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Council approves location and concept for town hall

JEFF HELSDON

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

After discussing several concepts and locations in the past 18 months, Tillsonburg council settled on renovating the existing Customer Service Centre at 10 Lisgar Ave for a new town hall at Monday's meeting.

Total estimated cost is \$5.69 million, with an upside limit of \$6 million. Council passed a motion to direct staff to execute an agreement with Paulsan Construction of Brantford to complete the project.

The project will be completed without increasing taxes.

"It does not affect the levy. This has been going on since 2016, and it's time," Mayor Deb Gilvesy said after the decision was made.

The road to reach this goal has been a long one that started nearly a decade ago, with recent efforts intensifying. A committee to look at a new town hall was formed during the last term of council. More recently, this council approved demolition of the existing building at 10 Lisgar Ave and the construction of a new building that could cost as much as \$18 million in July 2024. However, a month later, when complications were found with building a new two-storey structure on the site, the search was on for an alternative location.

Town-owned property on Harvey Street and the former Peavey Mart store were considered before council asked for options to renovate the existing Customer Service Centre last August. A motion was also passed that construction of a new town hall wouldn't commence until the sale of existing town assets covered half of the costs.

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NEW YEAR'S LEVEE

(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

Tillsonburg Mayor Deb Gilvesy greeted Legion president Tom Brown and past-president Dianne Hodges at the annual levee held Sunday at Annandale National Historic Site. The event was hosted by Tillsonburg and District Historical Society. See more coverage of the event on Page 9 of today's paper.

King representing Tillsonburg Curling Club at 2026 Brier

JEFF TRIBE

Post Correspondent

Courtland's Jayden King is not only brushing up on his curling skills for the Montana's Brier February 27 to March 8 in St. John's Newfoundland, but also his ability to kiss a cod and ingest dark rum.

"We'll do the whole screech situation," laughed the 23-year skip of the Farm & Food Care Ontario Men's Curling Championship winning rink. "Whatever comes along, we are excited to go along for the whole ride."

King, vice Dylan Niepage, second Owen Henry, lead Victor Pietrangelo and alternate Cory Heggstad booked their ticket to Canadian men's curling ultimate ride with a 9-6 win over Sam Moonbroeck's Whitby foursome Sunday, Jan. 11 in the Woolwich Memorial Centre.

The teams have met six times this season said King, Moonbroeck prevailing 7-5 earlier in the provincial draw and opening with the hammer during the final as a result. The Whitby rink counted one in the first end, King answering with a draw for two, Moonbroeck answering back with a great third-end shot of his own, to score two and take a 3-2 lead.

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Tillsonburg budget approved with 3.64 per cent increase

JEFF HELSDON

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Tillsonburg council approved the 2026 budget with a 1.8 per cent increase, plus another 1.84 per cent to cover court-mandated policing costs, for a total increase of 3.64 per cent, with only one amendment.

The 2026 budget was different from past budgets, with the province's Strong Mayor legislation placing budget responsibility with the mayor rather than all of council. In Tillsonburg's case, after Mayor Deb Gilvesy consulted with council, she worked on the budget with staff before releasing the budget to council in mid-December. It became public on Jan. 2.

The budget will result in a tax increase of \$89.42 on the municipal portion of property taxes for the average home assessed at \$243,000.

Gilvesy started the five-hour budget session on Jan. 7 by acknowledging the staff's work in completing the budget. She said \$1.4 million was trimmed from the original budget document, resulting in a "needs versus wants" budget.

The mayor went into more detail on the policing increase, explaining that it would initially have resulted in an 18.3 per cent increase, but the province stepped in and capped it at \$735,000. That still resulted in a 1.84 per cent increase in taxes.

With this being the last budget of the current council, the mayor had a list of things for future councils to watch, including completing a service level review with public input and being aware of fire communications, which lost a significant contract in the last year.

"Tillsonburg ratepayers shouldn't be subsidizing 9-1-1 services for other communities," she said, adding fire staff are pursuing other opportunities to replace the lost business.

The budget will total \$43.4 million in expenditures. Other revenues, which include grants, development charges, and user fees, amount to \$19.6 million, leaving \$23.8 million to be raised through taxation.

Director of Finance/Treasurer Renato Pullia said the budget started at a total of \$24.9 million needed from taxation, or an eight per cent tax increase. Senior staff

brought this down to 5.75 per cent, and then the mayor's review pared it down to 1.8 per cent.

The budget is broken into several pillars, following the 2021-2030 Community Strategic Plan, including:

- Develop a robust asset management plan to maintain infrastructure
- Enhance employee engagement and training as the foundation for excellent customer service
- Position Tillsonburg as a municipal leader
- Multi-year budgeting for sustainability
- Boundary expansion, industrial land purchase

Pullia identified budgetary pressures as OPP costs, inflationary costs, labour costs and fleet costs. The town employed 266 people in 2025, including firefighters, which equates to 166 full-time equivalents. This will increase to 169 FTE in 2026.

Included in the budget is \$70,000 for physician recruitment, and another \$30,000 for an enhanced social media presence to promote Tillsonburg to medical professionals.

Coun. Kelly Spencer asked if there was any movement to look into other inter-community transit opportunities, such as to Aylmer for patients referred there for an ultrasound.

Director of Operations Carlos Reyes, who oversees transit, said he is always looking for opportunities, but government funding for inter-community transit ended last year.

Gilvesy said inter-community transit was initiated through SCOR, and reiterated that funding was a challenge.

"I can assure you those conversations have been had, and continue to be had," she said.

Coun. Bob Parsons noted the increase in expenditures for transit paid through the levy was 167 per cent, or \$101,000, an amount he called "alarming".

"It's an awful lot of extra for taxpayers to carry," he said. "We need either grants or ridership."

Gilvesy concurred, and said every municipality is experiencing the same thing.

During discussions, several councillors and the mayor raised points about the condition of the roads. Reyes said an assessment report will be coming with more information.

In the economic development and marketing department, Development Commissioner Cephas Panschow said the attainable housing project at 31 Earle Street could be a revenue-generating project.

"The economy is strong, but a downside risk to the business plan is if that changes," he said.

Highlights of the recreation budget included a new changing room in the arena, three new pickleball courts, renovations to Library Lane, a new baseball pavilion and repairs to the clock tower.

The budget did not include an allocation to the Downtown Tillsonburg BIA as the mayor had declared a conflict of interest. BIA executive director Mark Renaud made a presentation about the organization's budget. Gilvesy, Deputy Mayor Dave Beres and Coun. Chris Rosehart did not participate in the discussion due to conflicts of interest.

The town allotment to the BIA, as per the memorandum of understanding, increased from \$37,119 in 2025 to \$58,959 in 2026. The town's contribution to BIA capital remained at \$20,000 in both budgets. For commercial properties in the BIA zone, there will be a 7.7 per cent increase in the BIA levy.

One of the items Renaud included on his to-do list is the need for a four-way advanced green at the intersection of Broadway and Bridge Street. He said this was first identified in a 2003 traffic study.

Renaud identified several gaps in the town, including a lack of fine dining, a shortage of hotel rooms, a lack of meeting and convention space, a lack of a performing arts centre, a lack of a movie theatre, and a lack of a men's clothing store.

He urged council to resist fragmentation of the commercial zone and to prioritize expanding of the central commercial area.

"I don't see what's happening in London, Kitchener and other towns where there are big box stores are on the periphery," he said.

He also urged council to work on transit to connect Tillsonburg to other towns and to address social issues.

Spencer pointed out the increase in addiction issues and asked about BIA staff training to deal with needles in hazardous materials.

Renaud said staff call the police if they need assistance, but it's vital not to let downtown

start to deteriorate, and noted that some infrastructure has been destroyed. The memorandum of understanding with the town allocates 2.9 hours per day for clean-up and handling issues.

Coun. Chris Parker noted the town allocation to the BIA has increased 50.3 per cent, and said that was significant.

Providing statistics, Renaud said a large part of it is an increase in garbage being picked up. It increased from 14 bags in 2022 to 21 bags per day in 2025. He noted increases in all waste collection and said BIA staff called the OPP for three critical incidents in 2022, compared to 27 times in 2025. Vandalism to BIA assets skyrocketed from two the entire year in 2022 to six per week in 2025.

"This is directly related to drug use," Renaud said.

Although the original budget didn't include the BIA financials, the projected tax increase incorporated it, noting it needed to be added by amendment. An amendment to the budget – the only one brought forward – to accept the BIA budget was presented. Parker voted against it, saying he can't support a 50 per cent budget increase.

"The BIA has done a great job in the downtown, and will continue to, but I can't support a 50 per cent increase when we've cut in other areas," he said.

Spencer countered the BIA is "dealing with unprecedented times", but said she isn't opposed to a slightly lower increase. The amendment passed 3-1.

With the budget being done earlier than is often the case, Beres asked if tenders for projects could go out earlier to get better pricing. Pullia explained tenders could go out, but it would be safer if there were no amendments, as the budget could be adopted quicker.

In the end, council also passed a motion to shorten the 30-day budget comment period to end on Jan. 8, 2026. With the new process, the budget is deemed adopted because there were no amendments outside of the one for the BIA, which the mayor declared a conflict of interest on.

A separate motion was also passed requiring any individual or group which received a grant from council shall submit a financial report within 60 days.



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EDITORIAL

New town hall solution is a win-win for Tillsonburg

For nearly a decade, Tillsonburg town councillors have been talking about a new town hall. Monday night, that debate was finally put to a rest with a decision to renovate the existing town customer service centre and the adjoining truck bays at 10 Lisgar Ave into a new town hall.

The decision brought with it something typically thought of as unimaginable in political finance – no additional cost to the taxpayer.

Long-time Tillsonburg residents may remember the stately red-brick building on Broadway that served as the town hall. Built in 1898, it not only housed the town's offices but was also the fire station, police station, jail, and even an opera house at various points in its history. That building was demolished in 1979 to make way for the Tillsonburg Town Centre. Municipal offices relocated to the second floor of the new mall.

Fast-forward a few decades, and talk of the need for a new town hall intensified as town staff outgrew the mall offices and the rent increased. Several past councils have tossed around ideas for a new town hall, but never pulled the trigger on what would surely be a considerable expenditure.

The present council was poised to move forward with a new building at 10 Lisgar Ave at a cost that could have approached or exceeded \$18 million. That would have resulted in a tax increase. Instead, through various turns of events, they decided to renovate the existing building at one-third the cost.

To those who live outside Tillsonburg, it seems a little strange that the town didn't have a town hall or municipal building. Recent reports on the town hall talked about employees being scattered in several locations, which was bad for morale, and didn't present the most professional image.

But, ask the average Tillsonburg resident if they cared there wasn't a town hall the past 40-plus years, and the answer would likely be an ambivalent 'No'. However, if the question was whether they want to see a tax increase to pay for the town hall, the answer would likely become a more emphatic 'No' or 'No way'.

The solution passed by council on Monday night gives the best of both worlds – it creates a new town hall and will end the town paying rent while at the same time not increasing taxes.

It really is a win-win solution.



(BETH SANDOR PHOTO)

PHOTOGRAPHERS WANTED

Do you have a great photo you think would look good on the editorial page?

The Tillsonburg Post is looking for images to display in this space from community members who would like to share their art work. All images must be taken in Tillsonburg, or the immediate area, and should not be of people.

Images should be high resolution jpegs. Please send only one image per e-mail, and send no more than three images. Images should be sent to jeff@granthaven.com

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**EVERYONE
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STORY
TO TELL**

ROBIN KRAFFT

Tillsonburg Post Columnist

Sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes to really see and appreciate our town. Virginia Sousa and her husband Paulo have lived here for five years, and she cherishes everything Tillsonburg has to offer every day. She often shares her admiration in enthusiastic posts to share with her extended family and friends abroad.

Virginia's cheerful and positive demeanor is all part of her lifelong ability to adapt to new and challenging situations. Tillsonburg is certainly a big change from the GTA, and a far cry from where she grew up.

"I used to live in paradise," Sousa said. "It was so beautiful. I was born in Africa,

and we lived in the small town of Lobito, in Angola, right on the ocean. It gave me a more open concept of the world."

Among her childhood memories of community parties, dancing, school and gymnastics, the beach across the street from their house is most deeply engraved on her heart.

"If we were not at school, we were at the beach," Sousa said. "The beach represented freedom. I would call on my friends and we would be there just playing all day. Soccer and volleyball, games that we invented in the sand with pebbles, surfing with the inner tubes of big truck tires and sometimes we would just be there, talking."

Looking back, she can see that it was hazardous, although she had taken swimming lessons from the age of four, but it was a different time and she had grown up on the ocean.

There were other dangers looming in her teen years, as she became more aware of politics. There was growing unrest, propaganda, and a struggle for control.

"When I was at university, I could see things were going to deteriorate," Sousa said. "We students wanted independence for everyone but we could see trouble in the way the politicians were talking, and

guerilla soldiers appeared, they were positioning themselves."

Her boyfriend (future husband Paulo) was at a university 1,600 km to the North in Luanda, and they kept in touch through writing letters. When things intensified, she began sending telegrams. After witnessing a violent, traumatic incident, Virginia returned to quiet and peaceful Lobito and resumed her day-to-day life until they began to hear shots ring out.

"We thought that things would settle down after independence, but my father told us to pack," Sousa recalled. "There was a fishing trawler at the dock to take us to a cargo ship in the middle of the bay. We had to climb a rope ladder up the hull. I still remember when we were leaving the bay and all the husbands and fathers were parked along the road and flashing their lights to say goodbye.

"After 15 days, we arrived in Lisbon and stayed at my grandmother's apartment, about 20 of us," Sousa said. "There were many people who had no family and were sleeping on the street. We would line up for days, my mother and all three children waiting for food rations because we had nothing."

Virginia credits her father's life lessons

for her resilience and ability to adapt. At her grandmother's suggestion, she arrived here as a refugee, but becoming a Canadian citizen required persistence and tenacity.

Virginia recalled her early years, when just getting to her job at the airport was an unnerving experience, but she adjusted. She went on to work for Air Portugal, had her own travel agency, became a licensed tourist guide, and was a property manager for high-rise condominiums.

"I studied history and philosophy, but I ended up doing things I never would have imagined," Sousa said. "We have to be open to do whatever life throws at us and do it the best we can."

After raising their sons and decades of living and commuting in and around the GTA, Virginia and Paulo wanted to get away from traffic, highways, and the fast-paced environment.

"The first time we visited Tillsonburg we immediately knew this is what we want," Sousa said, smiling. "The vibe and the town were right for us. We have everything here! I always see people I know, and I always find someone to talk to. There are lots of parks, we can walk safely, but the community is the most important."

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A BAZAAR DONATION

Hickory Hills Residents Association recently presented the Tillsonburg District Memorial Hospital Foundation with a donation for \$5,500. The money was the proceeds from the Christmas bazaar and tea the group hosted before Christmas.

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Tillsonburg POST

Guiding Principles

1. Everyone has a story
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A look at early North America through Dickens' eyes



THE STAGE IS THE WORLD

LAUREL A. BEECHEY

Tillsonburg Post Columnist

In last week's installment, Charles and Christine Dickens arrived in Boston to tour North America and Charles began his successful reading tour.

His books were based on his own past experience, and each exposed a dastardly flaw in British society. The first four exposed the injustice of the justice system; poverty; child labour; abuses against children in boarding schools, orphanages or workhouses. He became Britain's social conscious. He wanted to see how the fledging United States, who were building a nation from scratch, would avoid those same flaws against humanity that he lived and had written about in Britain.

Bill Moreau noted in his write up of the tour in "Full of Hope and Promise", "They toured east coast cities, from Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Washington D.C." Fortunately here the east coast had the benefit of railroads. Better roads, hotels, etc. He also notes, 'Insane Asylums, and institution for the Deaf and Dumb,' were pretty much on par with those in Britain.

Charles had planned to go further south, but decided to avoid the slave states, and instead, "travelled by canal boat and paddle steamer to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis and the Illinois prairie." The mid-west was being settled and not as far advanced as the east. It is amazing to read a snapshot view of various cities in Charles' notes. In Cincinnati, they found copious 'free schools' for the children, which impressed Charles.

However, the further southwest they travelled, Charles noted, "It was the ultimate disappointment in a tour that started well in Boston and went downhill from there." This was written in Cairo, Illinois'

For over two months by stagecoach on lumpy dirt roads; primitive accommodations outside of the cities, bugs, rain, muck, the tour continued. Many people

wanted Dickens' attention. He was presented with food he had never heard of. Charles and Christine were exhausted and homesick, ready to leave the U.S. and head to British North America. They would stay six weeks in Canada West, entering at Niagara. They had returned 'home' to the British Colony, which had rebelled only five years ago.

Like most tourists who travel to Niagara Falls, especially those travelling from afar, Charles was mesmerized by what Indigenous peoples called Thundering Waters. There is something about the roar, the thunder and the never-ending water that stills the mind and allows the heart and soul and puts life back in perspective again.

A quote from American Notes: "When we were seated in the little ferryboat and were crossing the swollen river immediately before both cataracts, I began to feel what it was: but I was in a manner stunned, and unable to comprehend the vastness of the scene. It was not until I came on Table Rock, and looked - Great Heaven, on what a fall of bright-green water! - that it came upon me in its full might and majesty. Then, when I felt how near to my Creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one - instant and lasting - of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of Mind, tranquillity, calm recollections of the Dead, great thoughts of Eternal Rest and Happiness: nothing of gloom or terror. Niagara was at once stamped upon my heart, an Image of Beauty; to remain there, changeless and indelible, until its pulses cease to beat, for ever."

Charles was enchanted with Toronto; but not of the colony's the seat of government Kingston, except for the new prison which took 35 years to build and opened in 1835. It still stands today. He was impressed with parts of Montreal and liked the other sections to typical French towns. Charles called Quebec City, the Gibraltar of America, due to its 'giddy heights.'

Crossing back into the U.S., they returned to New York to catch a ship home to England, where he wrote the Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, published between Jan.1843-Jul.1844. When the novel reached the U.S., they were not pleased, as Dickens also wrote of his 'unfavourable impressions' of his trip, however, his travelog American Notes, was popular on both sides of the Atlantic.

Next week will be Dickens finale, with more about the man, his wife, 10 children, and which of two women really was his mistress!

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Town hall won't increase tax levy for residents

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

After receiving direction from council at the Aug. 11 meeting, staff looked into possible renovations to the existing Customer Service Centre. It was determined a design-build contract was the best way to move forward. Four design-build contractors from Tillsonburg and area were approached to submit bids. Senior town staff reviewed the bids and determined the proposal from Paulsan Construction was the best. The criteria used to evaluate the proposals included the contractor's experience, design and innovation, and schedule and cost.

The first phase of the project is to convert the rear bay into office space to accommodate town staff currently working at 55 Brock Street East. The estimated budget for the first phase, expected to take eight months, is \$1.1 million and includes renovations, furnishings, relocation costs, and IT.

Phase two is larger, will take 14 months and cost \$3.06 million. It will involve transforming the front bay and mezzanine area of the existing Customer Service Centre into council chambers, offices, public washrooms, a new public entrance and a customer service counter. The existing customer service entrance will be removed.

The third phase encompasses renovating existing offices. It will take about four months and cost \$412,370.

As part of the investigation, staff looked at the \$3.57 million in capital upgrades



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

The bays on the Tillsonburg Customer Service Centre will be renovated into offices and council chambers.

planned for the Customer Service Centre over the next 10 years. Some of these expenditures, such as flooring, will be addressed during the renovations. Other items, such as HVAC, roofing, and windows, will be done during the renovations. This will result in a net savings of \$1.4 million over the original capital upgrades

cost, and is included in the \$5.69 million price.

The report also identified the possibility of future expansion by closing PUC alley and, to a small degree, towards Lisgar Ave.

During the presentation at Monday's meeting, it was emphasized council should

move ahead with this project to bring staff in one location, create better efficiency as well as take advantage of the current conditions with a downturn in construction and favourable market conditions.

Explaining the financing, Director of Finance/Treasurer Renato Pullia said \$3.2 million of the cost would be put into a 30-year debenture. The resulting annual payments would be less than the rent the town paid for the former offices in the mall, which were still carried forward in the budget.

"Therefore, the cost of the debt would be undertaken in the existing budgeted amount without an impact to taxation," he said. "It is hoped though that additional land sales could be able to further reduce the amount of debt taken on the project."

Coun. Pete Luciani, who was on the building committee during the last term of council, said, "It's nice to see this project moving forward, and moving forward quickly. It looks like a great solution. One of my concerns when I first read the report was room for expansion, but it's nice we have scope and an option to close the alley if we want to expand out."

Deputy Mayor Dave Beres questioned whether the debenture was open and if further money could be paid down on it from future land sales.

Pullia answered that once the debenture is issued, it's locked in. He explained potential land sales would be identified before the debenture is issued.

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This Week In the 50's



Welcome to **THIS WEEK IN THE 50's** sponsored by *Hilda's Yard* opening Feb 19th – March 1st 7:30 at Theatre Tillsonburg. It is comedy set in an earlier time with messages that we can all relate to even now. This week's flashback "**FUN of the 50's.**"

One of the story lines from *Hilda's Yard* revolves around family being and growing together. So the leisure fun of the 50's seemed like the perfect fit.



DID YOU KNOW?

Iconic leisure items in *Hilda's Yard's* day were surprisingly affordable. Hula Hoops were \$1.98, while silly putty was only a \$1 and Mr. Potato Head was 98 cents. The toy phone was \$2.98 and Barbie was \$3.00. Over 1 Million Hula Hoops were sold in 1958!

Many of us think of the toy train as part of the 50's culture but that Lionel train would cost \$50-\$150 with a full train display costing around \$345 in 1956, making it over \$3,900 in today's currency. Toy trains an expensive luxury item – who knew??



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- Poodle Skirts were often paired with sweaters, neck scarves, and white bobby socks.
- Sock Hops were popular teen dances at school. Shoes had to be removed to avoid scuffing the gym floor so the popular fad was named out of a custodial concern.
- 3D a modern invention? One of the biggest fads of the 50's saw whole theatres of people sitting wearing 3D glasses. Movies were only \$0.65 to \$0.85 a ticket or about \$5.50 – 8.00 by today's prices. An inexpensive form of entertainment.
- As cars became more popular and affordable so did Drive in Movies and Drive in Restaurants- both classic parts of the culture.
- Soda shops, the jukebox, the Diner style and teen socialization all become hallmarks.
- Today's Tik Tok Challenges had their origins in the fun of the 1950's. Cramming bodies into phone booths was one of many competitive pursuits. 25 in 1958 is the world record.
- The biggest fad of the time tops them all. While you might say Pez dispenser and you would be close with 70 million worldwide but it doesn't compare to the Frisbee.
- Wammo started the Frisbee in 1957 and today sales are in the multi millions. Between Frisbee Golf and football and competitive sports, the Frisbee is one of the biggest and longest standing fads from *Hilda's Yard's* Time.

Local industries spend \$10 million on expansion, new equipment

JEFF HELSDON

Editor

A combined investment of \$10.4 million by two Tillsonburg companies and a Norwich company will boost local manufacturing and create 32 new jobs.

Tillsonburg-based Wellmaster, a leading North American manufacturer for the groundwater, energy, and horticultural sectors, invested \$1,344,818 to develop a customized CNC lathe machine that will be a first in Canada innovation, giving the company a competitive advantage in the sector. The machine decreases labour hours and increases production and efficiency.

"The CNC lathe has been specifically designed for machining Wellmaster's high-demand groundwater products, including the new Press X Press™ steel casing connection," said James White, Wellmaster CEO and President.

When the machinery is fully operational, it will support five additional jobs.

Future Transfer will invest \$4,930,756 in an end-to-end production line for the development and manufacturing of a new water-based suspension herbicide.

Company co-owner John Lansink explained the Tillsonburg-based company is blending the herbicides under license for its customers. Future Transfer will be the only one using this particular blending technique in Canada.

Lansink said the new equipment, which was purchased from a company overseas, will make products more economical for its customers. The purchase of the equipment is part of a move to bring the sources for essential products closer to home after the supply chain was disrupted during COVID.

With its \$4,157,000 investment, Norwich's Split-Fire Sales will relocate to a recently purchased industrial building near its Norwich facility that will almost triple its manufacturing square footage. The

investment includes building renovations, equipment, software and employee training.

In support of this investment, the Ontario government is providing Split-Fire Sales with \$500,000 in funding through the Regional Development Program's Southwestern Ontario Development Fund. Wellmaster will receive \$201,723 and Future Transfer will receive \$739,613.

"By supporting strategic investments from regional businesses, our government is protecting Ontario's workers and creating the conditions for a strong, stable, and resilient economy that can weather any storm," said Oxford MPP Ernie Hardeman. "These investments will support growth and innovation across the local manufacturing sector and create more good-paying jobs for workers and families in Oxford."

"Employing more than 800,000 workers across the province, Ontario's manufacturing sector is the economic engine of our nation," said Vic Fedeli, Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. "Our government is proud to support local companies like Split-Fire Sales, Wellmaster and Future Transfer as they expand their operations, and we thank them for their contributions to Ontario's dynamic and growing manufacturing ecosystem."

White said government support helped Wellmaster's expansion move forward.

"Support from our partners in the Government of Ontario, including our local MPP, Ernie Hardeman, was essential for the development and acquisition of this advanced manufacturing technology," he said. "The project also benefits from the Ontario Made Manufacturing Investment Tax Credit. This Government of Ontario tax credit was recently increased to 15 per cent to support Ontario manufacturers during the current trade disruption with the US."

Ontario is investing over \$200 million through its Regional Development Program to help manufactur-

ers across the province grow while supporting distinct regional priorities. To date, Ontario has supported more than 165 projects through the program, leveraging more than \$2.1 billion in new investments and helping to create over 4,000 jobs.

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New year brings changes to recycling and waste collection

JEFF HELSDON

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Tillsonburg residents will see a few changes to Blue Box pick-up, with larger changes in store a year away.

Recycling of plastic film – which includes plastic bags, plastic wrap, bubble wrap, and wrap on meat or produce – will no longer be accepted at the Tillsonburg Transfer Station. Ditto for Styrofoam packaging – which encompasses hard, white Styrofoam and meat trays. Instead, both will now be accepted in the Blue Box.

The changes are part of a sweeping move to change how recycling is handled in Ontario. It will see the responsibility and cost of recycling transferred from municipalities to the companies that produce the waste. As part of the changes, Blue Box pick-up for businesses is no longer included. However, Oxford County council decided to continue this service.

“Under the new blue box regulation, they are no longer eligible to receive that, and the county wanted to ensure they continue to receive that service,” said Frank Gross, Senior Manager of Transportation and Waste Management.

Businesses need to register, though, to receive Blue Box pick-up. A link is on the Oxford County website to sign up.

While at first blush, it may appear that the county will be seeing tremendous savings in its waste budget, Gross said that isn't the case. He said the contract for garbage pick-up - which the county is still responsible for - increased in price, there is a cost for business recycling pick-up and the new Green Bin service. This necessitated the first increase in bag tag

fees in 10 years, from \$2 to \$3.

Gross explained the pick-up of compostable material, which is only being done in 2025 in South-West Oxford and Woodstock, will be expanded to the entire county next year. Provincial regulations state that urban municipalities that meet a size threshold, which Woodstock does, and Tillsonburg and Ingersoll are close to, must have compostable material pick-up. County council made the decision to expand this county-wide.

Although SWOX has had a six-day garbage and recycling pick-up for several years, it will be expanded across the county next year. Gross admitted this could cause confusion initially, but said people will get used to it.

With that change, he said there are 10 fewer pick-ups per year, and the total cost of bag tags for a household putting out one bag should be similar to what it is with weekly pick-up.

Organic material collected in the Green Bins will go to a pre-processing facility near Drumbo, where contamination is removed. It then goes to a facility in London, where it is treated in anaerobic digesters, and the off-gases are collected and fed back into the natural gas system. The organic material left at the end is used for fertilizer in agriculture.

Gross said the decision was made to go county-wide with the organic pick-up when it was found that 60 per cent of the waste in garbage bags, measured by weight, was organic material. It's expected that this will extend the life of the Salford Landfill Site by 10 years. When it opened in 1986, before the implementation of Blue Boxes, its estimated lifespan was only 30 years.

Opening for library board trustee

Oxford County invites engaged citizens to join the Oxford County Library Board.

There is one opening for a citizen member for the remainder of the 2023-2026 council term. The Board works under the Public Libraries Act to establish policies that direct library operations according to its purpose and the 2024-2028 Oxford County Library Strategic Plan. The board also helps establish the strategic framework for delivering efficient public library services that meet the specific needs of Oxford County.

The Oxford County Library Board has seven members and currently has nine scheduled meetings in 2026, starting at 3:30 p.m. at the Oxford County Administration Building. Meetings offer both in-person and online (MS Teams) participation and are open to the public.

Residents interested in applying are asked to submit, in writing or by email, an application including a resume by Jan. 28, at 4:30 p.m. to:

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Serving on a community board or advisory committee requires commitment and passion, and it can be a tremendously rewarding experience. More information about Oxford County's various boards and committees, including Terms of Reference, can be found online at <https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/your-government/boards-and-committees.aspx>.

tillsonburgpost.com

Mayor speaks of year past, future projects at annual levee

JEFF HELSDON

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

A new town hall, repairs to the clock tower, new pickleball courts and addressing homelessness were a few of the many topics touched on by Mayor Deb Gilvesy in her annual address at the Mayor's New Year's levee.

Hosted by the Tillsonburg and District Historical Society, the event at Annandale National Historic Site drew 84 people on Sunday afternoon.

"It is hard to believe that this council is now entering the final stretch of its four-year term," Gilvesy said. "It has truly been an honour to represent our beautiful town—locally, provincially, and at upper levels of government."

She mentioned some of the highlights of the past year, including the 200th anniversary of Tillsonburg's founding, the 100th anniversary of Tillsonburg District Memorial Hospital and the 70th anniversary of Community Living Tillsonburg, before tackling more serious matters.

"Residential growth has slowed considerably, while industrial and commercial growth has reached record highs," Gilvesy said. "This shift is encouraging, as a stronger commercial and industrial tax base helps better balance the overall tax burden. While we are not there yet, we are clearly moving in the right direction."

She backed this assertion, showing that residential building permit values slid from \$63 million at the end of the third quarter of 2024 to \$22 million for the same period in 2025. At the same time, industrial building reached \$50.7 million in 2025, surpassing \$14 million a year earlier.

However, she said the trade war with the United States "continues to cloud the future of the industrial sector." More than \$2 billion in local goods cross the border each year, which is close to 50 per cent of the local economy.

"Realistically, these markets cannot be replaced in the short term," Gilvesy said. "A loss of trade with our neighbour to the south would be extremely detrimental to our local economy."

She asserted alternative shipping options to other markets will require new infrastructure that would take years to develop.

Moving to the recently passed budget, Gilvesy said the budget focused on land sales and asset management, with the latter a major challenge.

"These funds help address the tens of millions of dollars needed for facility and infrastructure repairs—costs that, unfortunately, were not adequately planned for decades ago," she said.

The fire hall was mentioned as one future expenditure, as upgrades or expansion will soon be needed.

With the weir on Lake Lisgar repaired last year, it will enable draining or partial draining of the lake for remediation work. Some of this is planned for 2026.

Other town projects planned for 2026 mentioned included repairs to Verna Drive, Pine Avenue from Verna to Earle, and Duncan Street, and streetlight pole replacement in the Annandale subdivision. As well, the Kinsmen Bridge and Cranberry Road reconstruction are on track.

Gilvesy spoke about the court-mandated retroactive policing costs, which added 1.84 per cent to this year's tax increase. She said it originally came in at 18.3 per cent, but was capped at



Mayor Deb Gilvesy. (JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

11 per cent by the province, saving Tillsonburg ratepayers \$735,000.

"Everyone has to say thank you to the Province of Ontario for giving us a \$735,000 break," Gilvesy said.

The mayor maintains the per-household cost for OPP policing is still competitive compared to municipalities with their own police forces. It also provides "no borders" support, including access to helicopters, search teams, and specialized investigations at no additional cost. Municipal services are billed for these costs.

Social services, which include homelessness and community supports, are a county responsibility, but it is still "a significant concern for Tillsonburg residents." Gilvesy provided some positive news on this front, including a HART Hub at Woodstock hospital providing 60 beds - 40 treatment, 10 transitional, and 10 crisis. It is expected to open in 2026.

The county also provided funding for a shelter in Tillsonburg from Nov. 1 to May 1, and planning is underway for a 24/7 low-barrier regional shelter in Woodstock.

"We must be mindful that individuals cannot be forced into treatment or shelter," Gilvesy said, adding she believes a solution is moving forward, although it will take time.

She paid heed to the United Way's Light House in Tillsonburg. This transitional housing program opened in 2023 and is funded through

the Coldest Night of the Year fundraiser, the last Saturday in February. Of the 31 clients who entered the program, 21 have moved into permanent affordable housing, seven into rent-geared-to-income housing, five received rent supports, and three were discharged.

"Congratulations to United Way on achieving such meaningful success in a very short period of time," Gilvesy said.

The mayor spoke of updates to the town's recreational and cultural facilities, including a new \$250,000 elevator at Annandale House, clock tower repairs, a new dressing room in the community centre, three new pickleball courts, and playground equipment.

This year will see the removal of the overhead roof on Library Lane, plus concrete and drainage work on the walkway. Pillars will remain at each end.

The big news was, pending adoption at the following day's council meeting, renovations will move ahead on the Customer Service Centre at 10 Lisgar Ave to make it the new town hall.

"To summarize, it is a good financial story which will in fact save \$76,000 annually compared to amount of rent the town was paying at the mall," Gilvesy said. (See story on this elsewhere in today's Post)

"As we look ahead to 2026, this is very much a year of finishing well—strengthening essential assets, advancing important community projects, and positioning the next council for success," Gilvesy concluded. "We are addressing long-standing challenges, managing our resources responsibly, and continuing to build a town that is resilient, welcoming, and forward-looking."

Deputy Mayor Dave Beres, who is also on the board of the Rural Ontario Municipal Association, spoke about changes to the province's Strong Mayor legislation and the issues it created in some municipalities.

"Not with Deb Gilvesy," he said. "Deb Gilvesy has given input back to council."

The one exception to this was the budget, which he said was prepared by the mayor with staff input and approved by council after only 5.5 hours.

Commenting after the levy, Gilvesy said, "It was encouraging to see such a great turnout. The feedback has been very positive, and many attendees told me they found the information shared to be helpful and engaging."



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

On the day of the Golden Globe Awards, Deputy Mayor Dave Beres presented Mayor Deb Gilvesy with a miniature version of an Oscar for doing a good job representing the town, after saying he couldn't find a Golden Globe award.

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TILLSONBURG BUILDERS WIN AWARDS

(CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS)

Tillsonburg-area builders were the winners of multiple awards at the Oxford County Builders Association awards held in November. The group was reformed in 2024 after a hiatus. Tillsonburg builder Cedric Tomico was one of the driving forces behind the group's relaunch, and its interim president.



Cedric Tomico, right, of 360 Developments Inc. won the Energy Efficiency Award. He was presented the awarded by Jamie Adams of Adams Building Centre.



Joel VanLagen, left, of Joe's Carpentry accepted the Outstanding New Home Construction Award (Under 1,700 square-foot finished space) from Adam Moulton of Home Hardware in Woodstock.



Daniel Tobler of Tobler's Woodland was the recipient of two awards from the OCBA, for Outstanding Model Home Décor and Best Commercial Product. Tobler, left, accepted an award from Adam Moulton of Home Hardware in Woodstock.



Kirby Heckford, right, of Tillsonburg Developments Inc. won three awards: Outstanding Model Home Décor, Outstanding New Home Kitchen and Outstanding New Home Construction (1,701 square-foot to 3,000 square-foot finished space). He is seen here being presented the awards by Adam Moulton of Home Hardware in Woodstock.



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Glendale art exhibit at Station Arts Centre

JEFF HELSDON

Editor

Budding young artists from Glendale High School are displaying their artistic vision at the Station Arts Centre.

The exhibit “Visions of the Adolescent Mind” will be in the station’s gallery from Jan. 9 to 16. A soft opening was held on Jan. 10 from 1 to 3 p.m.

Most of the work is from the Grade 11 and 12 university/college arts students, but there are a few pieces in the display from Grade 10 students. This is the second year of the exhibit, which features paintings, drawings, print making, mixed media and sculptures.

“It’s been a really great learning experience for the senior arts students,” said teacher Michelle Dench.

The exhibit gives the students the opportunity to learn how to lay out a display and hang it. Station Arts Centre staff provided instruction on setting up the exhibit.

Dench said the students are excited about the exhibit and it’s important to provide them a confidence boost.

“It’s a really cool opportunity,” she said. “It brings their art to life to see it hung professionally. It gives them confidence.”

Grade 11 student El Platteeuw has a watercolour, acrylic painting and a pastel on display. This was her first time having her art hung in a public exhibit.

“I was really nervous because I’m not a big fan of people looking at my stuff,” she said. “When I got here, I realize the people who will be looking at it care about art.”

Being her second year being part of the display, Grade 12 student Meghan Scanlan was excited about the exhibit. She has four pieces that are part of the exhibit – oil and acrylic paintings and mixed media.

“It’s a great opportunity to show off what you’re working on, show off your art to the community and class,” she said.

Reese Russell, Grade 12, welcomed the opportunity to be part of the exhibit for a second time. Her pieces consist of an acrylic painting, watercolour, a mixed media piece and a wire sculpture.

“It’s good for the community to understand and connect to each other,” she said of the exhibit.

It’s also the first exhibition for Grade 11 students Sabra Andrews and Marissa Roberts. Andrews will have a clay sculpture, an acrylic and watercolour painting, a print and oil pastel in the exhibit. Roberts will have an acrylic and oil painting, and a print in on display.

“I really like seeing other people’s art and how they express themselves through it,” Andrews said, adding this is her opportunity to display what she created.

Roberts was nervous about the exhibit, especially with people critiquing her work.

“It’s a good opportunity for young artists to showcase their work,” she said.



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

Glendale High School art students were busy on Friday hanging their art in preparation for the exhibit Visions of the Adolescent Mind. The exhibit runs until Jan. 16.

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Tillsonburg's Norwich Merchant players building toward PJHL post-season run

JEFF TRIBE

Post Correspondent

Norwich Merchants coach Derek Partlo was pleased with a four-point January 3/4 weekend, featuring wins over the PJHL South Doherty Division-leading Woodstock Navy Vets and a bounce-back victory against the Tavistock Braves.

There was also the side benefit for Merchants' forward Cale Arvai of a goal-scoring performance potentially lining up a culinary reward from proud grandma Elizabeth, in the Norwich Community Centre arena to take in Sunday's PJHL 4-3 win over the Braves.

"She had to have liked it," laughed Arvai post-game, an appreciative previous beneficiary not only of her excellent Hungarian goulash, but also homemade donuts topped with icing sugar and strawberry jam. "They're really good."

Norwich's victories upped its record to 16-10-2 on the season, nine points back of the Vets, one behind the Braves and two in arrears of the third-place New Hamburg Firebirds.

"A good weekend," said Partlo, who heads up a strong Tillsonburg-area contingent during the

second season of his return behind the Merchants' bench. "Two wins out of two tough teams."

Last season, the Merchants set a points record with a first-place regular season finish. Although not by design, this year's team is instead focussed on the post-season, looking to improve on a 2024-25 second-round playoff exit.

"We're trying to build for the end of the year and have a long playoff run," said Partlo, who continues to thoroughly enjoy the experience. He knows a lot of his players through coaching them in minor hockey or at the high school level, is related to a few and also played with other's (Tyler Magoffin) fathers during his own junior career.

"Bottom line, they're all good kids," said Partlo, looking to impart his 'X's and O's' through the challenge of dealing with 25 individuals, who at times need either a pat on the back or kick in the butt.

"It's figuring out who needs which," he laughed. "And realizing a couple of them need both."

Arvai was in line for the former following a second-period 'hard work' goal, driving behind the Tavistock net to help gain possession before curling back out into the slot. He buried his seventh marker

of the season along the ice into the left corner of the goal (to go along with 15 helpers) on a centring pass and assists to Nathan Murphy and Logan Van den Acker.

"It was a line effort," credited Arvai, one of a list of Merchants including Brandon and Gavin Balazs, Owen Harris, Travis Lamb, Josh King and Chase McCallum (6 goals and an assist through 27 games) who either played in the Tillsonburg Minor Hockey Inc. system or are from the area.

"Been fun," Arvai continued of his experience in Norwich. "A great group of guys."

"We're starting to click as a group, you can see it out there."

"It's like any other team, we want to win it all," said Merchants captain Brandon Balazs, whose point-per-game stats are split evenly between goals and assists (11/11) through 22 games.

His 'big' little brother Gavin (three goals and four assists in 27 games) is enjoying his transition from the South Oxford League to the PJHL, finding the hockey faster and more competitive.

"It's fun playing with my cousins and brother," Gavin said. "Older guys, learning new things."

Josh King would be one of those 'older guys', returning to the Merchants for his overage season. Initially, King focussed on his university studies (human kinetics) but was able to find time for PJHL hockey.

"You realize just how much you miss being around the guys."

He has five goals and five assists in ten games since his return, including two goals, an assist and 14 penalty minutes in the previous evening's 6-3 win over Woodstock, an outing paying homage to coach Partlo's own playing days.

Last year's regular season came with high expectations, King finding things a little freer as this year's squad heads into the new year.

"If we keep going in this direction, good things will come our



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

Norwich's Josh King (right) keeps track of Tavistock's Jackson Andrews in front of goalie Darren Hagerty (left).

way."

Harris did not add to his team-leading 32 points (8 goals, 24 helpers) against Tavistock. However, with the Braves pressing for the tie on a late power play, goalie pulled for a six-on-four advantage in skaters, Harris did contribute a crucial zone clear after a Brandon Balazs faceoff win in the Norwich zone with 32 seconds left in regulation time. Harris followed up, disrupting a lead pass in the neutral zone with 16 seconds remaining, icing the one-goal victory.

"Trying to change the narrative a bit more this year," said Harris, whose father Duane also suited up with Norwich. "Play both sides of the puck, help the team get the win."

The Merchants appear to be catching fire at the right time, he added.

"Hopefully make a deep playoff run. Better outcome than last year."

Lamb's father Trevor also played for the Merchants, acting as cap-

tain through his four seasons, a 'no-pressure' scenario for his son to skate into.

"No kidding," laughed Travis, who joined Norwich as a 16-year-old and is currently enjoying his fifth and final overage year with the team.

"How much fun he had here was a big part of me coming here."

His five years with an organization 'which treats its players extremely well' have been enjoyable and productive says Lamb, an electrician looking back on the personal growth the lessons learned through his PJHL playing experience have helped foster. Against the realization his cousin Brandon already expressed, every other team is hoping to enjoy a deep playoff run, Lamb also looks to finish off his career on a high note.

"Just work as hard as we can," he concluded. "At the end of the day, if you can say you've put your heart out there, you can be happy with yourself."



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

Norwich Merchants captain Brandon Balazs (right) closes in on Tavistock's Carter Arseneau.

Fody's make push for first in Club Oxford A Division

JEFF GWYN

Post Contributor

Fody's notched a pair of wins in a push to catch first-place ReMax in A Division. Only three points separates the teams.

JAN. 4

A Division

Fody's 8, Health Hut 4

Fody's started slow in this one, but came alive in the second, with five unanswered goals. Once they find their scoring, it's hard to stop them. Health Hut had some good opportunities around the net in the first, but just couldn't compete in the last part of the second.

Adam Vandepoele had a hat trick for Fody's. Dave VanWyk had two points for Health Hut.

ReMax 5, Apple Shack 0

After a close first period, ReMax found their scoring with some great outlet passes and speed. They didn't let Apple Shack get many chances. Apple Shack played well until the middle of the second, then they couldn't hold ReMax back. Apple Shack had their chances limited to the outside in this one.

Jordan Kobayashi had two goals for ReMax.

B Division

Royal LePage 3, Carquest 1

Royal LePage came out strong in this one and gave themselves an early lead. They buckled down defensively to keep a digging Carquest team off the scoresheet. Carquest had some chances but couldn't get the bounces to go their way. They played well, but just couldn't connect in this one.

Christian Devlin had two points for Royal LePage. Brad Henderson had a goal for Carquest.

Glass 1, Airmount 1

Glass scored early to get some momentum, but couldn't get the shots and rushes they needed in the offensive zone. Airmount played a strong defensive game, keeping Glass shots to the outside. They had a few opportunities, but will be happy with a point against a strong Glass team.

Jason Koteles had the goal for Glass. Josh Stubbs had the goal for Airmount.

Prouse Mortgages 3, Source 2

Prouse Mortgages started quickly, but some penalty trouble changed the momentum for a bit. A solid effort late in the game led to some chances and the eventual winning goal. Source started slow, but picked it up in the first, they were able to get shots on net to create some chances. While getting their own pressure, they let

Prouse Mortgages get some late chances. Jeff Prouse had two points for Prouse Mortgages. Matt Sullivan had a goal for Source.

RND 5, B-Line 3

RND was playing with a short bench, but they had some solid spares to get things going in the first. Though it was tough, they were able to keep themselves under control so as not to let this one get away from them. B-Line gave up a couple early goals and that took them out of it for a bit, but they rebounded with the speed of their spares. A late penalty took them out of it, unfortunately.

Owen Koot had five points for RND. Jordan Hill had three points for B-Line.

JAN. 7

A Division

Fody's 3, ReMax 0

Fody's played a solid game at both ends. They were able to get some nice breakouts and capitalized on them. ReMax had trouble hitting the net in this one. They had a few chances on the powerplay, but

couldn't get things going tonight. Kurtis Burton had a goal for Fody's.

Apple Shack 6, Health Hut 2

Apple Shack was able to find the scoring tonight. They were able to get some good shots on net and had some great rushes to keep Health Hut on their heels. Health Hut had a bad middle of the first and it seemed to have taken them out of the game. They played better in the second and had some more chances in the second half.

Jake Jeffries had three assists for Apple Shack. Lance Haines had two points for Health Hut.

B Division

Source 1, Glass 0

Source played a strong defensive game and goalie Ben Serrador did well to keep the rebounds down. They had some chances and were able to get one to go in late in the first. Glass had a strong game and some good chances offensively. They kept a high-scoring Source team off the board with solid goaltending by Nolan Collard and quick defensive play.

Craig Robb had the goal for Source.

| CLUB OXFORD A DIVISION | GP | W | L | T | PTS |
|------------------------|----|----|----|---|-----|
| REMAX REALTY | 19 | 12 | 4 | 3 | 27 |
| FODY'S AUTOMOTIVE | 19 | 12 | 7 | 0 | 24 |
| THE APPLE SHACK | 19 | 6 | 12 | 1 | 13 |
| THE HEALTH HUT | 19 | 4 | 11 | 4 | 11 |

| CLUB OXFORD B DIVISION | GP | W | L | T | PTS |
|------------------------|----|----|----|---|-----|
| SOURCE FOR SPORTS | 19 | 16 | 3 | 0 | 32 |
| JEFF PROUSE MORTGAGES | 19 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 24 |
| TILLSONBURG GLASS | 19 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 21 |
| CARQUEST AUTO PARTS | 19 | 8 | 7 | 4 | 20 |
| ROYAL LEPAGE REALTY | 19 | 6 | 8 | 5 | 17 |
| B-LINE TRUCKING | 19 | 6 | 10 | 3 | 15 |
| RND CONSTRUCTION | 19 | 4 | 10 | 5 | 13 |
| AIRMOUNT FARMS | 19 | 4 | 13 | 2 | 10 |

Thunder lose close one in overtime to Petrolia

MICHAEL HOLLY

Post Contributor

What a game on Saturday - The Petrolia Squires-Tillsonburg Thunder rivalry is alive and heated.

Petrolia opened the scoring with a screen shot from the point that found the top corner. The Thunder answered quickly as Andrew Oosterveld, from Braden Roberts and Kurtis Heggie, replied at the 11:58 mark of the first. Petrolia's shots seemed to trend as screen shots as they added three more in the first with the Thunder just adding one from Jayme Forslund unassisted. Petrolia took a 4-2 lead after one.

Jaden Vansevant, from Nigel Abbott and Mike Stolar-Jaden, played forward this game as the new 6'3" Thunder defenseman was signed just a couple of hours before the game from Petrolia. A 4-3 score was after two.

Braden Roberts unassisted and Robert

MacLean, from Nicolas D'Agostino and Danny Attridge, gave the Thunder a 5-4 lead midway through the third. However, the Squires popped one in later forcing the game into overtime. Overtime is settled with five minutes of 3-on-3 pay. Several breakaways were stopped on both ends, but no goals resulted. The shoot-out resulted in a Squires victory.

The Thunder only has two more regular season games, both versus our Highway 3 rival the Delhi Flames. Puck drop, is 7:30 in Tillsonburg this Saturday.

PLAYER SPOTLIGHT

#2 Mike Findlay - Assistant Captain

Mike joined the Tillsonburg Thunder on Sept. 1, 2008. A veteran in his 18th year with the Thunder, he is the only original player on the present team. Born in Thamesford on July 8, 1986, he played his junior hockey with the St. Thomas

Stars. To date, Mike is a veteran of 404 senior hockey games, with 35 goals, 112 assists, and 323 penalty minutes. Mike grows his hair long and then donates to cancer. The first time he did this, the Thunder got hate mail from several girls. He is also the only Thunder player to get fan mail.

#13 Braden Roberts - Assistant Captain

Braden joined the Tillsonburg Thunder on Sept. 1, 2018. Born in Simcoe on Jan. 20, 1994, Braden played his junior hockey with the Simcoe Storm and Port Stanley Sailors. To date, Braden is a veteran of 222 senior hockey games, with 74 goals, 109 assists, and 205 penalty minutes. Braden is a tenacious player that always seems to be in the middle of everything. Braden and his wife are expecting their first child in February.

#12 - Justin Abraham - Captain

Justin joined the Tillsonburg Thunder on Jan. 1, 2022. Born in Waterdown on May 17, 1994, he played his Junior hockey with the Caledonia Corvairs, with 16 games in Division 2 Sweden with the Soderhamn/Ljusne. To date, Justin is a veteran of 195 senior hockey games, with 59 goals, 77 assists, and 384 penalty minutes. Justin is a rock of a presence on the Thunder blue line. Opposing players that dare to go in the corner with him always come out a little shaken.

#31 - Ben Blacker - Goalie

Ben, or Benny, joined the Tillsonburg Thunder just this year. Born in Oakville on April 23, 1997. He played in the NCAA Division 1 with the Western Michigan University Broncos. Ben is the owner of Benny's Irrigation out of London. In recent discussions with other OEHL teams, it has been suggested that several teams will trade a significant number of players for Ben...not a chance...

We want to hear from our community! info@tillsonburgpost.com

Hard-working young, Gemini girls' hockey team continuing to learn

JEFF TRIBE

Post Correspondent

One could say the Tillsonburg Gemini girls' hockey team played to a familiar tune through a 4-3 Thames Valley Regional Athletics Southeast loss to the visiting Woodstock Huron Park Huskies Thursday, Jan. 8 at the Memorial Arena.

But it certainly wasn't a sad song, the best Gemini outing of the 2025/26 season inspiring hope not only for the rest of this campaign, but beyond.

"We have a really hard-working young team," said coach Michelle Dench. "So, I'm looking forward to the future."

In the recent past, Tillsonburg's Gabby Ash

countered Huron Park's game-opening goal by scoring on a breakaway with exactly one minute remaining in the opening (15-minute) period.

"Shot far side," said the Gemini forward.

Tillsonburg took a 2-1 lead with just over four minutes remaining in the second frame, Mya Lauwerier connecting off an offensive zone faceoff, a la Connor McDavid's Four Nations initially unsuccessful attempt, just prior to the Canadian star burying the series-winner from the slot on an assist to Mitch Marner.

"But I scored," laughed Lauwerier who went five-hole to find the back of the net. "I'm better I guess," she joked.

The Gemini took the 2-1 lead into their dressing room between the second and third

periods, looking for their first win of the season.

"And then we got down," said Lauwerier.

"No music," explained Ash. "It was quiet."

"Needed to get motivated for the third," added Lauwerier.

The Huskies regained the lead on strength of two goals in the opening minute of the period, Makayla Cornish squaring accounts at two, before Leah Morrison put the visitors ahead. Addison Smith scored what would stand as the game-winner with 11:56 to play, assisted by Hannah Bast who had three helpers and a goal on the game.

Rachel Parry pulled Tillsonburg back within one with 6:51 remaining in regulation time, assisted by Bree VanRybroeck.

"I hit the bar and it went down," said the Gemini defender.

The Huskies managed to regroup however, holding on for a narrow one-goal decision.

"Close game, should have had it... it happens," said Lauwerier.

Although Tillsonburg has not recorded a TVRA Southeast win to date, that doesn't mean the season is without enjoyment or progression.

"Just have to smile when I'm at the arena," said Ash.

"I just like the sport, I've been doing it for my whole life," added Grade 9 rookie Danika Homick, whose dad Devin played in Tillsonburg's minor system, with the Norwich Junior C Merchants and also the senior Tillsonburg Thunder. Suiing up regularly with the Tillsonburg Lightning U15 girls' team, Homick has enjoyed her transition to high school hockey.



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

The Gemini dropped a tight 4-3 TVRA Southeast girls hockey decision to Woodstock Huron Park Thursday, January 8 in Tillsonburg's Memorial Arena.

"It's harder so I like it better, it's more of a challenge."

The challenge continues for the Gemini girls Thursday, Jan. 15 on the road in Lord Dorchester, Maggie Chromczak's speaker hopefully back in motivational play, returning to action following exams with a Tuesday, Feb. 3 date against Woodstock CI.

"As the season goes on, it gets closer, we learn more," Parry concluded.

"Learn more about each other," Ash added. "A good group of girls to talk to."



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

Tillsonburg's Gabby Ash (right) battles for the puck against a pair of Huron Park Huskies.

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| GIRLS HOCKEY | |
|------------------|---|
| THURSDAY, JAN. 8 | |
| HURON PARK | 4 |
| GEMINI | 3 |

| BOYS HOCKEY | |
|---------------------|---|
| THURSDAY, JANUARY 8 | |
| GEMINI | 4 |
| INGERSOLL DCI | 3 |

| JUNIOR BOYS BASKETBALL | |
|--------------------------|----|
| THURSDAY, JAN. 8 | |
| ST. THOMAS ST. JOE'S | 65 |
| GEMINI | 45 |
| TUESDAY, JAN. 6 | |
| WOODSTOCK COLLEGE AVENUE | 69 |
| GEMINI | 51 |

| SENIOR BOYS BASKETBALL | |
|------------------------|----|
| THURSDAY, JAN. 8 | |
| ST. JOE'S | 52 |
| GEMINI | 32 |
| TUESDAY, JAN. 6 | |
| GEMINI | 51 |
| COLLEGE AVENUE | 31 |

| JUNIOR GIRLS VOLLEYBALL | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| THURSDAY, JAN. 8 | |
| GEMINI | 25, 25, 28 |
| ST. JOE'S | 16, 14, 26 |
| TUESDAY, JAN. 6 | |
| GEMINI | 25, 22, 25, 25 |
| COLLEGE AVENUE | 9, 25, 17, 11 |

| SENIOR GIRLS VOLLEYBALL | |
|-------------------------|------------|
| THURSDAY, JAN. 8 | |
| ST. JOE'S | 25, 25, 25 |
| GEMINI | 19, 19, 22 |
| TUESDAY, JAN. 6 | |
| COLLEGE AVENUE | 25, 25, 25 |
| GEMINI | 21, 21, 14 |

King headed to 2026 Canadian Brier in St. John's

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

"We were back and forth again," said King, who counted two in the fifth and seventh ends, adding two in the ninth to lead 8-6 heading home.

The tenth end played out 'scary' for its majority King admitted.

"We made a pair of doubles," he continued, which put the pressure on Moonbroeck to attempt an extremely tough and ultimately unsuccessful shot. "And then we stole one."

Experience gained through a final appearance two years earlier helped this year said King, believing his team entered the match looser and more focussed.

"But it's hard to ignore what's at stake in these big games."

King's rink qualified for a first-round bye based on a strong seasonal performance. They opened Jan. 5 with a 6-4 win over Jordan McNamara's Rideau foursome, locking down a three-point sixth end and steal in the seventh with solid defence through the final three ends.

"They were pretty steady," King credited.

He prevailed 6-5 over Scott Howard in the team's second outing Jan. 6, drawing twice to the circle in the tenth end to finally decide a tightly-contested affair. The victory marked a measure of revenge against an opponent who had defeated King and company in the 2024 Ontario final.

Daniel Hocevar's Dundas Valley Golf and Curling Club rink came into their Jan. 8 encounter with the momentum of two large victories behind them. An 'up-and-coming team' took a 2-1 lead into the fourth end, where the game turned as King scored three and added a steal in the fifth for a 5-2 advantage.

"That was kind of our 'MO' this week. Three in one end and steal in the next."

Hocevar responded with two in the sixth to close within one, but King executed an 'in off' (playing off his own rock to take out an opposing stone) to count two in the ninth, running his opponent out of rocks through the tenth.

King's 3-0 record qualified his foursome for the page 1 versus 2 match Jan. 10 at 2 p.m.

"We did not play our best," he admitted.

King scored two in each the second and third ends, giving up one in the fifth and a pivotal steal of three in the sixth to trail 6-4.

"We were scratching and clawing but just couldn't quite pull it together," he said of an eventual 7-5 loss. "Sam played better than we did and deserved the win."

Rather than qualifying for the final, King's rink had to face Woodstock's Mark Kean in a semi-final matchup that evening.

"We're good friends and we seem to meet each other every year," said King.

A see-saw battle was finally decided as trailing by one, he blanked the ninth end to take the hammer into the tenth.

"And we scored two in order to win."

To say the King rink is thrilled with the Ontario title and resultant national championship berth would be an understatement.

"Going to the brier is every curler's dream. Over the moon happy - happy is not a big enough word to describe this."

He began curling at the age of 12, taken to the local club by neighbours Les and Nora Peters after having his interest piqued by watching the sport on TV. King fell in love immediately, eventually advancing to a competitive junior team in London and winning the U21 provincial championship in 2023.

"You are fierce competitors on the ice and friends off it," he explained of a sport requiring both athleticism and strategy, one which has "taken him many interesting places and introduced him to many great people."

Niepage, who hails from Oro-Medonte, and King played together at the junior level, meeting up with Henry (from Ilderton). Pietrangelo is from Niagara Falls, curling previously in the world university games, while Heggstad is also a well-known member of the curling community.

King sees his role as both shot-maker and leader, understanding and managing his team's strengths in order to put the rink in a position to be successful. It takes all four curlers playing well together to win says King, working as a team.

"We all pitched in and couldn't be happier with the result."

Each is 'super excited' to represent their home club, King proud to compete under the Tillsonburg Curling Club banner.

"Having a trophy to come home with is even better."

Their team is young, averaging 23 years of age, but he feels they can be competitive at the Brier.

"Make the playoffs and anything is possible from there," King said of their shared goal.

While making the Brier is an accomplishment for most curlers, doing so at this point of their careers is also cause for excitement, King pointing out most competitive curlers fall between the ages of 20 and 35.

"There's a lot of years left in our curling careers if we choose to take them. This is just the beginning."



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Jayden King's team won the Ontario championship on the weekend, qualifying them for the Canadian Brier. Left to right are: Dylan Niepage (vice), Jayden King (skip), Cory Heggstad (alternate/coach), Victor Pietrangelo (lead) and Owen Henry (second).

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MUSIC CORNER

Big rock, small town: Ghost Town Citizen turns up the heat at The Copper Mug



BEN ADDRESS

Tillsonburg Post Columnist

Tillsonburg music enthusiasts can expect a well-rounded night of rock when Ghost Town Citizen returns to The Copper Mug. Featuring seasoned musicians from across Southwestern Ontario and Oxford County, the band blends decades of experience, wide-ranging influences and a shared focus on giving audiences a memorable night out.

Fronting Ghost Town Citizen is lead singer and guitarist Patrick Bon-

namie of St. Marys, a familiar name to long-time alternative rock fans. Bonnamie was the frontman for Wolfgang, a Montreal based alt-rock band that made waves across Quebec from 1992 to 1998, playing iconic venues such as Metropolis, Club Soda and La Brique. Wolfgang later reunited from 2016 to 2018 to mark the 20th anniversary of their album Pervercity. With an impressive resume of cover bands and live performances over the years, Bonnamie has written more than 300 original songs and has also composed entrance themes for SMASH Wrestling stars Violet Lee and Chris Mitchel.

Backing Patrick on lead guitar is Brian Giroux of Woodstock, a player who has honed his craft over the past 37 years. Drawing early inspiration from Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page as well as Canadian influences like Ian Thornley and Gordie Johnson, Giroux brings

versatility and tone to the band, with an ability to recreate the feel of multiple instruments through his guitar work.

On bass is Jamie Eslinger of Tillsonburg, a multi-instrumentalist who has been playing bass for over 15 years. With musical tastes rooted in metal and rock, Eslinger's gritty bass tone adds edge to Ghost Town Citizen's sound.

Behind the drum kit is Anthony Wade of London whose relationship with rhythm began unexpectedly in a Grade 7 music class. Wade started playing in bands by the age of 14 after studying piano for six years and discovering drums at the age of 12. Entirely self-taught until later in life, Wade eventually learned that his biological grandfather was a professional drummer in Scotland which ended up making rhythm both a passion and a legacy.

That depth of experience shows in how the band approaches its live shows.

Ghost Town Citizen understands the balance between musicianship and fun.

"The many genres we each covered over the many years of playing and experience acquired during this time has made us realize two things," Bonnamie explains. "We need to enjoy what we each bring to the table, and most importantly, the audience needs to have a great time. Luckily the audience seems to enjoy what we bring when we meet in the middle."

The band's guitar player also echoes that philosophy while emphasizing variety and intention over predictability.

"The beauty about multiple genres with seasoned band members is the range in tone and change in music styles for each song. We each try to bring an understanding of countless styles of generational music so that we can avoid cookie cutter covers," Giroux describes. "The key is

to capture the vibe of the songs then put our spin on them to push ourselves and avoid being vanilla."

Even in a more intimate setting like The Copper Mug, the band has no intention of dialing things back. The band formed Dec. 22, 2024 and this upcoming concert marks their third time playing the venue.

"Despite it being a more intimate venue, we tend not to pull back. Drums are the energy, and the more you pull back the drums, the more energy you lose and that can be felt by the crowd," Wade says. "Rock and roll is supposed to be energetic, and a bit loud and in your face, and that is what we always strive to deliver. An exciting and engaging performance without compromising the energy."

The Tillsonburg crowd can expect a full night of carefully chosen rock covers delivered with power and precision.

"We will bring a full

night of rock cover songs played at a high level. The audience will enjoy hearing an interesting mix of well-known popular tunes that are not overdone by cover bands," Eslinger exclaims. "We are excited for this show as we love Kim and Daryl and the staff from The Copper Mug and we know that Tillsonburg gigs bring an enthusiastic audience that loves to sing along and dance."

With strong local ties, veteran musicianship and professionalism and a commitment to keeping the energy high, the band is set to deliver a night that lives up to its reputation.

Ghost Town Citizen plays Friday, Jan. 30 at The Copper Mug. The concert is a free, no-cover-charge event starting at 8:30 p.m.. Tables can be reserved by calling the venue at 519-842-6227. For more information and music you can visit the band on their official website at www.ghosttowncitizen.com

UPCOMING SHOWS

JAN. 16 - MUSIC TRIVIA
The Copper Mug
8pm

JAN. 17 - THE WRIGHT STUFF
Tillsonburg Legion #153
\$15 - 7pm

JAN. 17 - KARAOKE
The Copper Mug
8pm

JAN. 21 - SPAGHETTI FUNDRAISER
THE COPPER MUG
\$20 for Adults / \$10 for 10 and under - 4:30pm

JAN. 22 - FELICIA MCMINN
The Copper Mug, 8pm

JAN. 24 - HARD CHORDS
The Copper Mug
8:30pm

JAN. 25 - ROB CROMWELL
The Copper Mug
5pm

JAN. 30 - THE PENSKE FILE, ONE WAY STREETS & FULL THROTTLE
Paddy's Underground
\$20 - 8pm - All Ages/Licensed

JAN. 30 - GHOST TOWN CITIZEN
The Copper Mug
8:30pm

FEB. 21 - ERIC JOHNSTON COMEDY SHOW W/ JORDAN ARMENISE
Paddy's Underground
\$25 - 7pm - All Ages/Licensed

FEB. 26 - THE FLATLINERS
Paddy's Underground
\$50 - 8pm - All Ages/Licensed



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Oxford County Paramedic Services wins provincial award

LEE GRIFFI

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Oxford County Paramedic Services (OCPS) and partners have been awarded an Ontario Health System Quality and Innovation Award.

The award was given in the Patient Reported Experience Measurement (PREM) category for the county's Remote Care Monitoring and Chronic Disease Management Program. It was presented on Nov. 25 at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health.

"Oxford County Community Paramedics are a specialized team of caregivers," explained a county news release. "They take the time to connect with patients on a personal level, helping them understand how biometric readings and daily choices affect their overall health. PREM data shows that patients who feel heard report fewer visits to their family physician or the emergency department, resulting in a better experience for patients and caregivers, and meaningful system-wide cost savings."

Jamie Walter is the county's superintendent of community paramedicine and said their data collection shows a patient who is heard feels less need to visit their family physicians and less need to visit their local emergency departments, equalling less emergency department visits.

The PREM program has teamed with a vendor to provide clients with biometric data recording equipment including a blood pressure machine, oxygen saturation probe, weight scale, and tablet with a data plan to allow for easy transfer of information between the patient and our community paramedic team.

"OCPS is striving to push patient health upstream, meaning keeping people healthy longer, and to mitigate the number of 911 utilizations and hospital ER visits. Front and center of our philosophy is to provide the right care at the right time in the right place," explained Walter.

He added patient approval to date has been positive, with a 95 per cent satis-



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Left to right are Dr. Jitin Sondhi, Medical Director for OCPS CP team; Jamie Walter, Superintendent of Community Paramedicine; Ryan Orton, Manager/Deputy Chief of Operations and Performance; and Teresa Martin, Executive Director of the Oxford Ontario Health Team.

faction with the care received, a 90 per cent report of ease of system use, a 96 per cent rate of patients feeling they were listened to and part of their own care, and a 67 per cent response rate of decreased need to see family physicians and hospitals.

Walter said the program is currently funded by the provincial government.

"Our community paramedic program currently receives \$2 million annually through Community Paramedicine for Long Term Care (CPLTC) funding. In addition, we have applied for and received annual grants for programs such as RCM, which have grown modestly year over year with an increase in the number of patients served."

He added winning the award means he and his team are doing something right to support those in the community needing extra help.

"The success of our remote care mon-

itoring program reflects a simple but powerful belief that our health system can shift from reacting to crisis to preventing them, supporting people earlier, more meaningfully, in ways that truly change patient trajectories. This award reflects what is possible when we imagine a better system and build it together."

The application process for the award included a patient testimonial from Ted, an 84-year-old who is a survivor of eight heart attacks and one stroke. Ted stated that he was extremely pleased with the program and that it gave him peace of mind knowing that he was being monitored daily.

Paramedic Services also received written support from two executive partners, Teresa Martin with the Oxford Ontario Health Team and Randy Peltz, Director of the Oxford County Community Centre.

"Oxford County Paramedic Services

is committed to the community health and public safety of the people who live in Oxford County. Remote Patient Care Monitoring and Chronic Disease Management allows our paramedics to reach patients where they live. This approach gives residents confidence that their chronic conditions are being closely monitored and expertly managed," said Ryan Hall, chief of OCPS.

The Remote Patient Care Monitoring and Chronic Disease Management program was launched in 2022 and allows paramedics to provide in-home health checks and remotely monitor the health condition of community members who frequently call on emergency services.

Remote monitoring patients range in age from 22 to 98 years old and typically have moderate to severe chronic diseases, such as Chronic Obstruction Pulmonary disease (COPD), congestive heart failure, hypertension and diabetes.

Weekend Quiz

by Jake Grant

1. What is the birthstone for January?
2. What is Canada's biggest forest?
3. In the Chinese Calendar, what is the animal of 2026?
4. Who was the President of Venezuela in 2025?
5. In what organ of the body is insulin produced?
6. What was the first single released by Phil Collins as a solo artist?
7. Street Fighter was first released on what gaming device?
8. What is Mr. Beast's real name?
9. What does the federal agency, ICE stand for?
10. What is Canada's only native marsupial?

This week's answers are found on pg. 23

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GRANT HAVEN MEDIA



Coldest Night of Year fundraiser planned for Feb. 28



(FILE PHOTO)

The Coldest Night of the Year fundraiser will be Feb. 28 this year. Organized by the United Way, the event raises money for transitional housing in Tillsonburg. This photo from last year's event shows participants setting out on their walk.

JEFF HELSDON

Editor

Although many Tillsonburg residents are already grumbling about the cold weather, the bright spot ahead is the Coldest Night of the Year.

No, this is not a celebration of temperatures driven down by the next Polar Vortex, but the annual United Way fundraiser – and it's a good thing, a really good thing, unlike bone-chilling cold.

Planned for Feb. 28 nationwide, the Tillsonburg Coldest Night of the Year is organized by the United Way as a fundraiser for Tillsonburg Light House. Tillsonburg Light House is a transitional house in Tillsonburg that can accommodate up to seven people while they put their lives back together.

"All money raised in Tillsonburg will stay in Tillsonburg," said Kelly Gilson, executive director of the Oxford United Way.

The main thrust of the event is a walk, either 2.5 km or 5 km, for which participants receive sponsorship. The event will start with registration at the Tillsonburg Community Centre at 4 p.m., and the walk begins at 5 p.m.

"We go right down Broadway, through the downtown and back," Gilson said. "It's a really great time to spend time

with like-minded folks who want to make a difference in the community."

After the walk, participants are treated to a light meal, courtesy of The Mill.

One of the features of the walk is the toques, which are provided to adults who raise \$150 and youth who raise \$75. Each year features a different toque design.

"The toque is a badge of honour. We want to inspire people to earn the toque and then wear the toque," Gilson said. "Not only toques are a great memento for the walk, it is so wonderful to see this group of people walking behind each other with their toques. It is really something to see."

The goal this year is to raise \$52,000, the same as last year's. Currently, Gilson and her crew are trying to build excitement amongst the community to garner participating teams.

"You get really enthusiastic champions who set up a team," she said. "They bring friends, families, co-workers. It was one of those events that was welcoming to all."

Last year, there were 25 teams, and organizers are hoping for more this year.

Besides participants, sponsors and volunteers are also being sought. To sign up, sponsor, or volunteer, visit the website at cnoy.org and select Tillsonburg.

Chamber AGM to feature Ontario chamber V-P

Vincent Caron, vice-president of policy for the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, will be the guest speaker at the Tillsonburg and District Chamber of Commerce AGM on Jan. 21.

The event starts with registration at 11:15 a.m., with lunch at 11:30, at the Legion. Caron will speak at 12:30.

Most recently, Caron worked at the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Association. He also held various positions working for both the federal and Ontario governments.

The event is open to chamber members, and costs \$40.

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2026 Oxford County budget passes with 5-plus per cent tax hike

LEE GRIFFI

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Oxford County Council approved the 2026 Business Plan and Budget in late December, authorizing a total budget of \$406.1 million that includes a \$278.2 million operating budget and \$127.9 million in capital projects.

The amount of money collected through taxation is \$96.7 million resulting in a \$77 increase or 5.3 per cent for Tillsonburg residents.

The document was approved after a marathon meeting that saw seven councillors put forward 23 motions. Some were to add money to the budget but most were to take money out, mainly in the area of new employment positions being created at the county.

Tillsonburg Mayor Deb Gilvesy was one of three who voted against the budget in a recorded vote.

"I'm disappointed that the county levy began at 7.3 per cent and ultimately rose to 7.7 per cent, resulting in a 5.3 per cent tax increase for all residents outside Woodstock, and 5.2 per cent for Woodstock due to their independent library service," she said. "Over the past four years, levy increases of 6.3 per cent, 16.7 per cent, 6.6 per cent, and now 7.7 per cent average out to 9.2 per cent annually—far beyond economic reality. With the loss of a major employer, residents choosing between food and heat, and rising reliance on food banks, this was the time for fiscal restraint, not further pressure on ratepayers."

Several of the motions resulted in some heated debate including one put forward by Ingersoll Mayor Brian Petrie to hire a full-time grant coordinator position with a budget hit of just over \$100,000 for nine months of 2026.

Gilvesy said she isn't confident there will be enough work for a full-time role.

"When you are writing grants you are still going to have to get your departments involved. If it's a grant for housing we would have to get the director's team involved to provide information. Finance is going to have their hands on every single grant. I have faith in the current staff to know how to fill out grant applications."

The motion was ultimately passed by a vote of 6 to 4.

The total FTE increase for 2026 is 19.7. Of that, 17.1 will be funded through the library levy, general levy, user fees and recoveries, and a 50/50 cost-shared provincial grant supporting paramedic services. The remaining 2.6 FTEs are funded through other grants. Woodstock Coun. Deb Tait noted more than 100 new positions have been added since the start of this council term and the sunshine list for the county was \$22 million in 2024.

"The path forward must focus on core services and essential infrastructure, reinforcing discipline and accountability," Gilvesy said. "Staffing growth at the county has outpaced actual population growth by more than threefold. As the gate keepers of the public purse, we must listen to what our constituents are saying and what I am hearing does not align with an over 5 per cent tax increase. For these reasons and more, I could not support this budget."

In a press release, the county said the 2026 budget places strong emphasis on health care and housing. Key investments include \$400,000 for a Homelessness Support Services Fund and an increase of \$600,000 annually for needs across the housing continuum, from \$3 million to \$3.6 million. Paramedic Services deployment and facilities review, ambulance investment, and paramedic staffing to maintain response times, and the launch of a traffic management and road safety service to respond to increasing community concerns about speeding and road safety.



TOP-NOTCH TALENT AT SOUTH RIDGE

(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

Toronto-based singer Julian Taylor performed at South Ridge Public School on Jan. 9. Nominated for numerous Junos and other awards, the singer made his mark with the band Staggered Crossing and then, more recently, as a solo artist. Prior to starting a Canadian and European tour, he visited several schools. South Ridge music teacher Caleb Martin reached out to his management team after he saw the artist was doing school performances to start the ball rolling for the South Ridge appearance.

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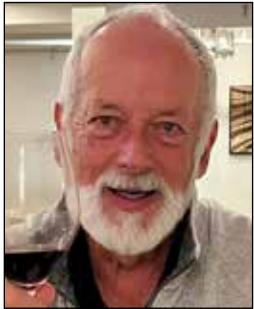
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Is travel safe, any more? Where should we go?



**OH,
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GO!**

PAUL KNOWLES

Tillsonburg Post Columnist

It's not too surprising that, from time to time, I get asked questions about travel, in emails or in person. Once upon a time, they were either, "What are your favourite destinations?" or "We're going to a specific destination; can you give us advice about that place?"

But lately, there has been an increasing number of questions on a third theme: "Is it safe to travel?"

Good question. I know, personally, there are places on my once-upon-a-time bucket list that are now moved to a "probably never" file. The world is changing, rapidly, and for travellers, not necessarily in a good way.

But the increasing number of people wondering about safe places to travel prompted me to do some research. The results were intriguing. One much-cited, reliable study is the Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection annual survey that polls thousands of American travellers who have actually visited the countries they comment on, and adds data from other sources like the Global Peace Index.

So... according to this survey, here are the 15 safest countries for visitors, in order: The Netherlands, Australia, Austria, Iceland, Canada, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, Japan, Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, France, United Kingdom and Denmark.

I find several things quite interesting here. The majority of these are in Europe. Canada is rated highly – number 5 among a total of 195 recognized countries world-

wide.

And you may notice who is missing – the United States. In fact, this survey, which reflects the view of Americans, mind you – rates the U.S. as only the 26th safest country, with respondents citing challenges including violent crime, health access and risk of terrorism.

Another report, published by World Population Review, ranks the safest countries in North America (which includes about half of the Caribbean Islands). Here, Canada is ranked best among 14 countries, immediately followed by Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. The U.S. is near the bottom, its safety ranking only better than Mexico and Haiti.

We need to acknowledge that while these reports are quite current, nothing can keep up with the challenges presented by our ever-changing global reality.

The BHTP report points out that "safety" is an evolving term. Where once it might simply have reflected the potential for being a victim of crime or terrorism, in today's world it also includes how safe women, LGBTQIA+ travelers and people of colour feel. And those factors were key components in identifying The Netherlands the safest destination.

There are sub-sections in the survey, and Canada comes off very well in almost all of them: second in safety from violent crime (after Japan); second in transportation safety; fifth in "health measures"; second, after The Netherlands, in how safe women, LGBTQIA+ travelers and people of colour feel.

Make me again proud to be a Canadian, and glad that at least half of my travel plans take me to wonderful destinations inside our own borders.

The BHTP report also has a "Safe Travel Hall of Fame" – countries that have averaged a top-ten position since 2018. Eight countries are on the list and yes, Canada is one of them, along with Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Norway, Ireland and Japan.

These surveys – and there are many more just like them – and the worrisome



(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTO)

Austria moved way up on this year's Safe Countries list, to be rated as the third safest country for travellers. Shown, the main square in the city of Linz.

headlines of the day all do suggest that travellers need to keep themselves informed before they make plans.

I am not suggesting that you should make your travelling decisions based entirely on safety recommendations, although it would seem wise to be as aware as possible. I do still plan to travel, a lot – this page doesn't fill itself, you know – and in the next weeks and months I will be visiting the Dominican Republic, Italy, British Columbia and Newfoundland.

But quite honestly, I am also turning down opportunities to travel. To the Middle East, for example and – full disclosure – to the United States. I have written dozens and dozens of articles about U.S. destinations over the years. Some of my closest friends and colleagues in the travel industry represent U.S. destinations, and my heart aches for the professional challenges they are currently facing. But just now – no, I can't go. For all the reasons you know about, including the fact that the country simply doesn't feel safe for visitors – and the statistics back this up.

However, many of you will disagree with this, and I have lots of friends who have made their annual trek to Florida, Arizona, the Carolinas or some other warmer U.S. destination. I wish them to be safe and well. But I won't be dropping in.

And since I have become so darned serious in this week's feature, let me dive even a little deeper. As an old white guy, I feel the need to ask myself if I am comfortable travelling to destinations where I would probably be okay, but where my friends of colour, or my gay friends, or my single female friends, would be in danger. Should I go where they cannot go? I think not.

All of these present-day realities have made my bucket list bucket pretty darned leaky. But it ain't empty, and hopefully, some of the holes will get patched up, maybe soon.

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.



(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTO)

Canada is rated fifth safest country (of 195 nations in the world); shown are Newfoundland lobster fishers.



(PAUL KNOWLES PHOTO)

Travel by Canadians within Canada increased by as much as 10% in 2025, a trend welcomed in every province, including Saskatchewan (shown).

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Solutions on Page 23

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7. Arcade Machine
8. James Stephen "Jimmy" Donaldson
9. Immigrations & Customs Enforcement
10. The opossum

SUDOKU

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

CLASSIFIEDS

TREES

Hundreds of shade trees, fruit trees, apples, pears, peaches, plums, sweet and sour cherries, apricots, nectarines, blueberries, haskapp grapes, raspberries, elderberries etc. Lots of spruce, pine, cedars for windbreak and privacy hedges. Sizes 1-8 ft. in containers ready to go. Flowering shrubs and much more. Mon-Sat 7:00am to 6:00pm. Martin's Nursery, 42661 Orangehill Rd Wroxeter, ON N0G 2X0 (1 Conc. North of Wroxeter on Belmore Line)

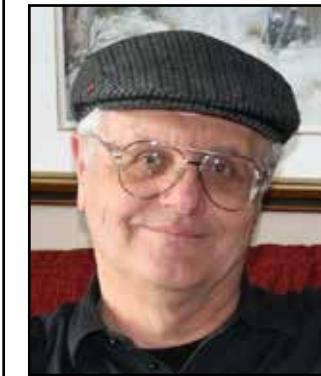
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OBITUARY

ELI NEIDERT



The family of Eli Neidert shares with deep sadness, his passing in Red Deer, Alberta, on December 4, 2025, at the age of 78.

Born in Hungary in 1947, Eli immigrated to Canada with his family in 1949. He was raised on the family farm in the Otterville area and attended Otterville Public School, Glendale and Annandale High Schools, and the University of Guelph. Eli began his professional career with Agriculture Canada and later served as National Manager with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in Ottawa. Following his retirement, he and his wife settled in Red Deer, Alberta.

Eli is lovingly remembered by his wife, Gail; their son Jonas and his wife Krista; and their children, Kaiden and Mataya, all of Red Deer. He is also survived by his sister, Kathy Szuba, and her husband Ed, as well as his nieces, Michele Szuba and Colleen Szuba (Stephen Molnar). He was predeceased by his parents, Eli and Katharina Neidert, along with several grandparents. Cremation has taken place in Red Deer.

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