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Affordable housing projects hit roadblock

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Two affordable housing projects are going back to the drawing board.

At the most recent Stratford city council meeting on Nov. 24, council voted to cancel the request for expressions of interest (RFEOI) for two City of Stratford-led affordable housing projects at 38 Coriano St. and 161 East Gore St.

The two locations are surplus properties in the city's purview and were tapped to be transformed into affordable housing units. At the May 27 meeting, council had unanimously voted to start negotiations with Pol Quality Homes, which proposed building 18 affordable housing units at the Gore Street location (managed and maintained at affordable rates for 40 years) and nine units held with three triplexes (all at market rates) at the Coriano Street location.

"Pol was selected due to their history of both building and managing affordable housing in mixed-market developments, their willingness to increase density on the sites, and the lack of zoning changes and site plans needed to achieve their vision," a May 27 staff report reads. "This creates an expedited timeline with a trusted developer at the helm."

Chief administrative officer (CAO) André Morin told council that the recent cancellation has nothing to do with Pol Quality Homes.

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(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Bear, Oslo and Michael enjoy the snowy train ride around Stratford City Hall during this weekend's Winter Wander-Land event. For more on the festivities, see page 10.

Property taxes set to increase by 3.19%; lowest tax rise in recent years

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

After the shortest budget deliberations in recent memory, the 2026 City of Stratford budget was approved with a projected tax increase of 3.19 per cent – the lowest in recent years. That figure translates to an approximate rise of \$172 annually (\$14 monthly) on an average home valued by the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) at \$317,000.

The draft budget was released in October of this year and

debated in a lengthy six-hour meeting on Nov. 27. Originally set to rise 3.09 per cent, after approving the purchase of a Mini-X Excavator for \$76,500, an accelerated replacement of the Devon Street playground for \$20,000 and the approval of a Fire Master Plan for \$90,000 – though some of these additions will be mitigated through reserve funds and will not affect this year's tax increase – the bottom line increased by 0.10 per cent.

Typically, the city's budget deliberations are a month-long process. Last year's deliberations began in Decem-

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Affordable housing projects hit roadblock

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

"I think they've done great work on this project," Morin explained the evening of Nov. 24. "It's really around us and the legalities around the Municipal Act and procurement, trying to understand what the best path forward is on this project. So again, all the work that they've done up until now – it's been fantastic. We look forward to working with them in the future. With that being said, our next step is to bring this back internally."

Speaking with the Times after the meeting, Morin did not give any more details on the decision or what about the previous process necessitated cancellation, but did give the following written statement:

"The City of Stratford values the outstanding contributions of Pol Quality Homes in creating affordable housing and their strong commitment to our community," Morin wrote. "The decision to cancel the RFEI agreements for the East Gore and Coriano Street properties was made to ensure full compliance with the Municipal Act and related procurement requirements. This step is not a reflection on Pol Quality Homes or on our shared ability to reach fair, collaborative agreements. We thank Daryl Pol and his team for their dedication and work to date on this project."

"Moving forward, the city will reevaluate the process and bring forward an updated strategy to advance our affordable housing goals. We look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with our community partners on our shared goal of accessible housing for all."

Morin indicated that an update on these properties and other affordable housing projects will be provided in the new year.

Property taxes set to increase by 3.19%; Mayor says rise is meant to respect ratepayers and pressures facing municipality

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

ber, wrapped up in January and then were finally approved with a bylaw in February. Due to the strong mayor powers recently endowed to Stratford, however, this year was markedly different. The mayor effectively approved the budget the same meeting it was debated by reducing the veto period.

Another change this year was the budget's development. Mayor Martin Ritsma put the budget together in consultation with senior staff, guiding the ethos of next year with a fixed goal of keeping the rate increase to 3.5 per cent or lower. Before deliberations began, Ritsma thanked everyone – staff, councillors and the public – for their dedication this season.

"This is our most important work," Ritsma stated. "I believe that what we have before us is an excellent combination of respecting the ratepayers' ability to afford a projected tax levy increase along with respecting the provision of services that they need, services that they require and, in many cases, they expect."

"... I realize and appreciate that these are anxious and stressful times for our residents and our businesses. As one mom shared with me a couple of days ago, we need our time to breathe. These stressful times are accentuated especially with the uncertainty around trade-tariff talks, especially around the (Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement) renegotiation, a trade agreement that has protected much of our local trading, local manufacturing, to date."

Despite the relatively quick turnaround, there were many line items in Ritsma's budget that sparked lively debate.

Coun. Jo-Dee Burbach pushed to divest the Stratford Municipal Airport. With an annual budget of \$61,031, the airport is a small line item on the operational side – though the ten-year capital forecast tells a different story. The forecast predicts \$5 million of investment by 2035 with lighting system upgrades, taxiway extensions, service expansion and upkeep.

"In the typical sense, I would not be thrilled about privatizing things," Burbach said. "But in this case, I do. Privatizing the airport, selling it to someone who can run it as an airport, where we still get the benefit of having it – a local, nearby airport, but not having the capital costs and expenses that are coming up – I think would be a wise move. It would free up quite a bit of capital if we just sold

it, which we could then invest within the boundaries of the city. There's discussion always about the Ornge helicopters that land there, which is really important. I would love to see an investment within the city boundaries, where the Ornge helicopters could land actually close ... where people wouldn't need to hop in an ambulance and drive all that way."

Burbach's idea did not gain traction. While some, like Coun. Harjinder Nijjar, expressed a desire to see it become revenue-neutral in the coming years, most talked about the value of an airport despite its costs – and that they can only guarantee it stays an airport if they retain ownership.

"I think there's more opportunities there than challenges," Ritsma said. "And we have to take account the economic impact, but also social impact of having got (that) asset."

As part of the departmental overviews, Zac Gribble, executive director of Destination Stratford, requested \$816,076 for the 2026 year – an increase of 3.5 per cent. Like last year, \$150,000 of that was earmarked for the annual Lights On Stratford festival. Again, like last year, that money is to be funded through the Municipal Accommodations Tax fund (MAT).

"We do feel that that use of that portion of MAT ... is an exemplary use case of municipal accommodation, investment and visitors contributing to the seasonality and the quality of life within our community, in particular for winter development," Gribble explained.

Coun. Cody Sebben disagreed. While he acknowledged that Lights On does positive things, he argued that any board or department in the city could do positive things with extra funding, making a motion to not fund Lights On's requested \$150,000 through the MAT reserve.

"We have a MAT ad hoc committee that is in the process of being formed and to remove half of the funds prior to the implementation of the ad hoc committee from the MAT, it doesn't seem right," Sebben said.

Other councillors highlighted the economic benefits of the program that perhaps go unnoticed and the winter activation it sparks – economic and social benefits.

"It is something that does much for us in the darkest days of the year and it brings so much joy," Coun. Brad Beatty surmised.

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Property taxes set to increase by 3.19%; Mayor says rise is meant to respect ratepayers and pressures facing municipality

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Sebben's push was defeated.

A delicate balance

Along with his motion for Lights On, Sebben put forward a number of other amendments which likewise didn't pass. He advocated for cutting the addition of air-conditioning for council chambers at \$50,000, Geographic Information System (GIS) enhancements at \$50,000, Intranet enhancements at \$50,000, the Unified Communication program (a phone system) at \$200,000, two water pickup trucks at \$80,000, a garbage truck at \$250,000 and the city's goose management program at \$60,000.

Sebben said his reasoning came down to what are needs and what are wants.

"Generally speaking, those with more money are more able to move the line between needs and wants, whereas those with less must hold a firm line between what can be done now, later or never," Sebben said. "Whether the proposed increase is 10, three or zero, we need to always be pushing to hold the line between needs and wants with the authority to impose property tax increases on the entire city. It's the responsibility of council to respect both those with the means to afford such an increase and also those who cannot bear any in-



(STRATFORD TIMES FILE PHOTO)
Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma's 2026 budget was passed with few amendments – and relatively few disagreements. The most recent budget talks were the shortest in recent years.

crease at all." The idea of balance was a sentiment shared by Coun. Mark Hunter, who sits as chair of the finance and labour relations committee. In his opening address, he

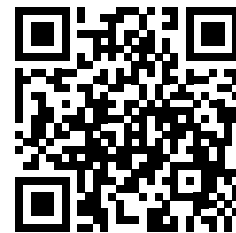
spoke about the differences between the private and public world.

"It's a very delicate balance to make sure we have enough tax collected, but not too much, but enough that we get to the end of

the year successful," Hunter said. "... This is my fourth budget, now doing this. Our city staff presented a budget which balanced on that knife's edge I think professionally well. So I want to thank Karmen (Krueger, director of corporate services) and her team and all the departments for bringing numbers that make sense, that are real numbers, and that do that balance between having enough to get to the end of the year and not overburdening our community."

For the full, nearly 600-page budget, visit <https://tinyurl.com/bdzb7t3x>.

To watch the full budget deliberations, along with departmental presentations, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zobvgy4xMss>.



For the full, nearly 600-page 2026 City of Stratford budget, scan the code.

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Editorial

Every little bit helps through non-profit group Not Just Tourists



AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

Over the years, I've loved travelling to different parts of the world, especially to places that aren't known for tourism. One of my favourite things about travelling is meeting people and learning about different cultures, which is why trips to Honduras, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and Zambia remain among my most meaningful experiences. These destinations aren't always the safest or the most picture-perfect, but they draw me in because I genuinely want to understand how other people live.

Most recently, I was heading to Cuba for a resort vacation when I came across a non-profit group called Not Just Tourists (www.njt.net). I learned that I could bring a bag of medical supplies with me and deliver it to a local



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Dr. Ariel, leading gynaecologist at Materno-Infantil José Ramón López in Matanzas, Cub and Amanda Modaragamage.

hospital. Even better, WestJet allows travellers to bring an extra humanitarian-aid suitcase for free. My only job would be to drop off the supplies.

The process was simple. Not Just Tourists, London packed the bags and sent me a link to fill out the paperwork for WestJet. Although I had to complete the forms more than once, it was still straightforward. When we arrived at the airport, my name was already in the system, and

the bags were tagged

to travel with us to Cuba at no charge.

Not Just Tourists provided a list of local hospitals in need, and we chose Hospital Materno-Infantil José Ramón López in Matanzas, one of the leading maternity hospitals in the country.

Once there, we took a day trip to Matanzas, about 40 minutes away. Our taxi driver kindly connected us with an on-site physician, Dr. Ariel – “like the Disney princess,” he joked.

Dr. Ariel told us that the provincial hospital, established in 1872, now operates as a women's hospital with services in

gynecology, maternity and general care. It handles roughly 80 to 85 per cent of all births in the region, with a mortality rate of fewer than three per 1,000 births.

As one of the largest and most advanced maternity hospitals in Cuba, it receives pregnant women from across the country who need urgent care, including those with high-risk pregnancies or birthing complications.

Cuba has its challenges. Food insecurity, medical supply shortages, limited access to clean or sterile water and a strained health-care system all

contribute to low birth weights and high-risk pregnancies. Yet the country's infant mortality rates remain better than those of many nations in Latin America and the Caribbean, and are closer to those seen in high-income countries, according to the Foundation for Economic Education.

In Cuba, home births are not permitted. All births take place in hospitals to reduce complications and infant deaths, and women are often admitted early if there are signs of trouble. Frequent prenatal checkups and routine monitoring also help support healthy outcomes.

During our visit, Dr. Ariel emphasized that even small items – saline, antiseptics, masks, gloves, dressing kits, wound-care materials – are needed, necessary and deeply appreciated. It's easy to wonder how much of an impact one suitcase can make, but he assured us that in Cuba's tight economic climate, every little bit truly helps.

I'm sharing this experience to encourage others to consider bringing a bag of supplies on their next trip. Not Just Tourists has locations across Canada and the United States, and the process is so easy. A little effort can go a long way.

If you are interested in learning more, please visit www.njt.net.

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Letter to the editor: “Positive, promising and progressive” reader calls Ritz’s GTR proposal

Dear editor,

Two of the positive, promising and progressive things Robert Ritz talked about at his open house Nov. 25:

1. That the community-based hub he proposes would reinstate the city's bus terminal, which was displaced from the heart of the city at city hall several years ago when the new transit terminal was constructed, as an accessible and central location riders will want to use.
2. That the proposed construction would primarily

benefit Stratford citizens, with its planned extensions to the Y and the library, and creation of the seniors' centre that was promised to replace the Kiwanis Lakeside Centre during discussions about the new Tom Patterson Theatre, but has not yet been delivered.

It is time for this. People are dying while waiting!

*Julia Schneider
Stratford*

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Stratford and Perth County Community Foundation recruiting new board members

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Stratford and Perth County Community Foundation (SPCCF), an organization dedicated to philanthropic giving and serving as the steward of funds earmarked for local charitable causes, is looking for new board members to support its mission across Stratford, St. Marys and Perth County.

For more than 20 years, the SPCCF has supported charitable organizations through grants made possible by the responsible management of endowment funds. As the foundation continues to evolve to meet emerging needs, the board is looking for people who bring insight from community involvement, hands-on experience and a willingness to think creatively about local challenges and opportunities.

“We’re really open to four to six (new board members) at this time, and actually, if we have candidates who are really

qualified, it could be more than that,” said Lee Anne Andriessen, a director on the SPCCF board and chair of the governance and nominations committee. “We do have some retiring directors, so we’re trying to stay ahead of the game in terms of being prepared that way. We’re actually operating at a minimum amount of directors and we’d like to get into a higher number. Sadly, one of our directors passed away in July – Don Hathaway passed away – so we were really sad about that.

“Typically, directors are at that retirement age and everyone takes on so much to some degree. A lot of them have already given three to four years, so it’s fair when people want to move on to other things.”

SPCCF board members are volunteers and they typically meet six to 10 times annually, though Andriessen says participation goes beyond the boardroom as she and her fellow members serve on committees of the board, attend funding announcements and other events, and work within their own community con-

nections to identify potential donors, as well as charities and other organizations that could benefit from the funding SPCCF has available.

Andriessen said the board is seeking members with experience that complements the work SPCCF does, whether that’s legal, insurance, finance, or business, experience working with charities and non-profit organizations, a background in long-term planning, policy development and governance, community leadership, and everything in between. While she says candidates are not required to demonstrate experience in all of these sectors, the board is looking to build a team in which each of its members bring something different to the table.

“We’re also looking for people who have their finger on the pulse of the community and what our needs are because our foundation gives money away – we grant out money,” Andriessen said, noting SPCCF manages and grows funds totalling \$10 million. “So, it would be nice

to know, from other people’s perspective, what is top of mind. Is it housing, is it food security, is it youth? ... Some people who work in different aspects of community life have a really good way of drilling down into what’s needed.”

While Andriessen says it can be easy to find potential board members in Stratford, she’s hoping to see applicants from both St. Marys and across Perth County.

“It is a county foundation that actually allocates money across the county, from North Perth to St. Marys, Perth East, Perth South, West Perth,” she said. “We need to have voices from all those corners because when you have voices from all those corners, you have a better sense of what are those needs, and also knowing people who can contribute to the foundation financially, too.”

Interested applicants are being asked to fill out an online application form at spccf.ca before 5 p.m. Jan. 5, 2026, and selected candidates will be contacted for an interview.

Santa’s coming to town: What to expect during this year’s Parade of Lights

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

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Stratford’s annual Parade of Lights will be held this Sunday, Dec. 7, starting at 5 p.m.

The parade will take a scenic route around the Avon River, beginning at Hillcrest Drive and William Street, moving east along William Street to Lakeside Drive North, across the Festival bridge, then west along Lakeside Drive to the area in front of the Tom Patterson Theatre. Santa will be in the last float.

New this year, the parade will offer a sensory-friendly area on William Street, between Hillcrest Drive and Denison Street. Along that stretch, floats will not use sirens or intense flashing lights or strobes.

Also, the timing and location of the tree lighting has changed. A tree on William Street across from Haig Street has been selected, and the lighting will take place there at approximately 4:45 p.m., just before the start of the parade.

For the safety of parade participants and spectators, a number of temporary road closures will be in place from approximately 3-7 p.m. Sunday. The closures include:

William Street from Mornington Street to Martin Street, Hillcrest Drive from Delamere Avenue to William Street, Denison Street, Lakeside Drive North from Martin Street to Lakeside Drive, Lakeside Drive from Lakeside Drive North to Waterloo Street and Veterans Drive from Waterloo Street to York Street.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

A map of this year’s Santa’s Parade of Lights plans, provided by the City of Stratford.

The City of Stratford urges all motorists to drive cautiously when travelling near the parade route, and obey all road closure signs.

Those driving to the parade and parking nearby are asked to be respectful of residents in surrounding neighbourhoods, and take care not to block or interfere

with driveways.

The parade is co-ordinated by the Stratford and District Saddle Club, Bethel Pentecostal Church and the city.

For more information, please visit www.stratford.ca/santa.



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTOS)

Photos taken at last year’s Parade of Lights.

UWaterloo Stratford students create installations for Lights On Stratford

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

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Now entering its sixth year, the multi award-winning Lights On Stratford annual winter festival by Destination Stratford launches on Dec. 12 and will once again transform Stratford's heritage downtown and park system with luminous art and interactive light installations over the course of six weekends in the darkest and coldest part of the year.

The Lights On Stratford 2025/26 theme is RADIANCE. Officially defined as a "type of glowing: either from a light source like the sun or a healthy, beaming person," event organizers extend the concept of radiance to reflect a community that comes together on a winter's night to celebrate art and light.

And demonstrating an abundance of radiant creativity and innovation, 46 students from the GBDA 412: Special Topics in Digital Culture course at the University of Waterloo Stratford School of Interaction Design and Business were challenged to design and create large-scale interactive media art installations specifically for the winter lights festival.

"It is such an incredible honour for our students to be given the opportunity to showcase their creative talent and critical design skills in a festival of this magnitude," said David Han, the GBDA 412 program instructor at UWaterloo Stratford. "Public art has a unique power to genuinely connect with audiences, and I've encouraged my students to tap into that power to create projects that are grounded in a sense of responsibility and respect for the communities and environments around them. I'm very excited for festival patrons to experience the creativity, care and innovation that these students put into their work."

Students in GBDA 412 were tasked with creating large-scale interactive instal-



(NOAH PRATT PHOTO)

UWaterloo fourth year students present their GBDA 412 course light art projects at the Destination Stratford Welcome Centre.

lations inspired by the 13 Grandmother Moons stories – an Indigenous knowledge tradition rooted in the Stratford region. The project emphasizes ethical design, cultural sensitivity and meaningful engagement with local communities.

New for this year is the hosting of the final three selected light art installations within Destination Stratford's Welcome Centre at 47 Downie St.

"This is the second year we've collaborated with UWaterloo to create student light art displays, and I continue to be amazed at their creativity and brilliance," said Zac Gribble, executive director of Destination Stratford and festival director of Lights On Stratford. "Showcasing these new interactive experiences at our Welcome Centre is incredibly exciting with the building itself transformed through exterior window projections, MicroTile

wall and indoor/outdoor facing displays. I can't wait for festival patrons to engage with these beautiful and thought-provoking art installations."

The three UWaterloo GBDA 412 student projects selected to be included at Lights On Stratford are Ripples Through Time, Healing Currents and When We Come Together.

Ripples Through Time draws from the stories of the 13 Grandmother Moons and lived Indigenous experience to represent how human relationships with water have shifted across generations. Using interactive digital windows and body-motion tracking, visitors are invited to create ripples of light that reveal two contrasting perspectives: one celebrating water as a source of life and community, and another uncovering its disruption through colonization.

Rooted in Indigenous teachings, Healing Currents is an interactive projection installation inspired by the fourth Moon of Creation that transforms reflective prompts into radiant digital sucker fish – symbolizing collective healing through light and renewal.

When We Come Together is an interactive micro-tile installation where small gestures of light connect to form shared radiance, reflecting how reconciliation grows from the self to the community.

Prepare to be mesmerized this winter when interactive displays will light up nightly Thursday through Sunday from 5-10 p.m. The sixth annual Lights On Stratford is free to the public and set to launch on Dec. 12, 2025 until Jan. 18, 2026. Visit lightsonstratford.ca for more details, upcoming announcements and sponsorship opportunities.



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Rick Honcharsky, executive director of the Salvation Army Stratford – St. Marys Regional Community Ministries, fills downtown Stratford with holiday cheer as he plays Christmas music in front of the LCBO.

Yes, it's that time again — Christmas is coming fast!

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Stratford Country Club donating meals in January to House of Blessing for Giving Tuesday campaign

EMILY STEWART
Times Correspondent

The Stratford Country Club (SCC) will once again provide meals for those in need as part of the Giving Tuesday campaign, but with a new donation timeframe.

The SCC is offering ham dinners for one and one litre containers of soup as part of their annual Giving Tuesday campaign. A purchase of a ham dinner for \$16 or of soup for \$8.50 will provide the meals and soups for clients of the Stratford House of Blessing. For every 10 purchases, the country club will donate an additional soup or meal.

The ham dinners and soup containers will then be individually packaged, with ingredients listed, in microwavable containers for the recipients to reheat. The SCC will donate the food to the Stratford House of Blessing in early 2026. Jessie Jacob, event and hospitality manager, said that the SCC used to donate in December, but decided to donate to House of Blessing in January instead.

"They obviously do a lot for the community during the December period to ensure that families have what they need during the holiday season, so I think it's a good opportunity for them to still get a good meal in January when maybe they're not receiving as many donations as they do in December," said Jacob.

The SCC launched their Giving Tuesday campaign in 2020. Since then, more than 600 meals and over 200 litres of soup have been donated to the Stratford House of Blessing. Orders for Giving Tuesday will be accepted until Dec. 31.

For more information, either call 519-271-4212, visit online via stratfordcountryclub.ca or swing by the club in person at 53 Romeo St. N.

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A space to learn: Stratford-Perth Pride hosting classes for allies

SYDNEY GOODWIN
Times Correspondent

Editor's note: Sydney Goodwin is the program coordinator for the Stratford-Perth Pride Centre.

Being an ally is one of the most important things to be for a queer loved one, but being an ally is more than just accepting their orientation or saying that it's fine. To be a true ally means to understand that how they think and feel is different, to stand up for them no matter what, to accept that there are things that you may not know and to take the step to learn what you can. Stratford-Perth Pride is offering a class for those who want to learn, Acronym for Allies.

The planning for this program began when staff at the Stratford-Perth Pride Centre noticed the amount of messages they were receiving from individuals who want to know how to best talk to/address their loved one who has recently come out to them. They also took from their own personal experiences from people asking invasive questions or having harmful assumptions of their orientations. A lot of times, these questions or assumptions do not come from a place of malice, but instead a place of either misinformation or genuine curiosity.

There are a lot of misconceptions in regards to differ-

ent orientations, how to best be an ally, what questions are right to ask and what are inappropriate. That is where Acronym for Allies comes in.

The class is dedicated to going through one orientation per class, going in depth in its history, the different ways that the orientation is expressed, how the orientation is marginalized in today's society and what an ally can do to show their support. It is also set up to be a place where allies can ask the questions they are unsure about asking and learn why some questions can be considered rude to ask, even if the intentions are to learn.

When allies take that step to expand what they know about the 2SLGBTQIA+, it helps to create a larger space of safety for queer individuals. Doing something small like having pronouns in the sign off of an email, saying spouse or partner instead of boyfriend/girlfriend, or husband/wife, or wearing a rainbow pin showcases that you are a safe person to be around, and those small actions could mean the world for someone else.

The next Acronym for Allies class will be held Monday Dec. 8 at 6 p.m. For more information about the classes, check out Stratford-Perth Pride's Instagram at stratfordperthpride, their Facebook at Stratford Perth Pride, or send them an email at stratfordperthpride@gmail.com.

U13 Stratford Warriors come together to support Ronald McDonald House Charities



(REBECCA CHENEY PHOTO)

The U13 Stratford Warriors turned their Saturday night game into a meaningful community moment as they collected toys for Ronald McDonald House. Parent Rebecca Cheney said the event was "a tremendous success," with an impressive number of donations gathered. The boys chose Ronald McDonald House because several have had family members or close friends who relied on the organization's support. Their opponents, the Kitchener Rangers, also joined in and contributed to the toy drive.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)
The Stratford Police Service is extending a big thank you to everyone who donated to the Stuff-a-Cruiser Food Drives in Stratford last weekend, which were located at grocery stores across the city and will go towards area food banks like the Salvation Army and Stratford House of Blessing.

Spreading Christmas Cheer one box at a time



(AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE PHOTO)
Staff at Famme & Co. Professional Corporation, Chartered Professional Accountants gather behind dozens of boxes filled with donations during the firm's annual food drive for the House of Blessing. Each year, the team puts a creative spin on giving back by setting fun category goals—such as collecting 110 cans or hitting a cereal target—and holding draws for gift cards to local businesses once those goals are met. It's a way to support both the food bank and the wider business community at the same time. The staff hope to inspire other local workplaces to find meaningful, community-focused ways to give while also making it fun.
Back row, from left: Justin Innes, Frances Evans, Casey VanDorp, Justin Erb, Brendan Boersma, Paula Taylor.
Front row, from left: Daniel Huras, Alex Hamilton, Jack Diamond, Kristen Lott, Angela Collens, Megan Smith, Katie Lawry.

City council challenging community in diaper and toilet paper drive

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

Stratford city councillors are challenging each other, and the community, to help fill an important need.

Rising costs for essentials like diapers, toilet paper and infant formula are placing even greater pressure on local families, as well as food banks like the Stratford House of Blessing, to keep up.

Councillors have challenged each other to help by collecting diapers and toilet paper that will relieve some of the strain on the House of Blessing's budget. The benefits are twofold. Number one, the collection helps to provide some essential items to local families. Number two, donated diapers and toilet paper allow the House of Blessing to put more of its limited budget toward infant formula for families who need it most.

The greatest need is for diaper sizes three, four and especially five. Any size of toilet paper will do.

New packages of diapers or toilet paper can be dropped off at any of the following locations: the clerk's office at Stratford City Hall, Jubilee Stratford (Sundays, and Tuesdays to Thursdays) and Pazzo Restaurant.

SHOP LOCAL. SAVE LOCAL.

Weekend Quiz

By Jake Grant

- How many times does the International Space Station orbit the Earth each day?
- Which Allied codebreaking centre famously cracked the German Enigma cipher during the Second World War?
- What is Tungsten also known as?
- True or False. Most of the dust in your home is made of human skin.
- The Mighty Ducks* movie and the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim NHL expansion team, both debuted in what year?
- What is the capital of British Columbia?
- What is currently the safest country in the world?
- Tony the Tiger is featured on what cereal brand?
- How often do your taste buds regenerate on average?
- What is the most flexible muscle in the human body?

This week's answers are found on pg. 27

Walking in a Winter Wander-Land: Downtown Stratford's unofficial kickoff to the holidays returns

EMILY STEWART

Times Correspondent

The streets of Downtown Stratford were bustling once again with lots of holiday merriment last weekend.

The Downtown Stratford Business Improvement Area (BIA) held their annual Winter Wander-Land on Nov. 29 and 30 with lots of activities like the Polar Express train rides, horse-drawn carriages, and roasting rice cereal treats over bonfires. DJ Ethan Maac played lots of upbeat tunes at Market Square as families were

exploring the area and kids lined up to meet Santa Claus.

"The kids are loving Santa and everybody's having a good time," said Jamie Pritchard, general manager of the BIA.

In addition to the Winter Wander-Land programming, holiday shoppers headed to the downtown core and packed the shops.

Pritchard said the annual Winter Wander-Land is a chance for downtown Stratford to give back to its residents.

"It gives something back to the people of Stratford because where can you go to

something like this that's free? It doesn't cost you to go and see Santa or to go on a train ride or go on a horse ride," he said. "We put it on, the BIA and all the downtown merchants and the great sponsors that work with us, so we can offer something back to the city. The businesses really get behind it because they all want to give something back too, and it does bring people into their stores."

New to Winter Wander-Land was an evening on York Street with live music from Retro Resonance, drinks and food on Nov. 29.

"It was a great event, well attended, great music from Retro Resonance and cold brews from End Times Bar and Beer Shop with great food from the Boat-house everyone found what they needed," Pritchard said to the Times in a follow-up interview. "A crackling fire and propane heaters kept the people comfy and cozy in the Muskoka chairs and picnic tables."

Anyone with a filled Winter Wander-Land passport of eight stickers can still drop it off at 47 Downie St. until Dec. 23 for a chance to win either \$100, \$150 or \$200 in Downtown Dollars.



(EMILY STEWART PHOTO)

The Holiday Train was filled with families taking a ride around Stratford City Hall and Market Square on the first day of Winter Wander-Land.



(EMILY STEWART PHOTO)

Bo, Nick and Daniel of London, Ont. enjoying holiday merriment on the Holiday Train ride.



(EMILY STEWART PHOTO)

DJ Ethan Maac making spirits bright with an upbeat playlist at Winter Wander-Land.



(EMILY STEWART PHOTO)

Violet Gray-Jones meets some alpacas from DL Farm Alpacas, who held a petting zoo pop-up.

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CALL 519-655-2341 OR EMAIL STRATFORDTIMES@GMAIL.COM

Salvation Army Hamper Program aimed to spread hope and community connection

ALEX HUNT

Times Correspondent

For some, a Christmas hamper means more than food or toys; it's a reminder that the community still cares, even in the toughest seasons of life.

The Salvation Army Stratford-St. Marys Regional Community Ministries will be handing out Christmas Hampers from Dec. 9-22. Registration to receive a hamper can be done online or in person. Locals will also receive a Kiwanis Club of Stratford gift card to purchase a Christmas dinner along with their hamper.

Community and family services manager Jennifer Morris said that the Salvation Army could end up supporting 150 to 200 Stratford households during the holidays.

"The hamper event represents hope and a connection with our community," said Morris. "It's amazing to see how many people come together to make those boxes possible. If all those different contributors didn't step up, it would look very different, but the way it all comes together is really special."

The Christmas season can bring beautiful and challenging moments, but Morris says it helps that staff and volunteers are able to share those experiences.

"The moments balance each other out, and they make it worth it," said Morris. "Our volunteers are great because we go through it together. You're not hearing it all on your own. I always tell the staff and volunteers that if they ever need to talk, there's space for that."

Morris explained that sometimes interactions can bring unexpected or emotional conversations, especially during the holidays.

"That's part of what makes the experience meaningful. Christmas can bring out a lot for people, and that's okay."

Michael Tigani, casual support staff worker, said that one of the most rewarding aspects of being a part of the Salvation Army is helping the community. He said that it's the right thing to do, whether people have been dealt a bad hand or not.

Morris said it's nice to see the success people have achieved for themselves six months down the road when they start coming less, and they're working at a store in town.



(ALEX HUNT PHOTO)

Jennifer Morris, community and family services manager, and Michael Tigani, casual support staff worker, at the Salvation Army Stratford branch.

"You might see someone at a low point during Christmas, but they start to get out of it as the year goes on. You see how

someone's life can change for better or for worse," said Morris. "It's really nice when you see the good things."

Stratford bartender wins his first-ever cocktail competition

AMANDA MODARAGAMAGE

Times Reporter

When Logan Johnson walked into the November Willi-Brawl Cocktail Competition, he wasn't expecting to win – mostly because he'd never competed before. But by the end of the night, the Stratford bartender walked away with first place and a big moment for the Relic Lobby Bar.

The regional competition brought together bartenders from across southwestern Ontario in a fast-paced, high-energy event, with proceeds supporting Community Fridge KW. Third place went to Sammson Ruby of Odd Duck in Kitchener, second to Joshua Cuellar of Grand Trunk Saloon, and first to Johnson.

At Relic, the excitement was immediate. Owner Ulises Sanchez said the win felt like a team celebration.

"We try to work together as a team to create an environment that promotes excitement and craftsmanship," Sanchez said. "We push our bartenders to go to competitions and perform to the best of their abilities. Seeing the win means we're encouraging that energy – helping them grow, learn new things and feel proud of what they do."

"Bringing a win to Stratford – it's kind of fun!" he added. "I'm excited for Logan, but also excited for what this brings to our staff and to our community. It's nice to keep the cocktail culture alive here."

The final round of the competition included a "mystery box," where bartenders had to create something on the spot



(TAYLOR JONES PHOTO)

Relic Lobby Bar's Logan Johnson walks away with first place win at his first ever bartending commission in Kitchener.

using a surprise ingredient. Johnson crafted a twist on the classic Clover Club: Willibald pink gin, Lillet Rosé, cherry vanilla syrup, lemon juice, egg white and a bitters garnish, earned him the top spot.

"I don't have too much experience working behind professional bars," Johnson admitted. "I got my start making cocktails at home when I turned 19. Coming into the competition, I was really nervous, but once I made it to the second round, the confidence kind of kicked in."

His experience downstairs at the Lost

Key – where cocktails are made entirely based on the customer's preferences – ended up being the perfect training ground.

"We don't have a cocktail menu downstairs," he said. "We talk to customers, get a feel for what they like, and build something around that. So I was pretty well prepared for that part of the competition."

Working alongside the Relic team, Johnson said he never felt alone in the process.

"Having someone like Ulises is great. He gave me so much good advice and helped me prepare. I couldn't have done it without them," he said.

Johnson's love for cocktails started long before he ever stepped behind a bar.

"I was into the James Bond movies when I was younger, so watching them make cocktails always looked cool to me," he said. That interest grew after seeing *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, where Leonardo DiCaprio's character regrets drinking too many whiskey sours. "I was like, what's a whiskey sour? So I learned how to make one at home – and it snowballed from there."

He first came to Stratford two years ago to watch *Rent*. After a not-so-good martini at dinner, he searched for a bar that could redeem the experience. That search led him to Relic – and to Sanchez.

"When I walked through the doors, I was absolutely blown away by the back bar," Johnson said. "I thought, this spot is for me. I have to work here one day."

He ordered an "obscure classic cocktail" that Sanchez hadn't heard of at the time. Sanchez tasted it, came over to chat, and a couple of years later, Johnson joined the team.

Johnson isn't slowing down. He plans to enter an Instagram-based cocktail competition with a grand prize trip to France – and he's hoping for more wins for Relic along the way.

To follow his cocktail journey, find him on Instagram @lrmixology, and follow Relic @thereliclobbybar.

STRATFORDTIMESSPORTS

Warriors overcame Mother Nature and pounced on Pelham Panthers on the road

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY
Times Correspondent

The weather outside this past week-end was frightful, but the results for the Stratford Hunter Steel Warriors remained delightful as they defeated the Pelham Panthers 2-1 at the Meridian Community Complex in Pelham on Nov. 30.

Stratford entered the week in fifth place in the Western Conference, where they sit one point behind the St. Marys Lincolns for third, but two points ahead of seventh-place St. Thomas Stars and only a point ahead of the Waterloo Siskins.

In preparation for the week, Noah Bender and Evan Arnold gave their take on how to keep focused on maintaining the six-game winning streak.

“It's just all sticking together, having some good practices this week. Work on what we need to work on, and then just going into each game not really worrying about the last game or the next game or anything, just worrying about the game that's at hand,” Bender said.

“We're going to come out hard, same as every game, and just play our style,” Arnold said.

A late-week, multi-day snow squall

covered Stratford and the surrounding regions, forcing the Nov. 28 home game against the Siskins to be cancelled. Still, it didn't deter the Warriors, who held an impromptu practice at the Allman Arena to fill the time.

Head coach Dave Williams explains that the team is fortunate to still have the ice time on Friday, maintaining some semblance of normalcy and not jeopardizing their system.

“We're fortunate we still have the ice Friday so guys can still get on the ice Friday night, so it kind of keeps us in a bit of a routine,” Williams said.

“We had practice yesterday morning, so for us, it really wasn't a big change of routine, because we're still able to get our skates on and get our touches in. So, we're fortunate that way.”

The Warriors travelled from the blistering, snow-packed Stratford to the wet and windy Pelham on Nov. 30 for a matchup with the Panthers, one of the top teams in the Eastern Conference.

Max Wildfong scored his 10th of the season from Colin Slattery and McQuen HayLock to open the scoring for the Warriors at the 5:40 mark of the first period. Evan Arnold extended the Stratford lead early in the second period with his fifth of the season from Slattery and Drew

Hodge at 6:08.

Despite a quality start to the game, the Warriors reverted to their disciplinary issues midway through the middle frame, going down to five-on-three after Aaron Green and Haden Frayne went to the penalty box in a span of 44 seconds. Pelham then took advantage to get on the board with 7:48 remaining in the period.

In what was a defensive standstill third period, the Warriors overcame a late-period miscue from Bender and an offensive push by the Panthers to escape with the 2-1 win. Bender notched his ninth win of the season with his 31-save performance in net.

Williams says the team bounced back from a tough second period to come out with the win.

“I really liked how we played the first half of the game. But I thought when we took those penalties, we lost some momentum, and I felt like (Pelham) tilted the ice and started to take the bite to us in the second half of that second period,” Williams said.

“It took us almost ten minutes into the third period to find our way again and be a little bit of an offensive threat, but obviously, they got a good hockey team over there. They played with lots of pace and, you know, maybe one of the more phys-

ical games we've had to play this year as well.”

Williams also credited Bender for providing saves in critical spots in the game.

“I thought he played exceptionally well. He was a big part of the win today for us. He made some big saves that were game-changing,” Williams said.

Slattery and Wildfong say the team's performance could've been more consistent, and they felt fortunate to get the win.

“It wasn't obviously our greatest performance on the road, but we got the win,” Slattery said.

“I'd say we had a good first period, and then kind of died down from there,” Wildfong said. “Still got the win. We're just looking to perform way better on Wednesday.”

The win was the seventh straight for the Warriors, the longest since Jan. 22-Feb. 26, 2025, when they won nine straight games. Next home game for the Warriors is the Toy donation and non-perishable food drive game on Dec. 5 against the Sarnia Legionnaires at the Allman Arena.

On Dec. 6, the Warriors host their annual "Skate with The Warriors" at the Allman Arena from 11:30 am to 12:30 pm, and take part in the Stratford Santa's Parade of Lights from 3-7 p.m. on Dec. 7.

Stratford Warriors 2025-26 Stats (as of November 30, 2025)					
Player	Pos	GP	G	A	PTS
Jonas Schmidt	F	14	7	11	18
Max Wildfong	F	20	10	6	16
Colin Slattery	F	20	5	10	15
Lucas Minard	F	17	11	3	14
Quinn Kipfer	F	18	6	7	13
Jack McGurn	F	20	5	8	13
Will Coward	D	20	1	11	12
Rhyse Brown	F	18	3	7	10
Dax Vader	F	19	2	8	10
Dominic Marshall	F	20	6	2	8
Evan Arnold	F	11	5	3	8
Joseph Curtin	D	19	2	6	8
Grady Murphy	F	19	6	1	7
Haden Frayne	D	18	1	6	7
Coen Galbraith	F	18	0	7	7
Aaron Green	D	13	2	4	6
McQuen HayLock	F	19	1	5	6
Drew Hodge	D	19	1	5	6
Matthew Blake	D	15	0	4	4
Mateo Craievich	D	14	0	3	3
Beckham McLeod	D	6	0	0	0
Goalies	Record	GAA	SV-%		
Noah Bender	9-2-0-1	2.15	0.925		
Gage Hurst	4-0-0-1	1.74	0.926		
Connor Davis	1-1-1-0	3.34	0.841		

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY
Times Correspondent

The U18 Stratford Warriors have endured a tough stretch to start the season.

During the past week, the Warriors hosted the London Jr. Knights at the Rotary Complex on Nov. 26 and were outmatched in a 5-1 blowout loss. On Nov. 29, the Warriors squandered the lead in the third period to lose 5-3 to the Woodstock Jr. Navy Vets.

Following the defeat to London, head coach Riley Mathieson commented on the game and expressed optimism that the team can find its stride as the season progresses.

“Tonight was another tough, tough loss, but you know, we won the third period, and we're gonna take the positive from it, and we're going to look towards the future and be ready for the next game too,” Mathieson said.

“It's a long season. You know, it's taken us a little bit to get our footing here, but I'm confident that we're gonna find it, and once we do, we're not going to look back.”

Team captain Owen Blain, who scored the lone goal for the Warriors in the third period against London, feels honoured to don the Warriors uniform and play in the city.

"It's super nice. I have known all these

GOHL Western Conference Standings (as of November 30, 2025)							
Team	W	L	OTL	SOL	PTS	GF	GA
Chatham Maroons	20	3	1	2	43	128	75
Elmira Sugar Kings	19	3	1	0	39	113	57
London Nationals	17	8	0	0	34	116	81
St. Marys Lincolns	15	6	2	0	32	86	52
Stratford Warriors	14	3	1	2	31	75	50
St. Thomas Stars	15	8	0	1	31	100	78
Waterloo Siskins	12	6	3	1	28	77	54
LaSalle Vipers	11	12	2	0	24	84	94
Strathroy Rockets	9	13	2	0	20	94	101
Listowel Cyclones	9	13	1	0	19	61	70
Komoka Kings	6	15	2	1	15	72	106
Sarnia Legionnaires	0	25	0	0	0	34	169

guys since I started playing hockey. It's nice to be back with these boys. It's a great team. Love the coaches, love the guys. It's a great environment,” Blain said. “Huge privilege to get to see this year and getting to represent this city. It's just a great privilege getting to represent the city.”

In addition to the regular season, the Warriors participated in the Jack McNaughton International Silver Stick in Stratford from Nov. 7 to Nov. 9 and the Waterloo tournament the following week, between Nov. 14 and Nov. 16. At both tournaments, the Warriors finished with identical 0-1-2 records and failed to qualify for the next round.

Mathinson said the team is progressing, but stated the team needs to focus on self-discipline, as reflected in the result against the Jr. Knights.

"Probably had played some good games in our last two tournaments, didn't quite get the results that I thought we deserved, but I think we're trending in the right direction right now,” Mathieson said.

“I think if we continue to compete like that, we're gonna be more successful going forward, and I think that's the main focus right now, is playing as a team and competing as a team.”

Next up for the U18 Warriors is Dec. 6 against the St. Thomas Jr. Stars at the Rotary Complex, followed by the road game in London against the Jr. Knights on Dec. 7.

Shorthanded Irish get clipped by Tilbury Bluebirds

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

On a blustery Nov. 29, the Stratford Irish were looking to keep pace with the Alvinston Killer Bees as they hosted the Tilbury Bluebirds at the William Allman Memorial Arena.

The Irish opened the scoring as Ethan Salter notched his first goal with the Irish 67 seconds into the game from Christian Polillo and Cole Thiessen. Stratford's lead didn't hold up long, though, as the Bluebirds tied the game over a minute later and poured on two more before the end of the opening frame to lead 3-1 after 20 minutes.

Tilbury continued their onslaught with two more goals in the second period for a commanding 5-1 lead. Mathieu Henderson scored his second goal of the season late in

the period from Ryan Migliaccio and Jake Silver to give the Irish a glimmer of hope heading into the final period down 5-2.

The visitors brought their lead back to four goals over two minutes into the third period to lead 6-2. Stratford attempted to stage the comeback with two goals from Polillo to cut the deficit to two, but their efforts came up short as the Bluebirds scored an empty net goal in the closing seconds to win the game 7-4. With his three-point performance, Polillo has tallied nine points in the last six games. Goaltender Zachery Weir made 40

saves for the Irish in the loss.

The defeat marked the first time the Irish had lost in regulation since Oct. 24 against the Strathroy Jets and marked the end of their points streak with four games (3-0-1 in the streak).

Following the game, Polillo and Weir were disappointed with the team's effort, despite a valiant push in the final twenty minutes.

"We were fighting back the whole game. We let in a few too early, and we're trying to claw our way back. If you let up on your goals too early in the game, it's tough to fight your way back, and that's

what we saw tonight. We were short with bodies, so we gave it our best, but at the end of the day, we couldn't get it done," Polillo said.

"It was tough. We were short for the second week in a row, and you don't have your regulars, or it's mostly new guys, and everyone's still trying to figure out how to play, to get how to play together, so that can be tough," Weir said.

"But I thought in the third we got it hard and showed a lot of fight there, and kind of almost got it back. It's good to see some fight at the end of the game, when we're short like that."

Next up for the Irish is the trip to Woodstock to face the Lakers on Dec. 5. Then, the Irish host the Teddy Bear Toss game as they face the conference-leading Alvinston Killer Bees at the Allman Arena on Dec. 6.



(FRED GONDER PHOTO)

Stratford Irish goaltender Zack Weir gloves the puck out of the air during the Irish's game against the Tilbury Bluebirds on Nov. 29.



(FRED GONDER PHOTO)

Christian Polillo scores his second goal of the night on Nov. 29 in the Stratford Irish's game against the Tilbury Bluebirds.

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Mike’s Bowling Lanes High Scores Nov. 24-30

PINPALS Thomas Holland 126 Gregory Jones 108 Bowlasaurus Dominic Rowe 120 Owen Farthing 100 Royce Butcher 116 Evangeline Butcher 107 Cole Casey 90	JUNIORS McKenna Morris 166, 462 triple Abby Smith 186, 476 triple Brent Louwagie 187, 493 triple Sydney Shillolo 203, 515 triple Austin Janmaat 185 Hugo Black 204, 477 triple Myla Douglas 185 Anna Ward 188, 548 triple Arik Scheuermann 155 Lauren Furtney 194, 509 triple Ryan Scheerer 198, 514 triple Brianne Bauer 170	Devon DeYoung 221 Myla Laukka 186	Monday Seniors Marlene Crerar 230 Brian Wagler 223 Steve Van Klooster 200, 225, 619 triple
PEEWEE Finley Wiedemann 109 Bantams Rilynn Bennett 140 Caleb Luckhardt 172, 404 triple Emmett Martin 179, 444 triple Leo Parker 132 Patrick Adair 161 Roland Rains 158 Stella Hurley-St. Pierre 146, 352 triple Coen Everitt 250 Rowan Eckert 203 Scarlett Smith-Illman 249	SENIORS Austin Bauer 202, 492 triple Peyton Boyles-Keating 283, 677 triple Dominic Boyles-Keating 275, 690 triple Alex Ward 213, 566 triple Sydney Smith 175, 477 triple Austin Martin 177 Zachary Clarke 223, 593 triple Wiatt Robinson 158 Payton Petrie 210, 603 triple Claire Turner 210 Isaac Kroesbergen 202	SPECIAL OLYMPICS Connor Boston 141 Caitlin Breedon 125 Courtney Moore 155 Luke Patterson 228, 405 triple Marie Martin 202 Aiden Winterer 131 Matthew Fischer 125 Sydney Cain 154 Tiffany Keller 205 Jacob Kaufman 162 Andy Van Schalk 161 Meghan O Donovan 161 Michael Hitchcock 248, 393 triple Michael Ambrozic 166	V-ETTES Bernice Dale 209 Cavell Fraser 221 Wednesday Ladies Joanne Ehgoetz 219 United Patty Haycock 208, 93 POA Nichele Butcher 224 Sydney Smith 214, 610 triple
		HIGH SCORES NOVEMBER 24-30 ADULT LEAGUES MEN’S Tylor Cook 334, 828 triple Michael Palmby 347, 882 triple Kevin McKenya 354 Brent Furtney 842 triple	TOURNAMENT RESULTS: Mike’s Bowling Lanes hosted the house round of the YBC Triples tournament on Nov. 30. The top two teams, determined by pins over average, move onto the Regional round. First place with 234 pins over average were Stella Hurley St. Pierre, Brent Louwagie, and Jocelyn Gethke. The team of Talia Klomp, Myla Douglas and Wiatt Robinson took second place with plus-217.

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Reality

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MINOR SPORTS

SCRAPBOOK



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Bentley Rekker drops to a knee and stops an incoming puck during the U13 Stratford Warriors game last Saturday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Breigh Priestap kicks the puck away with a pad save during last Saturday's U13 C Stratford Aces game.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Milana Verellen launches the puck down the board from the point during the U15 A Stratford Aces game last Saturday.



(PAIGE CAMPBELL PHOTO)

Owen Martin kneels as he releases a quick shot on net during this past Sunday's U16 Stratford Warriors game.

U16 Lakers bowed out of the Whitby Silver Stick

MICHAEL WILLOUGHBY

Times Correspondent

The Huron-Perth Lakers U16 AAA participated in the 2025 Gloria Rants Memorial International Silver Stick in Whitby during the weekend of Nov. 27 through Nov. 30.

In preparation for the tournament, head coach Jason Brooks shared what it means to be part of the prestigious event.

"The Silver Stick is such an honour to be a part of. Some great teams and players have played there. It's a great opportunity for this group to represent the Huron-Perth Lakers organization there," Brooks said.

"Obviously, with the 2009 team last year winning it, put Huron-Perth on the map there, hopefully our guys can go into that tournament and have a good showing. We have some very tough games ahead of us, but if we go out there, play our game, compete and give ourselves a chance, that's all

I can ask."

One of the reasons the Lakers have been a great team so far this season is the goaltending tandem of Rylan De Costa and Tyler Wilkinson. In regular-season play, the duo has posted a solid goals-against average of 1.92 and a record of 15-1-0-1 through 17 games.

Da Costa says his personal goal for the team is to compete and win the Silver Stick among the other primary goals.

"For the Silver Stick, it'll be great to win it, just like the boys (2009) last year, and then try to get a championship here, because Alliance one, and then make the OHL cup," Da Costa said.

Wilkinson is optimistic about the team's chances of competing in the Whitby tournament.

"I think we have a hard round robin, but we should be able to hopefully make it if we all work together and then see where we go

from there," Wilkinson said.

The Lakers started off the round robin with a 4-0 win over the Southern Tier Admirals on Nov. 27. Huron-Perth improved their record to 2-0 the next morning (Nov. 28) following a 4-3 win over the Rochester Bishop Kerney Selects but suffered their first defeat in a 4-3 decision to the Toronto Marlboros in the evening game.

On Nov. 29, the Lakers played a must-win game against the Detroit Little Caesars in the morning tilt. Unfortunately for the Lakers, their tournament play ended with a 5-2 loss, finishing 2-2 and in third place in Pool D.

Brooks was pleased with the Lakers' performance and their perseverance in the tournament.

"I was pleased with the way we played at Silver Stick. We got off to a great start, winning our first two games, beating Southern Tier and Bishop Kearney, which put us in

an excellent situation. Unfortunately, we played a good Marlies team in our next game and had some injuries. We were down to seven forwards for that game. We played hard. Had a chance to tie it late, but unfortunately, came up short and lost," Brooks said.

"Then we played Little Caesars, and they're a tremendous team, and we lost 5-2 in that game, but again, came into some more injury difficulty, starting the game with seven forwards, getting down to six, but fought to the end against them, and as a coach, I was really proud of the group for their battle and compete and being in every game for the most part, was really, really positive."

The Lakers resumed regular season play with two games at home at the Rotary Complex. They host the Elgin-Middlesex Canucks on Dec. 5 and the Waterloo Wolves on Dec. 7.

Bosom Buddies donate \$12,800 for Wellspring Stratford

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Leah Morgan, director of Bosom Buddies of Stratford, had never fundraised before.

"I figured, 'Hey, why not you give it the old college try and see what happens?'" Morgan recounted to the Times.

What ended up happening was a final tally of \$12,800 raised for Wellspring Stratford, a local cancer support organization located at 55 Lorne Ave. E that offers a warm and supportive gathering place for individuals living with cancer and those who care for them. As Morgan said, the money will go to the vital services that the organization offers, which aren't funded through the government – only from those that donate and sponsor.

Morgan said that she and the team were as surprised as anyone to see how much money their efforts garnered. With a laugh, she remembered the conversation her sister and her had about a goal as efforts began.

"She looked at me and said, 'You know Leah, I'm going to be thrilled if we can raise \$5,000. I don't know if we will, but we're going to try' ... and we surpassed it by over \$7,000."

Bosom Buddies is a relatively new organization, having just got started this year. Morgan described it as a group of women who have been touched by breast cancer in some way that get together and earn money to lessen the burden current patients face. Starting in January of this year, the group of about eight volunteers chipped away in fundraising, canvassing and organizing fun events for the cause.

It all got started when Morgan and her sister wanted to check out another support group organization, only to find that it was disbanded. They elected to start their own group and they hit the ground running.

"This city just was amazing," Morgan said. "The outreach from people was just phenomenal. ... Things just fell into place so beautifully. And what a great cause and a great group of people that I'm working with. I don't think I could say enough positive things about them."

In 2026, Bosom Buddies are planning a bigger and better year. Morgan said that Stratford residents should be on the lookout for their events as the year progresses. For more information, and to keep updated on Bosom Buddies' activities, visit their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/BosomBuddiesofStratford/>.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Leah Morgan, director of Bosom Buddies of Stratford, poses with Lisa Stacey, manager of Wellspring Stratford – and with a gargantuan cheque for \$12,800.

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Stratford goes country with Nashville Takeover songwriters' festival coming this spring

LISA CHESTER

Times Correspondent

Country music fans rejoice. A Nashville Takeover is happening in town April 10-12 as one of thirteen towns nationwide selected for the concert series. The three-day experience will bring fifteen top emerging singer/songwriters from Nashville and across Canada to perform in intimate settings all around town.

Co-founder Scotty James is thrilled by the response from Stratford residents at the prospect of bringing the event to the Festival City. A Facebook campaign across Canada gauging interest in a takeover showed Stratford as one of the most enthusiastic responders and ticket sales are already brisk.

"Scotty put out a big 'Hey, would you like to vote for your city for this to come' and they did. We had thirteen cities and Stratford was one of the loudest cities," said event coordinator Larisa Shoebridge. "It's not a surprise, you folks are always into music and drama and arts but on the country side, there's a need, a want and desire there so that's what we're bringing to the town of Stratford."

The concept behind the Nashville Takeover is to bring together musicians and audience in intimate listening rooms where the artist is within arm's reach and entertains with songs and stories behind the music. There are no large stages or barriers of separation.

It started out as front porch concerts during the pandemic with James performing solo at a time when social distancing and outdoor only gatherings was the norm. One such concert was performed at Hughson Hall Bed and Breakfast in August of 2023 to great success. Later the concerts moved to backyards. This expanded to the Nashville Takeover concept, and after two successful events last year in Collingwood and Port Stanley, the country will now experience what it is like to discover an artist emerging as among the best of the best se-

lected to participate.

"There's a market for it, for these communities, in these neighbourhoods, so we started doing them all across North America and we'd bring the whole Nashville experience to people's back yards. Just the essence of Nashville and the songwriters' rounds inspired it. It really didn't exist in too many places outside of Nashville, especially in Canada," said James.

There are three groups of tickets available. The Saturday pass is \$59, the weekend pass is \$99 and the VIP pass is \$249.

"The VIP pass is exclusive performances; they could be a special brunch on Sunday with an artist, it could be taking you away to a mysterious place for cocktails and appies. So that package is actually really quite popular, but the whole premise behind this is intimacy. There's something very special that happens when you put three artists on three stools with three guitars. Something absolutely magic happens when the whole room turns to a listening room where everybody just goes quiet," said Shoebridge.

The artists explain where the songs came from, telling stories to the audience. The performers read the vibe of the room and have total autonomy in how to conduct the performance to create a uniquely one-of-a-kind experience.

"We like to choose venues that have some mystique or really funky pieces to them and Stratford is full of them, so I'm having an absolute ball working with possible venues. We are even working with tiny ones like End of Times on York Street," said Shoebridge.

Who the performers will be is kept secret in advance. Festival goers can trust that who they are going to see is about to become a household name. Scotty James is an award-winning, chart-topping artist himself and is well ingrained in the Nashville scene to know the epic talent that will be coming.

"Scott does a detailed dive on each per-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Scotty James and his partner Andrea Watson cofounded Backyard Music Co which is bringing the Nashville Takeover to Stratford April 2026.

former looking for someone that is keen and wonderful and tells great stories. The pool of artists we choose from is incredible. There are so many talented people out there it's quite mind boggling. I can tell you that at Port Stanley and Collingwood there were artists that played there who are now hitting it quite big, so this is also part of the mystique," said Shoebridge.

Bringing country music back to the forefront is the goal. There is nothing in Canada like this songwriter's festival and bringing the Nashville Takeover to Stratford in April brings joy to the organizers.

"It's something we want to do every year and become a staple in these towns across Canada. We're the only company doing this at scale. We're proud to do that and we want to keep doing it and building our community base in each town," said James.

The Nashville Takeover songwriters' festival will take place at venues across town on April 10-12. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit <https://luma.com/kosmkni3/>

Northern Wit to come back in May

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

The Provocation Ideas Festival is pleased to announce that Northern Wit: Comedy as the Canadian Shield, originally scheduled for Nov. 28 and postponed due to a severe winter storm, has been rescheduled for Friday, May 1, 2026, from 7-9:30 p.m. at the Stratford City Hall auditorium.

The decision to postpone the event was made in the interest of safety after winter conditions and travel advisories prevented several key performers from traveling.

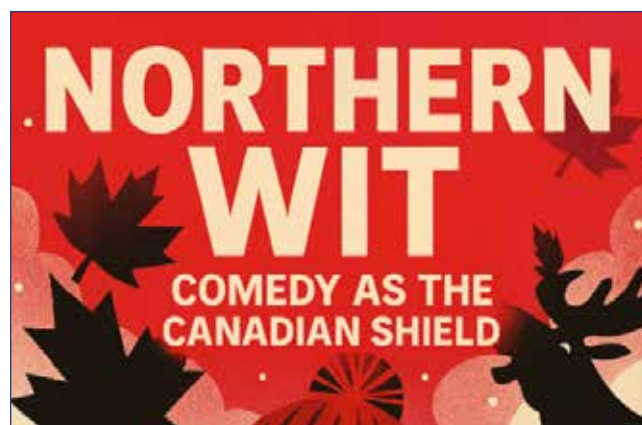
"Northern Wit is built on gathering in comfort, connection and good humour," said Mark Rosenfeld, founding director of the Provocation Ideas Festival. "We're grateful for the community's patience and thrilled to bring this exceptional program to the stage this spring."

All previously purchased tickets remain valid for the new date. Ticket holders who are unable to attend on

May 1 may request a full refund.

Northern Wit brings together some of Canada's sharpest comedic voices for an evening exploring the role of humour in shaping Canadian identity – a spirited mix of storytelling, satire and insight.

Further updates will be shared in the coming months.



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Winter Music Pop-Ups bring vibrancy and energy beginning this month

LISA CHESTER
Times Correspondent

Destination Stratford is pleased to once again support the Winter Music Pop-ups that will keep residents entertained throughout the winter season from December to March. With 14 venues planning events there will be something for everyone's tastes and styles.

With Lights On Stratford, a multi-week winter lights festival, acting as a cultural anchor tenant, there will be all the more reason to stay out and enjoy what Stratford can offer.

"As we do winter development and as there's more for our community to participate in, we should see, forgive the pun, a snowballing effect in the winter-time where we demonstrate people will come downtown. People will come to Stratford and they will come for cultural reasons," said Zac Gribble, executive

director of Destination Stratford and festival director of Lights On.

Applications were made to participate in this program with venues selected based upon criteria determined by Destination Stratford's committee to ensure the events align with the spirit of the program. A fund was established in 2023 to help support musician's fees at local venues, kicking off during Lights On.

"Stratford always does have a lot going on, including in winter, but really turning that on in a major way was the premise and if we could do it as a pilot project and demonstrate that that was successful, that these venues would attract people and also supporting directly and indirectly our sort of burgeoning music scene, it felt like a really good fit," said Gribble.

The pilot project was a success, so they did it again, and now there are two programs covering the year; one for the

winter and spring, and one for summer and fall called Stratford After Dark. With these two programs, local musicians and music enthusiasts come together in intimate settings for the after-dinner, after-theatre or night-out crowd.

"It is lovely to see venues that normally don't have live performances experiment with that because part of this is to demonstrate that it can work in an entrepreneurial sort of way. We are de-risking a local business to say we want to try being a venue and we also want to try an unconventional time of year. We're allowing them to innovate, and to be creative. They can successfully host a quality experience, and this is in support of the artists," said Gribble.

Destination Stratford takes a community first approach to what it does, and a big part of that is the quality of life, the cultural opportunity and the economic opportunity for local residents.

"A warm glow vibe that we'd like to see blossom is what this program, the winter music program, is in support of and we're seeing a lot of success. I mentioned the entrepreneurial aspect. We have seen some that we helped a couple of years ago to try some live music in the winter and who, without our help, have continued to have music series and it worked for them," said Gribble.

This is a great opportunity for every calibre of performer, from showcasing the seasoned artist to introducing new and upcoming performers embarking on their career. This is also an opportunity for local residents to discover the talent that is here and to feel that they're invited and included. Some events are free or at low cost, making the pop-ups accessible.

Events cover the spectrum of art, from music to spoken word. For more information, and to learn about venue events, visit visitstratford.ca/winter-music/.



Baby Faces of 2025

Baby's Name _____

Male or Female _____ Date of Birth _____

Place of Birth _____

Weight (birth) _____ Weight (now) _____

Parent(s) Name _____

Siblings (Name[s] & Age) _____

Grandparents _____

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(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Velvet and Ivory performed a 1920s-themed concert at the Stratford Perth Museum on Nov. 29 to a sold-out crowd. Pictured here are Tim Elliott, piano, Beverley Maranger, vocals, Lucinda Jones, guest vocalist, Steve MacDougall, bass, and Tim Adair, drums.

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Renowned Stratford performers to stage dramatic reading of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in support of Rotary Hospice Stratford Perth

GALEN SIMMONS

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Although at this time of year there is no shortage of performances featuring portrayals of Ebenezer Scrooge and his epiphanous, midnight meetings with three ghosts who help him discover the true meaning of Christmas, there is one such performance in Stratford unlike all others.

On Dec. 7, former CBC host and Stratford resident Judy Maddren is once again producing her annual dramatic reading of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* at Avondale United Church beginning at 7 p.m. While the story may stay the same, the characters in the annual rendition, staged as a benefit in support of Rotary Hospice Stratford Perth, are brought to life in new and exciting ways each year by a new slate of talented, Stratford actors, singers and orators, including someone recognizable by most Stratford residents – and people from further afield – as host.

"I'm so glad I asked (Stratford Summer Music founder) John Miller to be host because he sure knows his way around this stuff," Maddren said recently. "It is the first time he's hosted; he was a reader two years ago and was very engaging. Then I thought, 'John Miller would just be the best spokesperson for this.' ... We had quite a discussion this morning about questions he had and ideas he had, so it's pretty great."

Joining Miller onstage as readers this year are Stratford Festival favourites Laura Condlin, Jonathan Goad, Kevin Kruchkywich and André Sills, as well as Here For Now Theatre founder Fiona Mongillo and Maddren herself. Actor and vocalist Marcus Nance, also a festival favourite, will join the Flight Children's Choir, directed by Brooke Dufton, to provide musical elements that complement the story.

"You always have a list of the people you know will do a good job and you'd love to have read, and there were a couple of people I contacted who weren't going to be in town," Maddren said. "But everyone else we reached out to said yes and they have just been so helpful and so positive, and I haven't actually met some of them, so I'm really looking forward to that."

"(The musical component) was John Miller's idea. He said, 'Why don't you contact the Flight School and find out if the children's choir can take part?' ... You might have seen Brooke Dufton perform as part of Stratford Summer Music in 2015 or 2016. ... It was seven in the morning, there was a choir and she stepped into a canoe on the far shore, away from everyone on Tom Patterson Island, and she sang as someone paddled her across the still waters. It was just magical. Now, Brooke is the choir director for the Flight School. She's an accomplished soprano and she is going to sing with Marcus Nance, and Marcus is going to do a solo because he's quite an accomplished singer, too – and the choir, about 14 children. So, I think it's going to be a wonderful component. Christmas is about children ... so they'll be part of it."

The program includes a 15-minute intermission,

during which guests can enjoy a cup of hot chocolate and purchase raffle tickets for a beautifully curated basket, valued at over \$1,000, generously donated by the merchants of Albert Street. Rotary Hospice is also grateful to event sponsors Jeff Leney and John Wolfe, and Dan and Carolyn Mathieson, whose support helps make this community event possible.

Maddren says producing this dramatic reading each year in support of the hospice is near and dear to her heart. Not only was her husband, Tim Elliott, involved in the first community-based hospice in Canada, but Maddren's mother received hospice care in Stratford in 2024. Now, Maddren and Elliott's daughter, Pippa Elliott, works for the local hospice as marketing and communications coordinator, meaning supporting the hospice and the care it provides for palliative patients and their loved ones is truly a family affair.

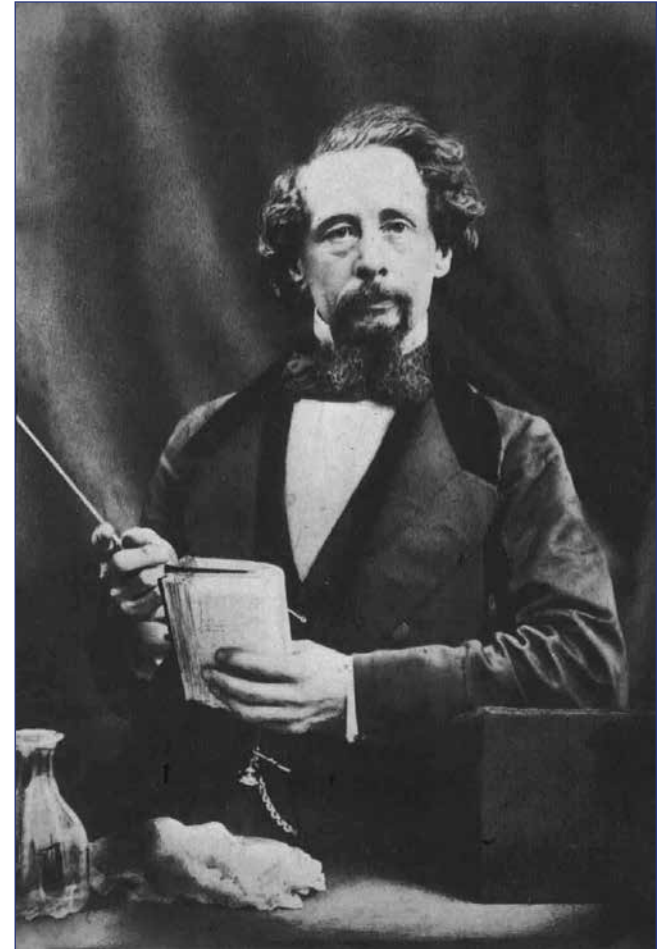
"That has just added to my appreciation for what the people at the hospice do," Maddren said.

"Working in an office where empathy is the most important characteristic is quite something," Pippa Elliott added.

Tickets for *A Christmas Carol* are \$50 each and all proceeds go to support hospice operations and its mission to provide warmth, dignity and comfort at end of life. To purchase tickets, visit rotaryhospice.ca/a-christmas-carol.

Located in a residential neighbourhood and surrounded by green space, Rotary Hospice offers 24-hour palliative care, 365 days a year, in a home-like setting, all at no cost to the individual or their loved ones. Cared for by compassionate and qualified staff and volunteers, Rotary Hospice residents are given the gift of precious time to spend together, while the clinical care team takes on the role of caregiver.

For more information about Rotary Hospice, visit www.rotaryhospice.ca or contact Lucie Stuart, direc-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Charles Dickens at a reading of *A Christmas Carol*.
tor of fund development and stewardship, at 519-508-4900 ext. 720 or lucie@rotaryhospice.ca.

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BIRDS OF A FEATHER captures Stratford national recognition as 'Bird Friendly City' by Nature Canada

STRATFORD TIMES STAFF

stratfordtimes@gmail.com

Destination Stratford is pleased to announce Stratford's recognition from Nature Canada as an official Bird Friendly City, a designation supported in part by the creative vision behind the newest light installations for the upcoming sixth annual Lights On Stratford Winter Festival of Lights.

Across Canada, people are coming together to make their cities bird friendly. Nature groups, municipal officials and other community groups are teaming up with Nature Canada to ensure urban environments are safe havens for birds rather than a source of threats.

"Stratford's dedication to advocating and protecting its local and migratory birds is inspiring," said Autumn Jordan, Bird Friendly City program organizer at Nature Canada. "Bird Friendly Certification showcases the many actions community members and municipal decision makers have taken to protect, defend and restore biodiversity. Nature Canada is delighted to have Stratford join the 36 other municipalities certified (as) Bird Friendly communities across Canada."

A Bird Friendly City is a community where:

- Key threats to birds are effectively mit-

igated;

- Nature is restored so native bird populations can thrive;
- Residents are actively engaged in admiring and monitoring local bird populations;
- Organizations are creating events to protect birds;
- Progressive municipal policies are created to protect urban bird populations; and
- A bird team has been created to oversee and lead these initiatives

"We are thrilled and extremely proud that Stratford has been certified as a Bird Friendly City by Nature Canada," said Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma. "Our community cares deeply about protecting the natural environment and wildlife along the Avon River, as well as in our region's 115 acres of parkland and 60 acres of natural areas, which are home to many species of birds year-round and during migrations. The Bird Friendly City certification supports the municipality's conservation efforts, while improving the quality of life of the people who live there or come to visit us."

"Our community has always supported and stood up for our wildlife residents, so when the BIRDS OF A FEATHER exhibit began taking shape for the upcoming Lights On Stratford Winter Festival of Lights, it was a natural fit for Destination

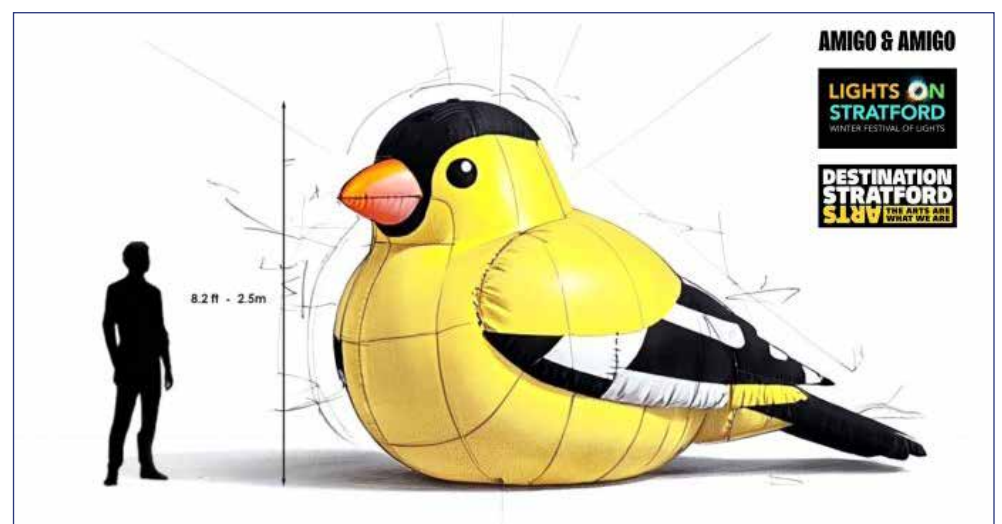
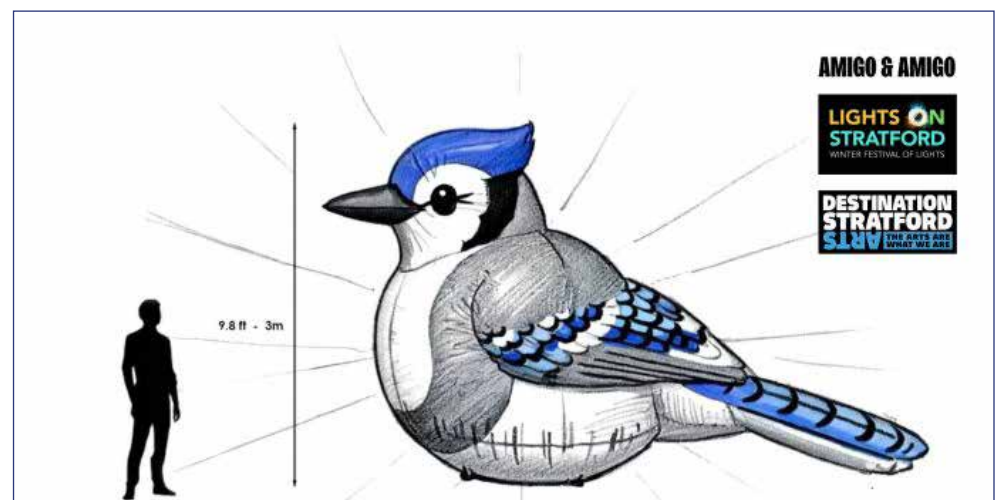
Stratford to also focus on bird preservation," said Christina Phillips, destination development manager with Destination Stratford. "Throughout the Bird Friendly City application process, we had the opportunity to engage and connect with many environment- and birding-passionate residents, organizations and businesses that all share a common desire for increased bird education and protection. We look forward to experiencing how this designation grows those connections and efforts to help improve the quality of life for all our residents."

This year's world premiere installation, BIRDS OF A FEATHER, will illuminate Tom Patterson Island throughout the winter season.

The featured species include: the BlackCapped Chickadee, Goldfinch, Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, Cardinal and Snowy Owl. The six birds were selected for their vibrant appearance, recognizable calls and their presence in Stratford and the surrounding area during the winter months.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER will be featured on Tom Patterson Island this winter as part of the Lights On Stratford festival, running from Dec. 12, 2025 to Jan. 18, 2026, Thursdays through Sundays from 5-10 p.m. Free to the public.

To learn more about Stratford's official application, check out the map of certified cities at <https://tinyurl.com/bdde7trh>.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS)

BIRDS OF A FEATHER, an upcoming exhibition for this year's Lights On Stratford Winter Festival of Lights, has earned Stratford national recognition as a Bird Friendly City. Catch the displays on Tom Patterson Island this winter when the festival kicks off on Dec. 12.

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Opinions

When kindness becomes a legacy: Five lessons from Kelly Walker

KIMBERLEY MACKENZIE

Guest Columnist

It was the most perfect dinner party. We invited a mix of new friends, 10 of us getting to know each other as we dove into a proper McIntosh Farm's Sunday prime rib roast beef. The house was full of warmth and vibrant conversation.

In our house, the kids all grew up knowing that if you played piano after dinner, you did not have to clean the kitchen. The most generous performer in our family is Shannon. She frequently picks a new piece on Sunday afternoon to share. That night was no exception. After dessert Shannon asked if we would like to hear a song. The response was unanimous. Of course!

What Shannon did not know at the time was that our dinner party consisted of several accomplished performers. A well-known actor, a cellist from the symphony and Kelly Walker – so Stratford!

An accomplished and generous musician himself, Kelly was beaming as Shannon played. At one point I saw Kelly's husband Ray lean over and whisper, "Will you play?" And Kelly just smiled with that abundant and so-full-of-love twinkle in his eye and said: "I'm just enjoying this right now."

Shannon played another piece and then it was Kelly's turn. I had brought a song from Church that I loved and we all sang together – "One more step, we'll take just one more step. ..." We all muddled through it. Then Kelly was off – filling the house with music on my old "Honky Tonky" piano. The racy funny songs came first and then he dove into his love songs. All written for beloved Ray. There were tears. It really was magical. I'm sure many of you who have been lucky enough to know Kelly longer than me have had similar nights.

The next time I saw Kelly at the symphony, I got one of his big much cherished bear hugs and he said so warmly: "Wasn't that just a wonderful evening – us all singing together." It WAS wonderful.

Nothing about Kelly ever felt performative. When he was talking to me, I always felt like I was the only person he knew in all the world. He was deeply curious and interested in how my family and I REALLY were doing and he never looked over my shoulder to see who else might be there. What a great example for us all.

Over the past 18 months my husband Rob, a few of our kids and Kelly and Ray have had a few more gatherings – but not nearly enough. Professionally, we both dedicated our lives to helping people through transitions. Kelly wrote three books on subjects that I also write and talk about. We connected on that and I devoured his books.

Never one to make you feel small or silly, he thought it was marvellous that this 57-year-old has taken three years to struggle through grade one piano! I'm muddling through "Silent Night" right now with him on my shoulder.

When Kelly collapsed and died during a concert last Saturday night shockwaves rippled through this small town. Such a gargantuan presence gone in such a surprising and public way. I'm so sorry for all those who were there to witness such an unexpected and tragic event.

In his book, *Dancing on the Ark: Facing Change in Uncertain Times* (What Every Noah Ought To Know), Kelly wrote about his uncle Jack Moore who danced well into old age as one of his heroes. Kelly wrote: "He and Aunt Win went dancing every week until they were very very old. He died living! What a legacy!" Well Kelly certainly died living, doing something he loved, sharing his talent, his heart and his soul.

I don't want to intrude on the grief of so very many people who knew him so much longer than I have. We were just brand-new friends. However, I believe people come into your life for a purpose. I've spent the last two days crying and rereading Kelly's books. And through his words Kelly has provided a great deal of comfort.

Here are just a few things I have learned from our brief friendship and his writing:

1. Find your heroes

We all have guides in this life. People older, wiser, who champion you and believe in you. People who set a good example that you want to emulate. In his book, Kelly calls these people "Noahs," like Noah and the ark, a humble, wise, resilient guide. A few of Kelly's "Noahs" were his father, Leonard Schuett, his uncle James Morgan, a "zany" woman named Dorothy Day and many others that he writes about.

The Noah of his that I found most inspiring is a woman named Regina who lived a life of abuse at the hands of her father, brothers and then her husband. But she clawed her way out, got a degree and became "strong, confident and free." She raised her children and broke the cycle. Kelly writes:

"That is how it is done. Regina had become a Noah. She served him (her son) fuel for the many transitions he would have to face in the years ahead. She gave him energy and hope because of her own journey and then supplied him with further resources so he could figure out his way. Isn't that all we can do? Light the torch and pass it on. Then hope."

Kelly was light and he shared it to lift and inspire others. We can try to do the same.

2. Dance to the beat of my own drum. I AM enough

"It took me longer to realize that I didn't have to be part of anything, to be who I was to be – for my own pleasure and for the good of the world," Kelly wrote. "I had limited myself by not exercising my imagination or my power I slipped into other people's paths as being the only legitimate ones for me."

New to this community and small town with such a vibrant social scene, it is easy to slip into trying to turn yourself into a pretzel to fit in. I need to follow my own path. This is who I am. I shall try not to waver. I will attract and form friendships with people who share my values. We can all forge our own path.

3. We are all a work in progress

"I would hate to think that people would feel they should come to someone for help who was all done," Kelly wrote. "I would rather seek counsel from someone I was certain was still working on his or her own life. To be all done is likely to be dead!"

I tell my clients all the time that we are constantly evolving and becoming the best next version of ourselves. Goodness knows the girl, mother and woman I was 30, 20 and 10 years ago is not who I am today.

We can call on more compassion and grace for ourselves and others as we continue to evolve and grow.

4. Darkness and solitude have purpose

"Remember, it is in the dead of winter that the roots of the tree prepare for springtime," Kelly wrote.

Times are dark right now. Especially in Stratford. A giant hole has been left with the passing of Kelly. In his book Kelly encourages us to retreat, reflect, reconnect with ourselves and each other. Take a beat. Stop the hustle and breath, hug and take solace in the company of people you love.

Twice I have had breakdowns that reorganized my life and career – just like

Kelly writes of. There is no shame in losing your way. I always emerge stronger and renewed when I honour the dark times. And yet, during it, I always feel like the world's biggest failure.

Kelly's kind words help us see that these times of solitude and darkness serve a great purpose. The light will return. We just need to be patient.

5. I can be "EVERYTHING"

"I asked a little girl what she wants to be when she grows up," Kelly wrote. "She ventured inside herself, wrinkled her brow, then threw up her head in the air and proclaimed in a loud voice, EVERYTHING!"

Sometimes I feel my desire to be "everything" is too ambitious. I hear my mother telling me to stay "humble" and then I become small. Through his writing Kelly provided us with encouragement to live a full beautiful life. It's ok to be "everything."

I am so sorry for your loss

Reading his books this weekend was an incredibly cathartic experience. It was like he was here, helping me to figure out how to live in a world without him. And that sentence even seems kind of silly given the fact that we met at the symphony as seat mates just 18 short months ago.

Kelly's superpower was making you feel like you were the most important person in the room. He made you feel extremely special. And you ARE. It was real. Kelly led with immense love for all people.

To everyone in Stratford and beyond who loved him for so much longer and had a lifetime of Thanksgivings and dinner parties with remarkable conversations and music, I am so very, very sorry for your loss.

Perhaps Kelly's warmth and love for humanity can live on in all of us. Or at least we can try.

Let's take care of each other and lead with love. Like Kelly did.

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Opinions

Musings: A “blue” Christmas this year?



MARK HERTZBERGER

Times Columnist

From childhood onward, I’ve never been much into competitive sports. It might have had something to do with being the last person chosen for teams when we played compulsory baseball in public school: “Ohhh kayyyy...I guess I’ll have to take Herrrrtzberrrgerr”, followed by a collective groan from the rest of the team. As an uncoordinated geek, I soon learned to pursue solitary activities. Thank heav-



ens for books and for being able to ride my bike without falling off, one of the few things my father taught me.

Social misfit that I am, I rarely pay attention to organized sports. This often leaves me at a loss for small-talk topics: “So, how about that game last night?” Um...it must have been great (I hope!) I used to think the big games served a valuable purpose by keeping people off

the streets. Then I read accounts of what sometimes happens when the game ends and certain crowds file out of the stadium, either wild with grandiosity if their team won or bitter with disappointment if they lost.

But baseball this year was different. The Blue Jays’ winning streak seemed to unite Canadians behind “our team” at a time when the country was under economic threat and in a

pessimistic mood. Even Yvonne and I got drawn in, albeit only until the last game. We were in genuine awe at how fiercely the Jays played and how united they were.

I was curious, though: Who are the Blue Jays? Probably most of you know this but I had to do a bit of research. I discovered that apparently only one player is a Canadian citizen. The team is based in Canada, though, and it’s owned by Rogers who, as far as I can see, is totally owned by Canadian corporations. So Canadian in that sense, I suppose.

What moves us to embrace a team whose players are enticed by high salaries and is effectively not made up of Canadians? For me, it was the professionalism, teamwork and grace shown by a diverse group of human beings who came together against a challenging opposition.

Of course it was a disappointment that they didn’t win the World Series. This may be a

somewhat “Blue” Christmas for many fans. But, hopefully, as they unwrap their Blue Jays hats, shirts and mugs under the tree they will take heart in how incredibly well the team played and what an inspiration they are. If only humanity as a whole could celebrate diversity and work together to face the challenges our planet faces. Think of how that might affect communities, workplaces and nature. What a win that would be.

Happy Holidays to all and see you in 2026!

Mark Hertzberger is a former social services supervisor, human resources manager, conflict mediator, and literacy practitioner. He has since freed his mind and now writes poetry and occasional opinionated columns. Mark has lived in Perth County for 27 years, the last 12 of which have been in Stratford where he resides with his wife, novelist Yvonne Hertzberger.

As I See It From America: We all deserve respect



PATRICK D. BURK

Times Columnist

We are a Christmas family and yes, we have been up in Stratford during the holiday season. The holidays reflect the love that we have for each other. It is also a time when we tend to spend a lot of time together. My entire family and then some were together this past Thursday. It was most delightful. Later in the week we were treated to wonderful photographs that our daughter and son-in-law took on their weekend trip to see Annie. They reported back to us that all was fine in your fair city and of course provided us with enough coffee and baked goods to hold us for a while. I am certain a few gifts were purchased for family

members as Stratford is a treasured destination for our entire family. I know that they had a wonderful time and like us, were immediately planning the next visit. It is a daily bit of conversation down here, especially when we hear from friends and miss that wonderful interaction.

Since I last wrote to you all, we have had our Thanksgiving weekend. It is a bit later than yours and of course based on the tradition that the native Indigenous people assisted and helped those that settled in New England. They showed the settlers how to survive in a harsher climate than they were used to and how to process food for storage over the long winter. Then they joined together for a large meal of thanks for the harvest and for the successful preparation for the cold times that were coming. I, of course, am never certain that any of that actually happened, but it is a nice story to hear, and it is comforting that if the story is true, there was a time when all were treated with fairness and respect.

Today I look at my country with eyes filled with sadness. I always thought that we were a nation that helped those around

the world that really needed support as well as those that were oppressed by governments and rogue groups or criminals or gangs. I just finished reading about a police officer who came here with his parents as a child because the drug cartel in their homeland insisted that his father deal in drugs. His dad, knowing and realizing that this was not a great life for his wife and children, fled. Our wonderful country took them in, protected them and allowed them to work toward citizenship. Today the entire family are model citizens, and the son is a police officer serving a small rural county in the south. He is afraid that his parents or family members may be deported.

What has happened to us? We have friends that cannot be sure that family members may be deported for whatever reason, and we know of many people that are actually hunted down, even though they have been “legal” for years. Children are threatened to tell on their parents and reveal locations of their parents and discuss what type of job dad or mom may have. We see people who are actual citizens of this country locked up and then de-

ported for no other reason than they are the wrong nationality or colour. Of course, they give “trumped up” reasons why these citizens should be deported. Often these reasons do not stand up in court, but it is too late. The person is gone. This weekend a young 19-year-old girl that had court approval to be in this country disappeared on her way to visit her family for Thanksgiving. Her family was frantic. She was missing. She turned up at a Honduras airport with literally nothing. How horrible, how tragic and how incredibly unnecessary.

We may see some light at the end of the tunnel. Successful challenges are happening, and people are souring on the current handling of this mess. We are looking forward to possibly seeing some relief and once again seeing people treated with dignity and respect. I really do feel that maybe if we are careful, lucky and work hard we can provide a much safer and welcoming environment for those that wish to become American citizens. I really think we will once again start to be a beacon of hope, not a bastion of racism. I can only pray. On Tuesday, Dec. 2 (after press time) there is a spe-

cial election for a congressional area in Tennessee. It looks really close and it is our hope that with all that is going on we can pull out an upset. This will be one more step to making big changes in our House or Representatives and a definite message of change and defeat for our current faction of government. I do think that the winds of change are in the air.

Which brings me back to Stratford. I realize I sometimes get off on a tangent in reporting on our life down here in the United States, but I also see such a difference when I am in Canada, especially my special place of Stratford. I always see a welcoming people and a kindness. I see caring people that are looking out for each other and working for a common good. I know that there are different political factions and such, I am very familiar with your political parties, but I also see a sense of humanity amongst the Stratford citizens. I see little name calling or discrimination. I see the beauty in the fact that all are different, no one is the same, but all deserve that wonderful word, respect. Keep up the good work!

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Community of Christ Church is giving again with over \$600 going to the Kiwanis Music Festival in Stratford

GARY WEST

Times Correspondent

The aroma of pancakes, sausages and warm conversation filled the Community of Christ Church hall last weekend, as neighbours and friends gathered for the church's monthly community breakfast.

Each month volunteers, prepare a hearty, homemade meal and direct the proceeds toward a very local cause. This month's breakfast supported the Stratford Kiwanis Festival of the Performing Arts, an organization that has played a mean-

ingful role in the community for generations.

The Kiwanis music festival is more than an annual event, it is a cornerstone of artistic growth in the region. For countless children, youth and adults, the festival provides a welcoming stage to explore and strengthen their talents in music, speech, drama and other performing arts.

Participants receive helpful guidance from trained adjudicators, encouraging learning, confidence and personal development.

Organizers from both the Community



(GARY WEST PHOTO)

At Sunday's Community of Christ Church breakfast over \$600 was raised for the Stratford Kiwanis Festival of the Performing Arts. Back: Pastor Nancy Brookshaw, Becky Huffman, Collins Howard, Stacey Brookshaw. Front: Kim Shepard, Julia Brookshaw, Kelly Tarr, Lily Denma.

of Christ and the Kiwanis music festival, noted that partnerships like this help to ensure the continued support of art education in Stratford.

"When we support the festival, we're supporting opportunities," said one volunteer. "Opportunities for people to express themselves to challenge themselves and to discover new gifts."

The morning saw a strong turnout, with neighbours gathering not only to enjoy a meal, but to strengthen the sense of belonging that defines the event.

Over \$600 was raised and will help the Kiwanis festival's continuous mission of enriching lives through artistic expression, and offering performers a space to learn, shine and connect.

The next community breakfast will be held on Sunday, Dec. 28 from 9-11 a.m., with proceeds going to the Stratford House of Blessing, supporting local families and individuals in need.

All are welcome to attend and share in good food, good company and the ongoing spirit of community care.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

STRATFORD SCRABBLE CLUB

Mary Elford, who by scoring 461 points broke a long-held record for the highest score without playing a seven-letter word, poses with Morgan Walpole, Tony Rea and Barry D'Costa, who all achieved improved best score. The Stratford Scrabble Club recently celebrated a number of achievements. For more information on the club, visit stratfordscrabble.ca.

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STRATFORD TIMES

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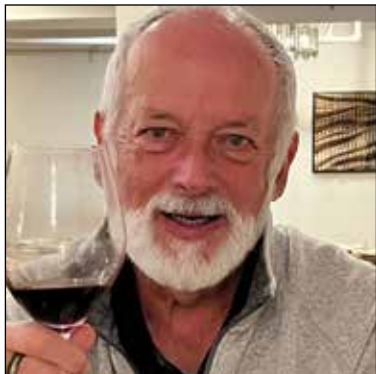
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OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: A qualified “yes” on visiting two popular Toronto attractions



PAUL KNOWLES

Times Columnist

Their beginnings are almost a century apart, but the Royal Ontario Museum and Ripley's Aquarium of Canada have a lot in common. They are two of the most-visited attractions in Toronto. They both are part of the Toronto CityPASS program that provides some significant discounts on admission prices. And they both offer a blend of entertainment and education to people of all ages.

So, all that being said, should you plan to brave the horrendous traffic and head to Toronto right away to take in these two attractions? My answer would be a qualified “yes.”

Why qualified? Different reasons for the two places. Let's start with the ROM. Most of us remember school trips to the ROM in decades past. After all, the Royal Ontario Museum has been open since 1914, so it predates all of us.

If you are like me, your three main memories are of dinosaur skeletons, Egyptian mummies and row after row of jam-packed cases loaded with a mind-boggling assortment of historical artifacts.

That's not the ROM of today – though you can find most of these things in the museum somewhere.



A new, high-tech feature at the Royal Ontario Museum: a video featuring undersea creatures of the Cambrian period.

(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTOS)

The ROM is modernizing big time and this is actually the reason for my “qualified yes” – because the museum is smack in the middle of a three-year, multi-million-dollar revitalization of the main floor and some of the second floor. The transformation impacts 86,000 square feet on the main floor and creates 6,000 square feet of new gallery space on the second floor. So, lots of the building is closed to visitors.

Change is certainly in the air at the ROM and not only concerning the physical space. After a decade in the position, director and CEO Josh Basseches has resigned and Yoke Chung and Jennifer Wild, already part of the museum's executive leadership team, are becoming co-directors and CEOs as of Jan. 1.

So, the ROM is in transition and visitors need to be aware of

this. That does not mean there is nothing to experience here – there is still a lot of the permanent collection on display, there are new innovations to enjoy and there are many current, temporary exhibitions ranging from “Saints, Sinners, Lovers and Fools: 300 years of Flemish masterworks” to “Sharks” to an intriguing exhibition entitled, “Layers in Time,” focused on southwestern Ontario's unique, meromictic lake, Crawford Lake.

And, in a slightly obvious segue, thinking of water takes us south from the ROM to Ripley's Aquarium.

It's a much newer part of the Toronto scene, having opened in 2013, 99 years after the ROM welcomed its first visitor. And while the ROM is working toward being a modern, state-of-the-art destina-

tion, Ripley's accomplished that goal from the get-go.

So why do I also give the aquarium a “qualified yes.” Here, it all depends on when you go. We visited recently, on a Saturday, and the place was jammed wall to wall with family groups. Great for the kids to be there, but a challenge to navigate. So, my qualification is Ripley's Aquarium is a terrific place to visit but do avoid high-volume days. Ripley's recommends avoiding the hours of 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. on weekdays, and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends and holidays. I agree!

If you can miss the uber-crowds, there is a lot to love about the place. The moving sidewalk that carries you inside the aquarium where you are surrounded by sharks, sea turtles and dozens of species of fish is amazing. The Ray Bay,

which allows visitors to actually touch a ray, is magical. And while the big features draw the most attention, there are marvels in smaller exhibits as well, including sea horses and sea dragons.

Ripley's has also taken their Canadian location seriously with really fine exhibits of Canadian species, both freshwater and ocean. Everyone loves the blue lobsters.

The attraction has, from the beginning, been over-the-top kid friendly. In fact, there are tunnels through water features, viewing areas and other nooks and crannies that are only accessible to children, which I personally think is very unfair. Heck, I'd like to crawl through a school of fish, except I would most certainly get stuck. So, let's leave it to the kids who love it.

I mentioned the Toronto CityPASS. Here's the current math for one adult. The CityPASS costs \$129.96 and a child's pass is \$92.92.

That gets you into the CN Tower, Ripley's Aquarium and three other attractions from a list including the ROM, the Toronto Zoo, Casa Loma and more. If you did all five, you would be paying \$182 for an adult. Even visiting just three, you save money with the CityPASS.

Whether you use that pass or simply plan a visit to one or two places, the aquarium is definitely worth a visit – away from peak hours – and the ROM, even under construction, still offers many of the wonders that we remember from when we were school kids, and promises a lot more to come.

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.



Yes, there are still dinosaurs to be found at the ROM.



Peak hours at Ripley's Aquarium can mean large crowds.

Crossword

CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Dough made from corn flour
- 5. Rise
- 11. Gratitude
- 14. A low wall
- 15. Kidnap
- 18. A cup golfers want to win
- 19. Outgoing
- 21. “Partner” to flow
- 23. Former Michigan coach Brady
- 24. Proverb
- 28. Gasteyer and de Armas are two
- 29. Helps a body recover
- 30. Baseball Cy Young winner
- 32. Very fast airplane
- 33. Offensive baseball stat
- 35. Body of water
- 36. Record of one’s heartbeat
- 39. Signs a contract
- 41. Atomic #24
- 42. Bind securely
- 44. French Jesuit theologian
- 46. Fragrant brown balsam
- 47. Post office box
- 49. Sells tickets at inflated prices
- 52. Places to hang coats
- 56. Jewish salutation
- 58. Yellow fruits
- 60. Poorly educated
- 62. Microorganism
- 63. Talk show host Barrymore

CLUES DOWN

- 1. A way to plan
- 2. Three-banded armadillo
- 3. Mobile

- 4. Romanian city
- 5. Making sour
- 6. Take a seat
- 7. “The Golden State”
- 8. When you hope to arrive
- 9. Pointed ends of pens
- 10. Extinct flightless bird
- 12. Sharp-pointed dueling sword
- 13. Nape of neck
- 16. Problems (Spanish slang)
- 17. Narrow carpet
- 20. To avoid the risk of
- 22. Spiritual academic degree (abbr.)
- 25. Equally
- 26. Traditional cars still need it
- 27. Eligible voters
- 29. Greek alphabet letter
- 31. Body part
- 34. Referee-declared outcome
- 36. Means to moving money
- 37. Popular footwear brand
- 38. Cockatoo
- 40. NFL’s big game
- 43. Botswana currencies
- 45. News-reporting organization
- 48. Batman villain
- 50. Urgent request
- 51. Not all
- 53. Hallmark’s specialty
- 54. Knot in a tree
- 55. Satisfy
- 57. Notable space station
- 58. Baby’s dining accessory
- 59. Stitch clothing
- 61. ___ and behold

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		1	3					
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	3						6	2

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A Message from Canada's news publishers

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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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P	T	S	A	L	E	S	S	T	
H	I	T	S	E	A				
E	C	G	I	N	K	S	C	R	
F	R	A	P	G	O	B	A	T	
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6	1	5	4	8	7	2	9	3
3	6	9	8	2	4	7	5	1
8	7	1	3	9	5	4	2	6
5	2	4	1	7	6	9	3	8
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