waterloo added one more with 23.2 left to seal the win.

Despite being rewarded with the loss, Aces netminder Sloan Cameron stood tall in between the pipes for the home side throughout the game and kept the division leaders in check.

Cameron says the team fought hard and will take this game as part of the young squad's learning process.

"They were good today. We played with them for two solid periods. We went back and forth with them. In the third period, we finally got one squeak by their goaltender, and then we gave one up in the last two minutes," Cameron said.

"Then they put the empty net goal in. So, it hurt a little bit, but it's back to the drawing board, and sometimes you've got to learn a lesson the hard way."



U18 Warriors looking to continue progress as regular season reaches the homestretch

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

In the 2025-2026 ALLIANCE regular season, the Stratford U18 AA Warriors are in the final stretch. With seven games remaining, the Warriors are in eighth spot in the league, but in the fourth seed in the six-team ALLIANCE Constellation AA Playdowns if the regular season concluded at press time.

In addition to the playoff push, the players are also completing their exams, adding to the psychological grind as of late.

Head coach Riley Mathieson is optimistic about the team's potential and its preparation for the postseason but understands that a balance is needed to help the players focus both athletically and academically.

"I'm happy with the team's performance right now. We have a couple of

tough games ahead between Waterloo and the London Knights Green. It's also exam time for our boys in high school right now, so we are juggling that, but so far, I'm happy with our performance, and we're looking to improve it in a couple of areas as we get closer to the push before playoffs," Mathieson said.

"Both are extremely important, obviously, right now, with the time that they're at in school, it trumps hockey as it should. But I think it's important that the boys learn the life skill of being able to juggle more than just one life event, and I'm not worried about it, something we're going to have to navigate for a week or so. But other than that, it'll be right back to business once again, into a new semester."

Team captain Owen Blain believes the team is generating good chemistry in time for the inevitable stretch run to the

playdowns.

"The start of the season was a little rough. We didn't find everything. We didn't find out what we needed to do early in the season. But as the season kept going, it started to get better. We got some wins, some two-win weekends," Blain said.

"We got a nice tournament win (Ajax). We've been trending upwards since mid-November and started December. So, it's nice to see the boys starting to mesh, really getting together and getting some runs."

On Jan. 23, the Warriors travelled to Waterloo for their road matchup with the Wolves.

The home side opened the scoring with 2:30 left in the first period. The Warriors tied the game with 4:48 remaining in the second period, but Waterloo retook the lead 84 seconds into the third period and

doubled the lead with 6:22 to go in the period.

Stratford closed the deficit to within one on the powerplay with 3:35 left and pressed on for an equalizer on the six-on-four powerplay late in the game. Despite their best efforts, the Warriors came up short, and Waterloo iced the game with an empty-net goal to win 4-2.

The Warriors returned to the road for their game against the London Jr. Knights Green on Jan. 26.

London opened the scoring with 2:36 left in the opening frame. Stratford responded on the powerplay with 79 seconds remaining in the second period, but the home side retook the lead and held on for a 2-1 win.

Next up for the Warriors is the U18 Bowling Green Tournament at Bowling Green University in Ohio from Jan. 30 to Feb. 2.

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MINOR SPORTS **SCRAPBOOK**



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Luke Price backhands the puck from the wing towards the net during the U11 Stratford Warriors game last Wednesday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Dylan Hansen unleashes a heavy shot on goal during last Wednesday's U12 BB Stratford Warriors game.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Grace Elliott fires a shot on target from the wing during the U15 BB Stratford Aces game this past Sunday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Emmie Rider loads up a shot from the point during this past Sunday's U18 AA Stratford Aces game.

U16 Lakers take care of business on the road

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Huron-Perth U16 AAA Lakers travelled to the southwest corner of Ontario for their two road games against the Sun County Panthers and the Windsor Jr. Spitfires.

Head coach Jason Brooks says the team's priority is to properly execute their game plan to pick up the wins over the weekend.

"We just must focus on us right now. I mean, we know both teams are outstanding, very competitive, and have some talented individual players, but we have to execute our game. We got to execute our details and our systems and manage the puck, make good puck decisions," Brooks said.

"We don't have possession of the puck. We want to make sure we defend well, get back on the side, put people up and obviously, get possession back so you can get the puck in the offensive zone and hopefully get some balls."

Power forward Joseph Haskett says he emulates his game after Brady Martin of the Soo Greyhounds of the Ontario Hockey League. Haskett says the focus is to provide.

"Just to say, I want to take it as far as I can and maybe try to get my school paid for," Haskett said.

On Jan. 24, the Lakers travelled to Leamington to face the Sun County Panthers.

Blake Moore opened the scoring for the Lakers early in the first period with his third of the season from Callum Brooks and Declan McCotter. The Panthers tied the game 3:50 into the second period, but it was all uphill from there for the Lakers.

Ethan Bridges notched his 10th of the season from McCotter and Brooks at the halfway mark of the middle frame, followed by Brooks scoring his 17th of the season from McCotter and Moore with four seconds remaining in the period to give the visitors a 3-1 lead after two periods.

The Lakers continued the goal-scoring barrage in the third as Moore got his second of the game, 39 seconds into the period, from Colten Van Geffen and Evan Fisher. Bridges scored his second and third goals of the game in under a minute apart, and an unassisted goal by Tanner Luczka capped off the 7-1 rout over the Panthers.

Brooks and McCotter each led the Lakers with four points, while Fisher led the team with the hat trick. In total, eight different Lakers registered a point in the win. Netminder Rylan Da Costa picked up the win in net.

The following day, the Lakers headed to Windsor for their matchup with the Jr. Spitfires.

McCotter notched his 25th of the season from Moore and Van Geffen to open the scoring for the Lakers 25 seconds into the first period. The score remained 1-0 until Windsor responded with the goal of their own in the second period, and the game headed into the

third period at one apiece.

Windsor took the lead 4:49 into the third period, but Bridges from Fisher and McCotter on the powerplay at the halfway point of the third period tied the game for the visitors. The Lakers restored their one-goal lead after Haskett notched his seventh of the season from Fisher and Mathieu Lapan with 8:34 remaining.

McCotter from Fisher and Sullivan Kipfer, with 7:08 remaining, provided insurance for the Lakers, and Haskett's second of the game with 5:13 left sealed the game for the Lakers. McCotter and Fisher led the team with three points each, and nine different Lakers tallied a point in the win. Tyler Wilkinson got the win between the pipes for the Lakers.

With the sweep, the Lakers took over first place in the ALLIANCE U16 league standings, one point ahead of the London Jr. Knights, their next opponent on Feb. 1 at the Stratford Rotary Complex.

Stratford skaters earn strong results at recent events



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured in the front row, from left to right, are Izzy Pritchard and Laura Need. In the middle row, from left, are Tatum McCallum-Moesker, Caleigh Moylan, and Madeleine Milton. In the back row, from left, are Samantha Dominguez, Laine Moylan, and Melanie Milton. Pictured individually is Bella, who earned a silver medal in the Star-Three Group 18 division of the Star One-Four East Gwillimbury skating competition Jan. 16-18. Dominguez captured the gold in Star-One Group Seven. Pritchard earned silver in Star-Two Group 10. Need took silver in Star-Two Group 15. McCallum-Moesker brought home the silver medal in Star-One Group Five. Madeleine Milton claimed silver in Star-Two Group Seven. Caleigh Moylan picked up the bronze in Star-Two Group 10. Melanie Milton finished with the bronze medal in Star-Three Group Seven. Laine Moylan placed seventh in Star-Four U13 Group Three. Kylie Klassen, pictured in the photo on the right, earned a bronze medal in Star-Three Group 11.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Pictured in the front row, from left to right, are Kylie Klassen, Jane McCutchen, Gracie Sutherland, and Katerina Schmidt. In the back row, from left, are Jaida Ford, Alexa Klassen, Amy Schroder, Nicole Verhoef, Tessa Bell, and Mason Clemmer. At the Provincial Series No. 10 Milton Winter Skate event, Jan. 16-18, Clemmer placed second in Star-Eight Men and fourth in Star-Seven Men O12. Alexa Klassen finished second in Star-Five Women O13 Non-Qualifying and sixth in Star-Five Artistic Group Two. Schroeder took second in Star-Seven Artistic Group One, eighth in Star-Six Women Group Three, and 13th in Star-Seven Women O12 Group Three. Verhoef came in fourth in Star-Five Women O13 Group Four and sixth in Star-Seven Artistic Group Two. McCutcheon was sixth place in Star-Five Women U13 Non-Qualifying. Schmidt finished sixth in Star-Five Women U10 Non-Qualifying. Ford placed 12th in Star-Five Women U13 Non-Qualifying. Sutherland came in 13th in Star-Five Women U13 Non-Qualifying. Bell took 16th in Star-Five Women O13 Non-Qualifying.

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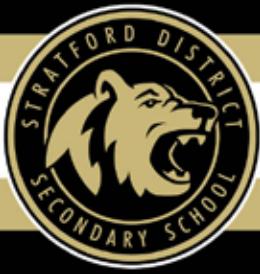
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COMING EVENTS

Friday, Jan 30	Poutine and Draft Night - 5:00 - 9:00 p.m. \$20 per person Call Dave 519-703-6544 or the Legion 519-271-4540 for tickets.
Sunday, Feb 8	Treat a loved one Pork Tenderloin 3 course served dinner \$25 per person Take out 4:30 p.m., Dine in 5:00 p.m.
Wednesday, Feb 11	Ladies Auxiliary Sweet n Sour Chicken Luncheon, \$16 Call Mary Helen 519-273-1389 for reservation
Thursday, Feb 19	Burger and Fry Night, pick-up 5:00-5:30, dine-in 5:30, 2/\$25 or \$13 each NO Reservation required
Friday, Feb 20	Friday Night Euchre, \$20 per team. Call Dave 519-703-6544, Anne 519-301-0914 or the Legion 519-271-4540 to register your team
Saturday, Feb 28	Heartburn Day, Rotary Complex, 11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. Come visit our booth and help support Heart and Stroke.
Wednesday, Mar 11	Ladies Auxiliary Luncheon, to be determined. \$16 Call Mary Helen 519-273-1389 for reservation
Friday, Mar 27	Friday Night Euchre, \$20 per team. Call Dave 519-703-6544, Anne 519-301-0914 or the Legion 519-271-4540 to register your team
Sunday, Mar 29	Easter Buffet, Ham and Scalloped Potatoes salad and dessert bar Dine in ONLY, 5:00 p.m., \$30 adults, \$15 6-14, 5 and under eat free Call for reservation Frank 519-271-9669 or Legion 519-271-4540

Tuesday Morning Buddy Check, 10:00 a.m. -12:00 p.m. OPEN to all Veterans Widows and First Responders
Friday Afternoon Weekly Social 3:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
Saturday Afternoon Meat Draw doors open at 2:00 p.m., meat draw starts at 4:00 p.m.

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stratfordlegion008@gmail.com



BLACK AND GOLD Edition



INTRODUCING THE BLACK AND GOLD EDITION

Welcome to the first ever Black and Gold edition of the Stratford Times, a new fixture of our paper you can find in the last edition of each month. In each edition, you can read the many talented student journalists writing for SDSS' popular student newspaper The Black and Gold.

OPINION: Five Things

AVERY VAN NYNATTEN

Black and Gold correspondent

If younger me met myself today, I wouldn't be able to recognize myself.

Grade 11. Day five. Packed. I scrambled into the first seat I found.

"Welcome! Going around is an attendance sheet and the classroom code is on the board," said Peer, the president. The first meeting felt, well ... I felt I shouldn't have been there. Everyone was chatting, being loud, having fun. But Aaliyah and I felt trapped at the back of Ms. Craig's room, unable to escape. After that meeting, I didn't want to go back at all. Aaliyah was the one who nudged and meddled and nagged me until I told her I'd try it again. It never got better. Every meeting I sat there and listened, kept my mouth shut, and never volunteered to do anything. Why would I even go if I don't do anything? Going there really just felt like meeting, after

meeting, after meeting. Aaliyah wanted me to... volunteer? I did it for her, because she's done so much for me. It's really only fair. So I obliged and decided I would sell tickets one day at lunch with her. It wasn't awful, which was odd. Why was this thing I've been despising turning out to actually be enjoyable?

Meetings went by, a few events happened. And finally I started to feel like I belonged. I started to talk to new people, even had a few conversations with Peer, someone who initially intimidated me. I looked forward to every Tuesday, where Aaliyah, the friends we have convinced, and I would cram into the Student Council room and actually talk, participate and volunteer for dances, spirit weeks – everything really.

After more time, I became a key member of the council. I took a large role in the winter semi, offering to set up and

CONTINUED TO PAGE 13

Growing the future of SDSS: Green Industries course spotlight

NADINE EGGER

Black and Gold correspondent

Dig into this program at Stratford District Secondary School (SDSS), offering a personalized, unique and skill building experience. This course is not your typical "sit at a desk and take notes" high school class. Green Industries allow students to get out of the regular classroom and make nature their learning environment, in the school gardens or greenhouse. This program fosters curiosity and experience all while students learn about sustainability and innovation within nature.

Ms. Howe is the current teacher of the program who has recently taken it over from the now retired Ms. Ritsma, who started and led the program for five years. Ms. Howe expressed some of the opportunities her first class got to experience. During the course they hatched chicks and worked as a class to create a "chicken proposal" to keep chickens as a part of the Green Industries experience. It promoted sustainability for the students and crossed into science when learning about the cycle of the eggs and how chicks grow through observation. Students researched policies and procedures they must follow to be allowed chickens for the course. For the Grade 8 open house in November, Ms. Howe brought in a baby black angus calf, so current and future students got to connect with animals found in the farms around us. Ms. Howe expressed the importance of students understanding the

agriculture industry that plays such a large role in Perth County. Additionally, this course also promotes a variety of career pathways including unique occupations like homeopathic medicine.

Sustainability is a word heard so often in the media and society, but in Green Industries, students get to learn what sustainability truly is, what it looks like and how to be more sustainable. Ms. Howe explained how the past semester has been focused on understanding the natural environment and lifecycles so they can learn how to protect it. The students had the special opportunity to listen to a guest speaker from the Lake Head University master's program of forestry management and environmental science during their fungi unit. The speaker taught the students about the anatomy of forests and its relation to fungi and how caring for our world sometimes means allowing nature to be undisturbed.

Green Industry students greatly benefit from the bounty of skills they learn, establish and grow throughout the semester. The course holds an annual plant sale in the spring, where students get to learn about marketing and business skills prior to the event. In addition, the course allows the class to use yard tools, for example a weed trimmer or a lawn mower, which students might have never been able to use at home. Proper lessons about workplace safety are taught to the students so they are safe throughout the course. Ms. Howe stressed how collaboration is a strong con-

cept through the course, as she gets the class to practice brainstorming as a group rather than individually trying to problem solve. The hands-on projects give the students a chance to work together with each other's strengths and weaknesses to get the job done. The greenhouse can also be a tighter space for class, so students had to adapt to work together in a small space. Leadership is promoted throughout the course, as students work on presentation skills in a relaxed environment and Ms. Howe gives students a sense of ownership of "their own piece of land" to redesign and plan. Ms. Howe also lets the students lead the topics covered throughout the semester and embeds the curriculum into the students' curiosities. The class is tailored to the individual class themselves to create a personalized and more engaging learning experience for the students.

In terms of recently taking over the program this past September, Ms. Howe communicated that it has been a very exciting experience. It has been fun revamping the core curriculum to reflect who the students are and what they are curious about. She enjoys the opportunity to continue to build a course that has the ability to change with the students themselves and our ever-changing world.

"The best part," she stated, "is that it is rooted in the values of our community and the school."

Her favourite part of the class is not just the curriculum she teaches, but the students. She described watching the stu-

dents engage, succeed and learn as "satisfying." In the course they embrace not being successful all the time and take the opportunity to problem solve together and try again. Ms. Howe has also faced challenges adopting the course, such as time constraints, as she only has a class for 75 minutes a day, and it's hard to brainstorm mini projects that won't take all day. She explained how staying on budget will always be a challenge and she is always thinking about ways to seek donations or reduce costs in other ways but still give the students the true Green Industries experience. Furthermore, she clarified that a bigger greenhouse would be beneficial as space limitation does make it harder to lead the program.

In conclusion, Ms. Howe described that of everything students experience throughout the course, she hopes they take away an understanding and respect for nature, plants and animals. She hopes that with all the fundamental principles she has embedded into the class, students will want to come back and build on their previous knowledge again the next year. But the class isn't all about just learning, it's about building those connections, sense of belonging and community. She wants her students to know that the greenhouse door is always open as a safe spot to them even when they are not currently in her class. The Green Industries program is an opportunity for students to grow their skills, their connection with nature, their future and their school community.



BLACK AND GOLD Edition

Life lessons from *The Simpsons* writer, producer Tim Long

NANAKO UENO

Black and Gold correspondent

The annual Tim Long Creative Writing Competition at Stratford District Secondary School (SDSS) is back, hosted by *The Simpsons* writer Tim Long. Ahead of its deadline on March 1, the Black and Gold edition sat down with Tim Long for a Q-and-A.

What made you become a writer?

I grew up reading and writing stories and was a big reader. I kept writing for a long time (newspaper at school, etc.) and wanted to exchange ideas and (talk) with other writers.

Was there a moment when you felt the job as a writer was the right path?

I wrote a newspaper in high school and people/teachers were encouraging. I found out big cities like Toronto would also become encouraged with my writing and this was when I chose to pursue this path.



The annual Tim Long Creative Writing Competition at Stratford District Secondary School (SDSS) is back, hosted by *The Simpsons* writer Tim Long. Ahead of its deadline on March 1, the Black and Gold edition sat down with Tim Long for a Q-and-A.

Was there anything you might approach differently?

No, I sometimes suffer from anxiety and nervousness, but I always have been bold in trying things. My philosophy being, "If it's not going to kill you, you might as well do it," the worst thing could happen as a writer is being said "no" or not being responded to, which is not too bad.

How did you start producing *The Simpsons*?

Before that I had been working at the *Late Show with David Letterman* for three years, then my friend recommended me to join *The Simpsons*. Its important to be contact with as many people as possible.

What is writing and producing for you?

It is a constant process that never ends. My two personalities, introvert and extrovert, comes through my job. My introvert part is the writing part where I sit and write scripts, and my extrovert part is talking to different departments to create

what I want for the episode.

What lines do you live by?

Try new things and be nice to people.

What kind of ideas are you hoping to see in the contest?

I would like to see people trying something different to be original and express your true selves!

What would you say to people who are unsure about submitting their works?

Do it! Try something new to search and find what you are capable of.

Tim Long was born on June 14, 1969 in Brandon, Man., and grew up in Exeter, Ont. He worked for a spy magazine before joining the *Late Show with David Letterman* and wrote for several years before joining *The Simpsons*. Long has been a writer since 1990 and has received six Emmy awards. Each year, he hosts the Tim Long Creative Writing Competition at SDSS.

Those interested in applying can see Ms. Craig for details.

OPINION: Five Things

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

take down and do coat check and do ticket sales. Planning this dance made me feel important, valued and, most importantly, gave me core memories that changed who I am.

While doing coat check, after all the getting names, writing numbers, and running with coats, Peer came up and started chatting with us about random stuff, our classes, the weather, then he dropped a question that I could have never anticipated.

"Are you running for an exec position, Avery?"

The booming music stopped, whatever my hand was writing stopped. I think even my heart may have stopped. Everything stopped, or at least it did for me. He could tell by my silence that I had never thought about it.

"Come on, you'd rock it! You have everything that would make a good president."

President? I guess I'd never thought that I was good enough. I mean, it's me. Not involved. Quiet. Trapped. I haven't

looked at myself as the involved, devoted, well-spoken person Peer looked at me as. After taking the time to reflect on how I've changed, I had become who Peer saw me as: a devoted leader and someone who really has a passion for what he does.

I decided, why not? Why not run? I would be really good at it, my only real obstacle has ever been myself.

So, I applied for president, and sure enough, now I'm president. Summer passed, and school is back in.

Grade 12. Day five. Packed. I calmly walk in the room and up towards the front of the classroom, ready to start.

"Welcome, going around is an attendance sheet, and the classroom code is on the board." Says... me. The president. The first meeting felt... right. I was chatting, being loud, and having fun. I see Aaliyah, my used-to-be-trapped best friend in the swamp of the crowd, chatting away, living the life.

At the start of Grade 11, I would have laughed at you if you told me who I've become. It's all thanks to the five things

that I've learned from Peer and Student Council:

Believe in yourself. Your biggest enemy is almost always yourself. If you trust yourself, you are more willing to take risks, which means you'll do great things, and learn from your mistakes.

Teamwork. You have people with you to help; you don't need to do it all alone. Asking for help shouldn't scare you.

Learn to work well. If you enjoy what you're doing or know strategies that help you stay motivated, it doesn't really feel like work. That saying "Pick a job you like, and you'll never work a day in your life" is a quote that I use to inspire me to reach for what I want to do, instead of what I'm told to do.

Helping others feels good. Smiles that you cause are priceless. And executing a big event for others to have fun makes you feel on the top of the world. Have and be a role model.

Find someone you aspire to be. Talk to them. Ask them questions. The only way to learn from them is to want to learn.

Who knows, maybe someone will look at me the way I look at my role models? When I look at who I've become in the past year, the biggest changes have come from Student Council.

Dear Aaliyah, thank you for dragging me into student council. You may not realize it, but you have forever changed the way I view myself, I view things and view people. The lessons I have learned – not directly because of you, but because of your actions – are truly priceless and are lessons that will carry me throughout the rest of my life. Thank you.

Dear Peer, I wish you were still here to fully see how much I've changed. Thanks to you, I've learned to believe in myself, let people help me, learned how to work efficiently, and the feeling you get when you help other people. And most importantly, thank you for being my role model. I couldn't have asked for anyone better. Hopefully I get to help someone the way you got to help me.

Thank you for changing my life, Avery.

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Owner's bid to use stucco on downtown building denied; City investigating heritage loan program

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At last Monday's Stratford city council meeting, Craig Foster, owner of 23 Downie St., petitioned council to let him repair his building with a "logical fix."

"We're asking to put stucco on it, which is a 100-year-old exterior finish," Foster said the evening of Jan. 26. "I really believe that we are in our right to fix the building the way it should be fixed."

The building, located downtown in the city's heritage conservation district, is currently where Resonance Fashion is located. After Foster noticed paint peeling on the back wall facing the Albert Lot car park, he applied for a heritage alteration permit last spring. He argued that the existing brick of the building was beyond repair and needed replacing, pointing to other buildings in the downtown core.

Staff and the heritage committee, however, were of the opinion that the brick façade was not beyond repair and should be repaired by removing the paint and repointing the brick. The owner would be permitted to repaint the brick, according to the city's heritage standards, but the preference would be for the original brick to remain, according to Adam Betteridge, director of building and planning.

Being a heritage building in the conservation district, the building is subject to more stringent standards than other buildings. For the type of building the subject property is, "the original masonry must be



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

The owner's bid to use stucco to replace the back façade of 23 Downie St. was denied by Stratford city council this council, as the building is in a heritage conservation district. From this decision, city staff have been directed to investigate a new loan program to help protect downtown heritage and mitigate owners' costs.

retained wherever possible. If repair and/or reconstruction is necessary, the new brick or stonework shall match the appearance of the original as closely as possible, in colour, shape and/or pattern," according to the heritage conservation district's standards.

"I don't understand how repairing the brick and then painting the brick can be a logical way of approaching the problem," Foster explained. "And I do not also un-

derstand how a finished stucco wall, that is also a solid colour once it's painted, can be of any less historical (value) or aesthetically pleasing. ... It just seems to me to be a very logical fix to the solution. It's on the back of the building, facing the parking lot. There's several buildings already that façades are on the parking lot that have stucco on them. So it's not like it would be a brand-new thing."

In a unanimous decision, council denied

Foster's permit. Many councillors around the horseshoe pointed to the lack of a professional opinion supporting Foster's claim that the brick was beyond repair – something they encouraged Foster to investigate. There are no city fees for applying for a permit and nothing restricting Foster from submitting another application for the same project.

Although Coun. Larry McCabe voted to deny Foster's permit, he was sympathetic as a downtown property owner himself.

"I have also (owned) a building which was in a similar state with bricks that were popping off and it became a hazard and needed to be addressed," McCabe said. "The longer-term solution was to repoint the brick ... and have it restored to the condition it was in years ago. And I think that provided a good solution, and ultimately a long-term solution for the building, which maintains the heritage of Stratford and our heritage conservation area, which I think is extremely important."

To that end, McCabe put forward a motion to have staff investigate "a levy-neutral property-secured heritage façade and masonry loan program under the Community Improvement Plan, targeted to the heritage conservation district, funding up to 50 per cent of eligible costs, capitalized from the unallocated funds of the proceeds of the city-owned Vivian Line land sale, structured with a Bank of Canada linked interest rate."

The motion was passed unanimously, with only Couns. Mark Hunter and Taylor Briscoe absent from the vote.



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Spring Works~Puppet Works! presents 'My Great Work' a micro-puppet performance

LISA CHESTER

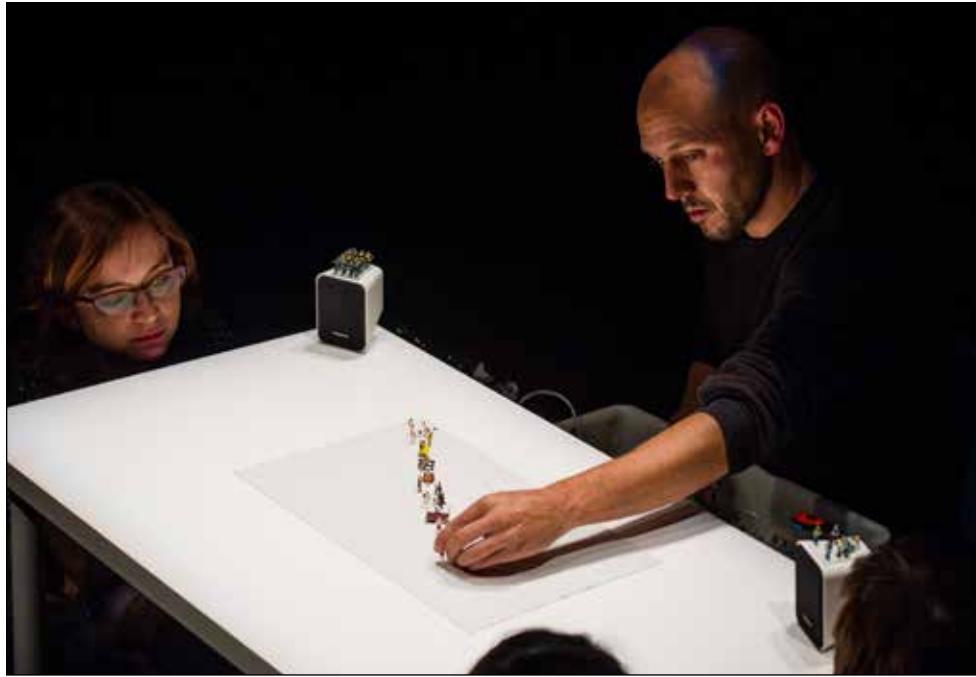
Times Correspondent

Imagine what could be done with an unlimited budget, the largest theatre in the world, 300 actors on stage, a military orchestra, a rock band, animals, cars and a helicopter, but on a micro-stage. This is what "My Great Work" by David Espinosa from Spain brings to the audience this Valentine's Day weekend. The award-winning artist comes to Stratford while touring more than 30 countries over the years.

At a scale of 1:87, the petite performance uses miniatures to tell short stories in the one hour show to be held at Falstaff Family Centre Feb. 13 at 7 p.m. and Feb. 14 at 1 p.m., 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

"I saw this particular work by David Espinosa and was blown away by just the concept and the skill and the storytelling and how you can say something incredibly profound by moving two objects. It's micro-puppetry and I think the scale is 1:87," said Eileen Smith, artistic director for SpringWorks Festival.

The performance is an intimate one with a maximum audience size of 20 for each show. The table-top scene where the stories take place will be enhanced by opera glasses to watch the puppetry in action. Step into the inventive world Espino-



(ALEX BRENNER PHOTO)

David Espinosa from Barcelona Spain, brings his creative micro-puppet show to Falstaff Family Centre for four separate shows on Valentine's Day weekend.

sa has created, a dynamic visual universe without words, as it demonstrates a commentary on the reality artists and global citizens inhabit.

"It's in a sense like a cabaret, a set of short stories. Some of them are funny, some of them are serious, and some of

them are thought-provoking. For instance, a life story of a couple meeting and marrying and then just going through the cycle of life is one of the stories," Smith said.

Espinosa has travelled the world with his micro-puppets. Currently coming off a tour of Kelowna and Calgary, Spring-

Works was invited to be a part of the tour.

"We work really hard to make international artists' journeys affordable and environmentally respectful. The heavy lifting was done in Kelowna and grants were applied for in Spain as well as Canada. We are so lucky that people want to work together and make the world a better place. It'll help people to have unusual, curious, insightful art brought to your hometown," said Smith.

With the show running about an hour, not to mention on Valentine's Day weekend, this can be an exciting experience as part of an afternoon coffee date or a night out for dinner and a show, perhaps. Additionally, there is the ticketing choice of the Champagne Exclusive. With this offering, you will enjoy the show and receive your choice of a beverage: wine, beer, cider, prosecco or a non-alcoholic option, a selection of sweet and savoury nibbles and you can chat with artist Espinosa after the show.

"You have a range of ways to celebrate your love of puppetry or your love of whosoever would be fun to invite – be it a friend, a colleague, a loved one – just to celebrate love because the world so needs to celebrate love right now," said Smith.

For more information and to purchase tickets online, visit www.springworksfestival.ca.

Emm Gryner to debut new single, 'Touch the Sky' at Foster's Dinner Concert

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

Juno Award nominee, singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Emm Gryner will be appearing in an intimate dinner concert at Foster's downtown Stratford on Feb. 20. Fans of Gryner are sure to snap up tickets for this performance where she will debut her new single, "Touch the Sky."

Gryner has played many stages in many places, but looks forward to the intimacy that Foster's presents. She has played there several times before and enjoys the connection with the audience.

"It's really nice to be able to see the reactions on people's faces and the kind of artist that I am, I like to interact with people between songs so it's a venue that you can do that. I also really like that people get to enjoy a nice meal there so a lot of their senses are being hopefully soothed. It's a special place that I have spent a lot of the time at over the years," said Gryner.

The show will encompass a little bit of everything, with a setlist prime for such a setting. Look forward to the new single written by Gryner, Juno winner Steve MacKinnon (Marc Jordan, Serena Ryder) and Michael Holmes, acclaimed poet. The uplifting song was created to com-



(HILL PEPPARD PHOTO)

Foster's Dinner Concert Series presents Juno nominated Emm Gryner in an intimate evening of music on Feb. 20.

memorate Canadian Space Agency astronaut Jeremy Hansen's role in NASA's historic Artemis II mission, the first crewed journey around the Moon since the Apollo missions, and a defining milestone in Canada's space history.

"I became friends with Catherine Han-

sen, Jeremy Hansen's wife. At the time I didn't know she was married to an astronaut but knowing that I was a musician she was talking casually about there being a song to commemorate this historic moment of the first Canadian going around the moon. I didn't really start

working on it until April, but the inspiration comes from my fascination of space and space exploration. But also, not a lot happens without love in our lives, and family, and Catherine and Jeremy are the perfect example of a couple that have really supported each other through a lot of significant things in their lives. So 'Touch the Sky' is a love song but also a love song to Canada too."

Upon hearing the song, she hopes the audience can appreciate it on two levels. The production level of the song plays into her love of David Foster-like anthem songs in the vein of "Tears are not Enough," where they worked hard to capture emotion in the song. The second level is to tap into the connection between love and family and dreaming.

"Every time I play a song the first time, it's pretty nerve wracking. It takes that first performance to get over the hump and Foster's is a good place to debut the song. There's something special about the Stratford area, it feels like not only the performers are creative, but the audiences are equally as creative. I really look forward to performing there," said Gryner.

Emm Gryner's appearance is part of Foster's dinner concert series. For tickets online visit www.fostersinn.com and click on Buy Concert Series Tickets.

Optimism Place looking for volunteers to bring Not OK. campaign to workplaces

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

After recruiting some volunteers to distribute Not OK. campaign materials in workplaces, Optimism Place is hoping to get more volunteers to expand distribution.

Optimism Place Women's Shelter and Support Services is looking for volunteers in Stratford and North Perth to distribute materials from the Not OK. campaign in the region's workplaces and businesses to raise awareness on intimate partner violence (IPV). Donna Jean Forster, executive director of Optimism Place, said that some volunteers came on board after the initial social media post on Jan. 16.

In addition to physical materials like tear-off posters in women's washrooms and workplace washrooms, there is an online resource for workplaces found on the Not OK. campaign website, <https://itsnotok.ca/be-a-workplace-champion>.

The web page lists signs employees may be experiencing IPV such as visible distress, isolation from colleagues and frequent disruptions. Employers can also explore Make It Our Business training, explore resources and request materials.

"In addition to having campaign materials, we can support people and we want to do that, but workplaces also have an obligation to support their employees who are experiencing intimate partner violence," Forster said.

Bill 177, for example, mandates that

Ontario workplaces must accommodate the needs of an employee or a child of an employee experiencing domestic violence by either providing time off or adjusting work hours unless it would cause the employer undue financial or safety hardships.

Forster said workplaces must ensure that their policies regarding IPV must be up-to-date and clearly written so employees can understand what happens if they experience IPV.

"If they're experiencing intimate partner violence, how do they disclose that in their workplace? What is available to them from their workplace if they're experiencing intimate partner violence? What happens when they disclose? Is it kept confidential? All of that should be included in the policy and employees should know about it," she said.

Since launching the Not OK. campaign on Nov. 25, 2025, there have been more than 1,000 website visitors and materials distributed across Stratford and Perth County public spaces like arenas and libraries.

"People have been really positive and we're hoping that continues, especially as spring arrives and it's easier for people to distribute the materials when you don't have to deal with the snowbanks," Forster said.

Anyone interested in volunteering to distribute materials to workplaces can either send an email to donnajean@optimismplace.com or call 519-271-5310 ext. 112.

Egg Farmers of Ontario hold annual local meeting

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

Newly re-elected director of Egg Farmers of Ontario's Zone 6, Sally Van Straaten, told the Times that the good news for egg eaters is that area egg farmers will be doing their best to keep shelves at grocery stores full with many types of Grade A eggs.

At last week's zone meeting in Stratford, which encompasses farmers from Perth and Waterloo counties, producers of both pullets (young growing hens) and eggs learned there is still a strong demand for all types of local eggs, including free run, free range, nest laid and Omega 3-in all those egg-types listed above.

Grade A large white eggs continue to be the most in demand at less than \$4 a dozen (the price of a dozen eggs in Florida on Jan. 25th was \$5.49 in U.S. dollars). Brown eggs and those on the organic shelves are still giving grocery buyers the choice they have come to expect.

About 37.3 million dozen shell eggs were sold in Ontario last year, a reported increase of 9.7 per cent over the year before.

Scott Helps, who continues to chair the Egg Farmers of Ontario board of directors, was in attendance, and assured producers that the cost of production continues to be undertaken, to assure both producers and consumers that Ontario farmed eggs, will compete with any country in the world on quality and price.

He said with independent provincial and federal inspections continually taking place on area farms, egg consumers should remain confident when seeing the "Egg Quality Assurance" logo and the "Start Clean, Stay Clean" stamp of approval from inspectors through Egg Farmers of Canada.

Helps also said, "Leaders in provincial and federal egg organizations want consumers to know, the eggs they are buying are of the highest quality from laying hens that are housed with their natural behaviours and comfort in mind.

"This would include perch and scratching areas," Helps continued. "Darkened egg laying and nesting areas, with an abundance of room, with quality air in winter or summer, fresh clean tested water and feed that is balanced to produce eggs with protein, vitamins and minerals that they have become known for, through past decades."

Van Straaten, an egg farmer from northwest of Stratford near Sebringville, was re-elected to represent the Perth-Waterloo area for another year. She has been in that roll for four years and says she and husband Mike have raised their four children, who are all involved in barn chores and the operation of their family farm with eggs and field crops, while also operating their on-farm drying and grain handling and storage facility.

Both Sally and Mike were raised on generational farms in Perth County, and their hope is one or all of their children will also be part of the ongoing family farm and operation in the years to come.

Van Straaten stated after she was elected, that her role as director has been an incredible journey, deepening her understanding of the egg industry and also the challenges faced – along with the opportunities that were ahead. She is committed to strong representation on the 10 member Ontario board, advocating for the best interest of Zone 6 egg farmers while supporting a sustainable and successful egg sector in Ontario.

SEE THE PHOTO ON PAGE 19

KEEPING THINGS IN BALANCE

(on the occasion of Stratford's Patricia O'Malley's appointment to the Order of Canada)

There is in the numbered column
a kind of patient beauty
that is there for all
though noticed by few.

And the same, I think,
can be said for the elusive margins,
where the truth cowers
like a garden mole,
there for all,
discovered by few.

Our Tricia has revelled in
these perceptions, always.

In rooms long ruled
by masculine assertion, she brought
precision instead of bravado,
a steady hand on the ledger
in a world that preferred estimates.

Balance sheets became her maps,
tracing fault lines beneath prosperity,
flagging risk before
it became ruin, counting not just
profit but consequence.

Standards once treated as footnotes
became her architecture –
frameworks durable enough
to cross borders,
principles that refused to be
conveniently flexible.

As Tricia has always said:
transparency is a moral act,
and disclosure
a kind of daylight,
because what we choose to measure
shapes what we choose to value.

Trailblazer, yes –
but also auditor of assumptions,
challenger of inherited norms,

keeper of the long view.

And now,
the Order of Canada,
no adjustments required,
no qualified opinion,
a recognition that balances perfectly:
service rendered,
leadership demonstrated,
a nation grateful
for accounts made clearer,
a future properly stated.

Yes, Tricia has always
seen the beauty in the numbered column,
the miracle of the spreadsheet,
the wonder of keeping
everything in balance...

in love
as in life

in life
as in love.

-- David Stones, Stratford poet laureate



(GARY WEST PHOTO)

in front- Sally Van Straaten, elected Zone Ontario Egg Farmer director for Perth and Waterloo counties, and Scott Helps, chair of Egg Farmers of Ontario, sit in front of Egg Zone councillors and delegates. Pictured here in the front row are: Julie Wynette, Erin Gerber, Rita Reynen, Paul Neeb, Scott Graham, Brett Graham and Kayla Veldman. In the back are Mike Ready, Clarence Martin, John Erica DeWeerd, Tyler Harper, Gary Wagler, Delmar Schultz, Henry Groenestege, Andy DeWeerd, Josh Veldman, Anthony DeWeerd and Rick Roes. Absent was Amanda Cook, Allan Drost, Adam West and Jeff Rundle.

Satisfy your sweet tooth and help animals in need with Bake for the Animals

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

The sweetest way to support the Humane Society of Kitchener-Waterloo Stratford Perth (HSKWSP) will return for February.

The Bake for the Animals fundraiser will take place for the month of February. Participants can host their own bake sale with their workplace, school or for their friends and family to raise money for the local humane society. Prizes will be awarded to the top fundraising groups.

"It's a great community grassroots opportunity to support the humane society," said Victor Dinh, manager of events and partnerships.

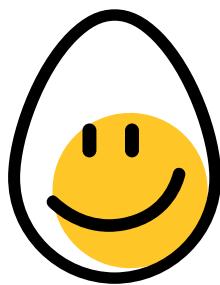
Stopping by a participating business on the Pastry Path will also support Bake for the Animals. Bakeries and restaurants in Kitchener-Waterloo, Stratford and Perth County with treats for humans and dogs alike will donate proceeds from the sales

of a special baked good to the HSKWSP and participants can collect stamps for their passport. Completed Pastry Path Passports can lead to a chance of winning prizes such as a KitchenAid stand mixer.

Fundraisers like Bake for the Animals support the humane society's programming and services, as the organization is reliant on financial donations.

"What a lot of people don't realize is that the humane society is a completely not-government funded organization, so we rely very heavily on the support and the generosity of the communities that we both operate and serve in and the work that we do is not only is a second-chance for animals to find their forever homes, but we also provide a plethora of community services that are designed to help keep animals in loving homes," Dinh said.

For more information about getting involved with Bake for the Animals, visit <https://kwsphumane.ca/events/bake-for-the-animals>.



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

AMANDA NELSON

Times 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



(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

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 honestly 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?"

Although 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 Cross-

Fit, 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 absolutely 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 givecan.keela.co/rise-and-run or dropped off in person at Optimism Place, marked to support Sydney's Rise and Run.

Huron-Perth receives cold weather warning

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

A period of very cold wind chills persisted this week in Huron-Perth, according to Environment and Climate Change Canada.

In response, Huron Perth Public Health (HPPH) is again reminding the public that very cold temperatures can pose risks for cold-related injuries, including frostnip (mild frostbite), frostbite and hypothermia, all of which can be prevented.

Additionally, cold weather can worsen existing health conditions, particularly those affecting the heart or lungs. Health risks are highest for people experiencing homelessness, older adults, infants and children, people with pre-existing health conditions such as heart or lung disease and those who work or enjoy recreation outdoors.

To prevent cold-related injuries and ensure the safety of yourself, your family, and others from the dangers of very cold temperatures:

- Check the weather. Verify conditions before going out. Keep children indoors when it's -27°C or colder (including wind chill).
- Check on others. Ensure friends, family and neighbours are warm and safe, both indoors and outdoors.
- Dress appropriately. Wear layers, including a hat, gloves, a scarf, warm socks and waterproof boots.
- Recognize cold injuries. Be aware of frostnip, frostbite and hypothermia. Monitor vulnerable individuals for

symptoms.

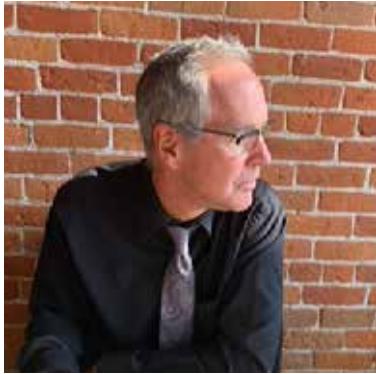
- Stay warm and dry. Seek shelter from the cold and take breaks indoors. Change into dry clothing if you get wet and drink warm beverages (avoid alcohol and caffeine).
- Travel safely. Avoid unnecessary travel when road conditions are poor. Keep an emergency kit in your vehicle.

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

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Opinions

UNTIL SOON. LIVE WELL: TIME SIGNATURE



STUART LENDER

Times Columnist

Let's pick an analogy between music and our lives, and by example let's illustrate it. There is a most profound quote once put forward by the continuously shape-shifting and forward-forging jazz giant, Miles Davis, and it is this: "When you hit a wrong note, it's the next note that makes it good or bad."

That is so brilliant on so many levels, and although it's clearly a reference to the forever undiscovered country of musical expression, it can be looked at as a metaphor for redemption, for-

giveness and life's never-ending practice. And like proficiency in musical endeavours, it is true as true can be that a large swath of life might feel as though it mimics the glorious crescendos of a sweeping symphony at times, or the weird and wonderful mood of a strange jazz time signature. But all too often, it still seems too little known, that musical genius comes from being practiced, over and over again, much like our lives should be – so that we can adapt and bring ourselves to a point where we feel somewhat satisfied with who we are in the world – for the moment at least – leaving the door to ourselves unlocked and open for alteration. For our own creation. Our own creation!

This is as it should be. Our living should be practiced continually. Change is not only what happens when something around us has shifted – our jobs or the places in which we live for example. The most important shifts happen within, through awareness of ourselves and how we feel, think and do. We need to be

awake for that, meaning not just in the act of feeling, thinking and doing, but a step back from our rehearsed expressions, asking ourselves either during or after the sense, the thought, the action – why? In these scenarios where we observe ourselves, it is never about other people, it is only about us. And of course it should be, under the circumstance, as "to know thyself" from one moment to the next is the major goal of our lives. Some people lately have called that "woke," tacking it onto all kinds of personal fears they haven't reckoned with and which allow them an excuse for poor behaviour, as if they don't want to be awake, rather more asleep, as if "woke" is some kind of bad word – when really what it means is to be aware, within the greater context of existence.

In keeping with the musical analogy of our lives, why should we want to expand our life's (musical) vocabulary? Because if we don't, we'll be listening to (read: doing/believing) the same old song, oblivious of ourselves and how what we do and say affects

others – we'd be like a playlist with gigabytes of storage for potentially new and unique musical styles but the 'repeat' button is stuck in the on position. And subconsciously, we, and potentially those around us, are getting tremendously bored listening to the one song over and over again. Our lives routine. Our opinions dull, unopened and unimaginative.

As for what allows us to break free from the monotony of ourselves sometimes – you might be surprised at how far a simple gesture or alteration in our behaviour can make a seismic shift within. And this is where the "wrong note" might lead to the right action. Much of the time it isn't a result of what happens in our daily lives that changes us in the long-term, it's our perspective on that thing. We cannot change the event; it has already taken place. Only what we think of it or how we see it can be altered, after the fact. We can choose and we can practice who it is we want to be and we will eventually, act accordingly – becoming the one

we are imagining. Miles Davis became a chameleon of personal style throughout the course of his musical explorations. But in our, perhaps, more humble endeavours: If one wants to feel more love in the world, practice being more loving. If one wants to be of service, do something outrageously compassionate. If one wants to potentially change their mood for the better – practice smiling more. We're not fixed in mind or body our whole lives.

How boring to resign ourselves to "this is who I am" as though we are already putting forward the excuse of "this is why I can't change" when deep down inside we are barring our own doors from being opened, denying potential for growth, hiding the truth from ourselves, which in all actuality, is: "this is why I won't change."

Stuart is a celebrant and the manager of Rutherford Cremation & Funeral Services. It is his privilege to serve, dispel myths, and give information concerning his field of compassionate service.

Emotional intelligence in an age of distraction



IRENE ROTH

Times Columnist

We live in an age where distraction is no longer occasional – it's the default setting. Phones buzz, tabs multiply, headlines refresh and conversations compete with screens. Even when life is calm, our minds can feel scattered, as if we're always slightly behind, slightly overwhelmed, and always "on." In this environment, emotional intelligence isn't just about managing feelings – it's also about protecting attention, because attention is the doorway to emotional balance. When your focus is pulled in ten directions, your emotions often follow and you may become reactive, impatient, anxious or oddly numb. That isn't a personal failing; it's

a predictable nervous-system response to constant input.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to notice what you feel, understand what's driving it, and choose your response with intention. In a distracted world, EI becomes a grounding skill. When you are continually interrupted, your brain stays in a mild stress response, scanning for what's next and bracing for what might go wrong. Over time, that can shrink your emotional capacity. Small inconveniences feel heavier. People's comments land harder. You may find yourself snapping, withdrawing or needing "something" to take the edge off. EI helps you intervene earlier – before distraction turns into chronic emotional fatigue.

One of the simplest ways to strengthen emotional intelligence is to practice pausing long enough to name what you're feeling. Distraction often shows up right when an emotion appears, because our minds want relief. The moment you feel uncertain, bored, lonely, pressured or overwhelmed, you might reach for your phone, open another tab, check the news, or scroll without thinking. A short pause breaks that automatic pattern.

It also helps to notice your personal "distraction triggers," because many distractions aren't about curiosity – they're about discomfort. For some people, distraction is a response to uncertainty: not knowing what to do next can feel intolerable, so the brain looks for quick stimulation. For others, it's frustration: when a task becomes difficult, a screen offers immediate relief. Sometimes the trigger is social discomfort, fatigue or sadness. When you can identify the feeling that precedes the distraction, you can respond to the real need underneath it.

Because distraction is so physical – so tied to the body's stress response – emotional intelligence in this era requires nervous-system care, not just good intentions. A simple reset can be done in under a minute. Let your shoulders drop, unclench your jaw and take one slow breath in. Then exhale longer than you inhale. That longer exhale sends a signal of safety to your body. It tells your system you are not in immediate danger, even if your thoughts feel urgent. This is important because a distracted mind often lives in "mini emergencies."

Another quiet but powerful EI practice is choosing single-task moments on purpose. Distraction trains us to do everything halfway. Emotional intelligence trains us to be here. You don't have to overhaul your life; you just need small pockets of presence. Drink a cup of tea without checking anything. Take a short walk without audio. Eat one meal without screens. When you give your brain a few minutes of undivided attention, you're not just improving concentration – you're restoring emotional steadiness. Presence is what allows you to notice subtle feelings before they build into big reactions.

In a distracted age, one of the most emotionally intelligent choices you can make is to create a boundary between stimulus and response. Constant stimulation trains quick reactions. You feel something and you act – reply, comment, defend, shut down, lash out. EI invites you to slow the response down. A helpful inner reminder is: "Just because I feel it doesn't mean I have to act on it." Feel the irritation, the urge to argue, the impulse to refresh the feed and give yourself a moment. Even a short

delay – 10 seconds, a minute, a short walk to another room – can keep you from saying something you don't mean or making a choice you regret.

Finally, it helps to replace "more input" with "more meaning." When we're overwhelmed, we often reach for more information, more updates, more noise, as if the next piece of content will settle us. But more input rarely equals more peace. Emotional intelligence asks a different question: "What would help me feel grounded right now?" Sometimes the answer is silence.

Distraction isn't just a modern habit; it's an emotional environment and it shapes how we react, how we relate and how we treat ourselves. Emotional intelligence is the skill that helps you live with clarity inside that environment. It helps you notice what's happening, regulate your nervous system, and return to what matters. You don't need perfect focus or endless willpower. You need small practices that bring you back – again and again – to your own steady centre. In an age that pulls you everywhere, emotional intelligence is the art of returning home to yourself.

Opinions

Canada lives

PETER RICE

Guest Columnist

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 conclusions 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. 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 cooperatively 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.

Stratford's 2026 real estate: Opportunities and challenges ahead

MAKLANE DEWEVER

Guest Columnist

In my last column, I recapped four major trends in 2025. In this issue, I will look ahead.

Last year, we saw almost as many sales as the previous year, but prices fell. When more people want to sell their houses than there are buyers, house prices face downward pressure because sellers must price their homes competitively to stand out.

Simply put, for prices to start rising again, more people need to be out there buying houses than selling them.

Eventually, this will happen. Below, I outline six trends to watch in 2026 that will shape when, how soon, and by how much.

Tailwinds

The return of affordability. After peaking in 2022, Stratford's median price has moderated, now sitting in the mid-500k range, with the average house selling for

over 600,000.

While we aren't back to 2019 levels, the "price-to-income" ratio is much healthier (see last month's column). A couple with a combined median income can now buy the median home. Still, measures to improve affordability are needed.

Buyers also have time to think, conduct home inspections, and negotiate – things that make the homebuying experience much more pleasant.

A stable interest rate floor. After beating down the first instance of inflation in decades (which, arguably, they were part of the cause) with higher interest rates, the Bank of Canada has been on a cutting spree.

Ratehub.ca now quotes the best five-year interest rate at 3.45 per cent. This has improved affordability and talk about "more cuts" has decreased. Stability is a positive; if you think rates will fall further, why buy now when you could lock in a lower rate later? The end of this wait-and-see

mentality could encourage some purchasing. Near-zero pandemic-era interest rates fueled the surge in house prices, and the hikes brought prices down. With that behind us, things should stabilize.

Pent-up demand. Life didn't stop just because prices went down. People still got married, changed relationships, retired, looked to downsize, wanted to enter the market, had kids or took new jobs in Stratford. Some people held off moving in 2024 and 2025 because prices fell or interest rates were high. Now that affordability has improved and rates have settled, those "life-event" buyers are returning. At a certain point, you can't outwait the market.

Headwinds

Consumer confidence and the trade war cloud. The dark cloud of U.S. tariffs, the upcoming CUSMA (NAFTA 2.0) renegotiation, and the unpredictability of the U.S. president hang over the Canadian economy. Stratford is a manufacturing and cultural hub; our economy is connected to

the world. When people are nervous about their job, they're less likely to upgrade to a larger home.

Fortunately, local data suggests our local economy has held up much better, with the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula region's unemployment rate at 4 per cent, far below the national rate of 6.8 per cent.

The population "pause." For years, the story was "Ontario is growing by 500,000 people a year. Buy everything!" That narrative has hit a wall. Federal changes to immigration targets and student caps have slowed population growth. Demand in 2022 and 2023, caused by immigration, has cooled.

Stratford was not the same magnet for this immigration boom as other municipalities in Ontario, which have seen larger declines in real estate prices. But consumer confidence is shaped by headlines, many of which originate from the GTA. Overall, this is less of a headwind for Stratford, where our population is growing.

CONTINUED TO PAGE 23

Opinions

Stratford's 2026 real estate: Opportunities and challenges ahead

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

Inventory overhang. We are starting 2026 with high inventory levels. This is great for buyers, but it drags on price growth. Sellers still anchoring their expectations to 2022 prices are finding their homes sitting on the market. It now takes on average over 50 days to sell a home, though ours sell much quicker. Eventually, this overstock will clear; the question is how long it will take.

Putting it all together

Overall, the local real estate market has shown greater resilience than other real

estate markets. Unless the U.S. causes further harm to the Canadian economy beyond what it already has, I predict things will stabilize and eventually return to a normal, balanced market. However, this could take some time. The caveat is that "normal" means slow, predictable rises in house prices. It never made sense for a house to earn more money per year than someone working full-time, as we saw during COVID.

If you are a buyer...

This is likely the most "balanced" buying opportunity we have seen in a decade.

You have a choice, you have time. This is a great time for people entering the market and people seeking an investment opportunity.

If you are a seller...

This is not amateur hour. The days of putting a sign in the lawn and reviewing offers at 7 p.m. are gone. You need to price for the current market, not the market you wish we had. You also need expert advice to help you position, prepare and price your home to maximize its value.

For people up-sizing, you can afford more house on the other side of the trans-

action than before. And for downsizers, there is a case to sell. If you downsized last year and put the money in the TSX, you'd be up 28.24 per cent on whatever you netted. If you stayed in your house, you'd be down. Houses build wealth through leverage. If you put 5 per cent down on a \$500,000 home and it goes up 5 per cent, your \$25,000 down payment nets you \$25,000, a 100 per cent return. But if your house is mostly or fully paid off, your return on that equity is tied to the housing market, which has traditionally underperformed the broader equity market.

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STRATFORD SCRABBLE CLUB

Anne Hathaway Residence 480 Downie St., Stratford
Meets every Wednesday evening at 7 p.m. for 3 games.
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CROCKINOLE

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For more information call Oliver Davidson 519-508-5664

STRATFORD ASTRONOMY GROUP MEETINGS

St. Michael Catholic Secondary School, 240 Oakdale Avenue, Stratford
Rear parking lot off Matilda. Room # 1104 - 1st Tuesday of each month from September to June. 7-9 p.m.

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

POUTINE & DRAFT BEER NIGHT

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

Royal Canadian Legion, 804 Ontario St B1, Stratford

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

STRATFORD WINTER FILM FESTIVAL

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

Stratford City Hall Auditorium

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

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

Wheel chair accessible via doors and lift from the Market Square side of City Hall.

<https://stratfordwinterfilmfestival.ca>

GARDEN STRATFORD GENERAL MEETING

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

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

Featured Presentation: "Managing Rainwater: capturing

stormwater to benefit the garden and environment", Vanni Azzano, Supervisor of Community Education, Upper Thames River Conservation Authority
Meeting Open to Everyone; Free Admission.

RESCHEDULED

CLIMATE CHANGE - What Can We Do to Help?

Wednesday February 4, 2026; 7pm

Stratford City Hall

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

OXFORD PHILATELIC SOCIETY OXPEX & OTEX 2026 STAMP SHOW

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

St. Mary's Catholic High School, 431 Juliana Drive, Woodstock, ON, N4V 1E8

Free admission and parking.

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Contact: dhfe@silomail.com

Web: <http://www.rpsc.org/chapters/oxford>

STRATFORD TIMES

Deadline: Tuesday prior at 3 p.m.

Contact: stratfordtimes@gmail.com

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

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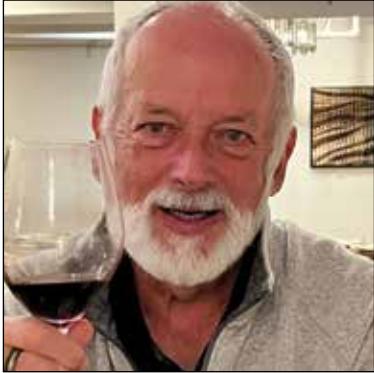
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OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: My first and last trip to the Dominican Republic



PAUL KNOWLES

Times 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 Domini-



The Cocotal course was beautiful and generally in good shape.

(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTOS)

ca.)

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 de-

vising.

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 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.

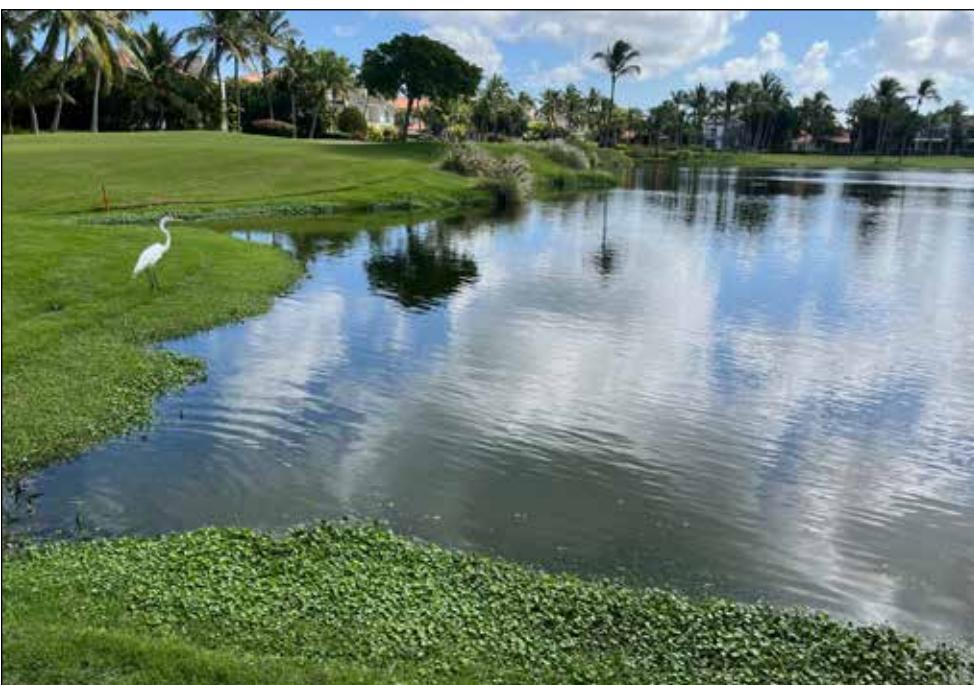
The ugly? We both got sick. Sick enough that on a couple of days, golfing was a challenge, but we'd paid the big bucks, so we mostly stuck that out, but some meals were skipped, evenings were spent in our rooms and the trip home was on two wings and a prayer we would get back to Canada without any health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

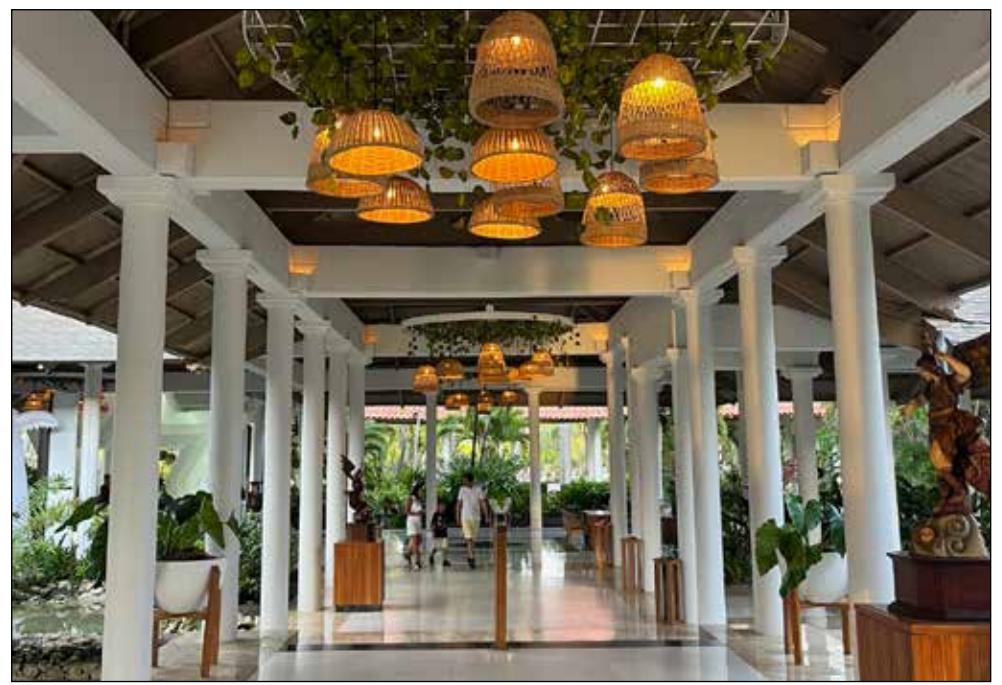
By the way, my observation was that there were a lot of Canadians, some Europeans including British folk, a lot of Spanish speaking guests and almost no Americans. The one person from the U.S. we talked to was wearing a button which read, "I didn't vote for him." I commended her for her courage.

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.



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



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

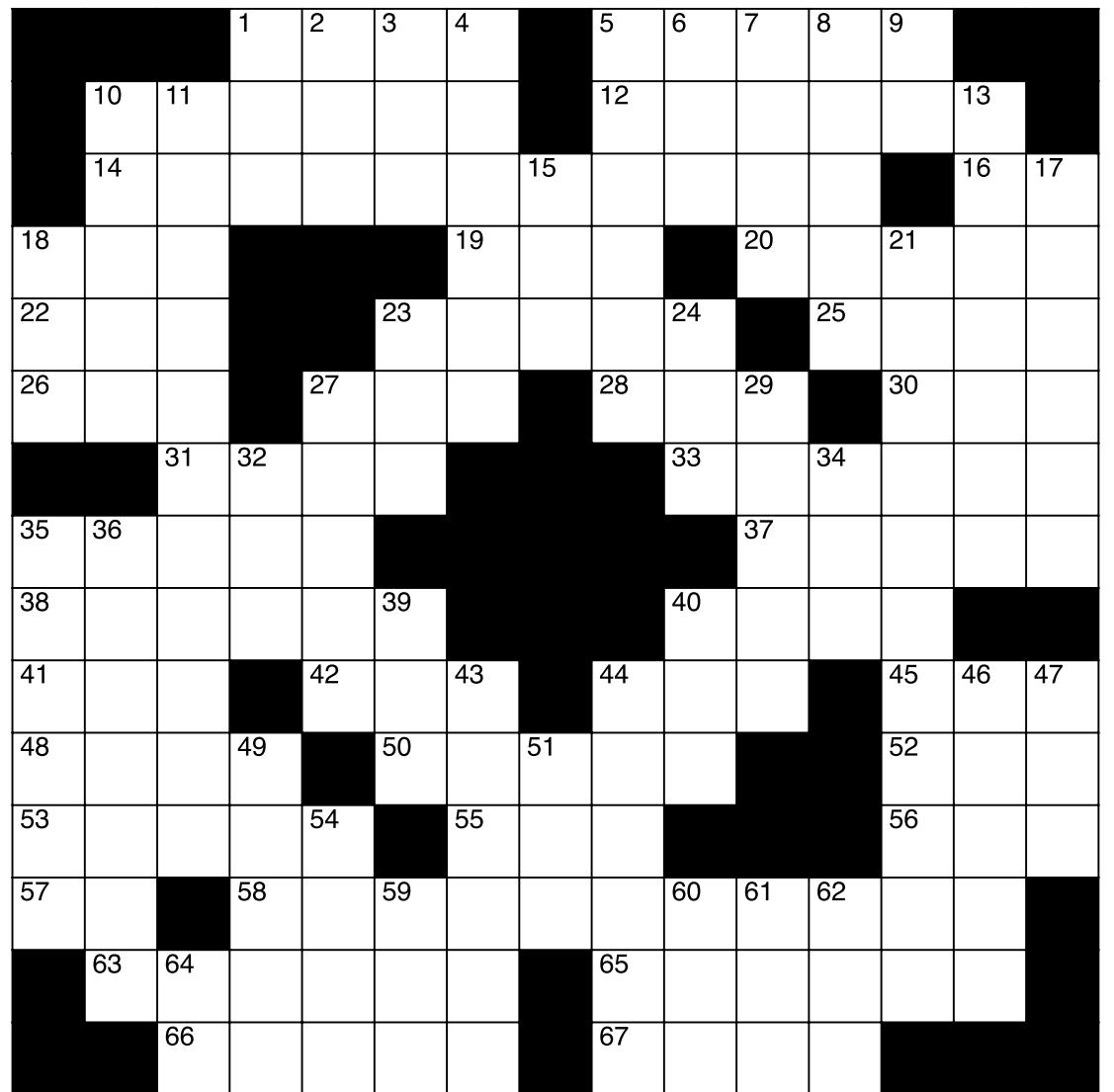
Crossword

CLUES ACROSS

1. Native American people of CA
5. Long periods of time (Brit.)
10. Classroom tool
12. Rods
14. One who renews
16. They start the alphabet
18. Periodical (slang)
19. Smooth singer Cole
20. Dorsal sclerites in insects
22. One from Utah
23. The world of the dead
25. Singer Redding
26. Mafia head
27. Wrongly
28. Unhappy
30. Anger
31. Dark olive black
33. Places to sit and eat
35. Made a mistake
37. Damp
38. Banned fuel type
40. Actor Damon
41. What thespians do
42. A polite address for a woman
44. Disallow
45. Swiss river
48. A banana has one
50. Afrikaans
52. Relative biological effectiveness (abbr.)
53. Agave
55. Journalist Tarbell
56. One-time tech leader
57. Incidentally (abbr.)
58. Intestinal bacterium
63. Loose sheaths around the spinal cord
65. Accompanies nook
66. Vogue
67. Highly excited

CLUES DOWN

1. Witch
2. Utilize
3. Writing utensil
4. Where rockers work
5. Becomes less intense
6. Consume
7. Type of catfish
8. "Horsetown, U.S.A."
9. Atomic #50
10. The Muse of lyric poetry
11. Brings back to life
13. Humorous critiques
15. Cool!
17. Worst
18. Wet dirt
21. Useful
23. Hebrew unit of liquid capacity
24. High schoolers' test
27. Internet device
29. City in India
32. A place to rest
34. Chat responder
35. A way to move on
36. What consumers are given
39. Digital audiotape
40. More (Spanish)
43. Disfigured
44. White (Spanish)
46. Church building
47. Georgia rockers
49. Surgeon's tool
51. "Much ___ about nothing"
54. Make by braiding
59. Local area network
60. Unit of work
61. Indigenous person of Thailand
62. Liquefied natural gas
64. Distance to top



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Pet of the week



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Sudoku

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

Solutions on page 27

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A Message from Canada's news publishers

To the Government of Canada,

We applaud the Government of Canada's ambition to build Canada strong, and commitment in the forthcoming Budget to Buy Canadian.

Last year, the federal government including agencies and Crown corporations spent over \$100 million on advertising. Most of it went to U.S. Big Tech.¹

Why are we funding American tech monopolies that extract tens of billions a year out of Canada -- largely untaxed -- at the expense of local journalism and culture, and whose platforms have become vectors for division and disinformation?

Let's reinvest our ad dollars in Canada. In Budget 2025, the Government of Canada should follow Ontario's lead and set aside a minimum of 25% of its advertising budgets for Canadian news media.

At no additional cost to taxpayers, the government can support local jobs while getting its message out in a brand safe environment. Far fewer Canadians trust ads on Facebook and Instagram than those published by Canadian news media.²

Buying Canadian advertising in Canadian news media is both the right and smart thing to do.

Respectfully,

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Newspapers Association



SOURCES

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

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

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