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LOCAL NEWS

AI and Our Kids

■ Artificial intelligence is growing fast, and some are worried about its effect on society in general, and on young people in particular.

Details on Pages 4-5



LOCAL NEWS

Seine River School Division Budget Under the Microscope

■ An ongoing budget crisis in the SRSD has drawn the attention of the provincial government, which has appointed a specialist to get a grasp on what's going on.

Details on Page 16

SPORTS & REC

Local Speed Skaters Making Big Impact on the Sport

■ Speed skating may be a bit overlooked in the grand scheme of winter sports, but these skaters say that it has a lot to offer.

Details on Pages 20-21

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Pet-Child Bond Inspires New Children's Book

■ A Niverville author has released a fun book based on the real life bond between her new son and the family dog.

Details on Page 22



Out in the Cold: Commemorating 10 Years Since Gas Explosion **»» READ MORE ON PAGES 8-9**

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Since May, traffic has been rerouted around a burned-out bridge on Highway 311.

BY BRENDA SAWATZKY

Highway 311 Bridge Construction Set to Begin

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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Eight months after a bridge was destroyed by fire along Highway 311 near New Bothwell, Manitoba Transportation and Infrastructure (MTI) says that construction is about to get underway.

The bridge, believed to have been taken out by runaway stubble fires last May 10, has been cordoned off ever since and traffic has been rerouted through New Bothwell.

MTI says that construction of the bridge will begin this February and should be open to traffic by December 2024.

The final completion isn't anticipated until the summer of 2025.

"The design for a new bridge at this location was expedited and is now complete," says a provincial spokesperson for MTI. "The construction contract was publicly tendered and has been awarded. Graham Construction and Engineering is the successful bidder."

The total project cost for the new bridge is estimated at approximately \$16 million.

The original bridge was made of treated timber with a creosote coating to help prevent rot.

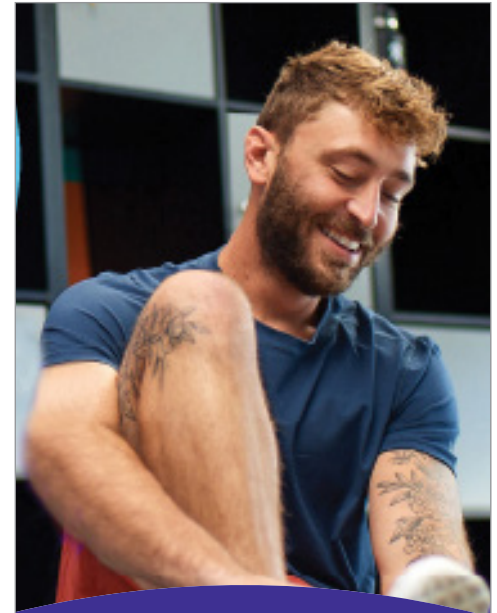
It took firefighters the better part of two days last May to douse the fire as embers continued to smoulder in the many structural joints of the

wooden girders.

It wasn't until MTI staff arrived that the decision was made to completely dismantle the bridge so that oxygen could reach every cranny and rapidly complete the inevitable burn.

The *Citizen* questioned MTI as to whether different materials will be used in the bridge when the under-goes reconstruction.

"MTI took into consideration the traffic needs in the area in the design of the replacement structure," the spokesperson responded. "The modernized structure will be a three-span concrete girder bridge, which will have a higher capacity to accommodate heavier or overload vehicles."



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Artificial Intelligence and Our Kids

By Brenda Sawatzky
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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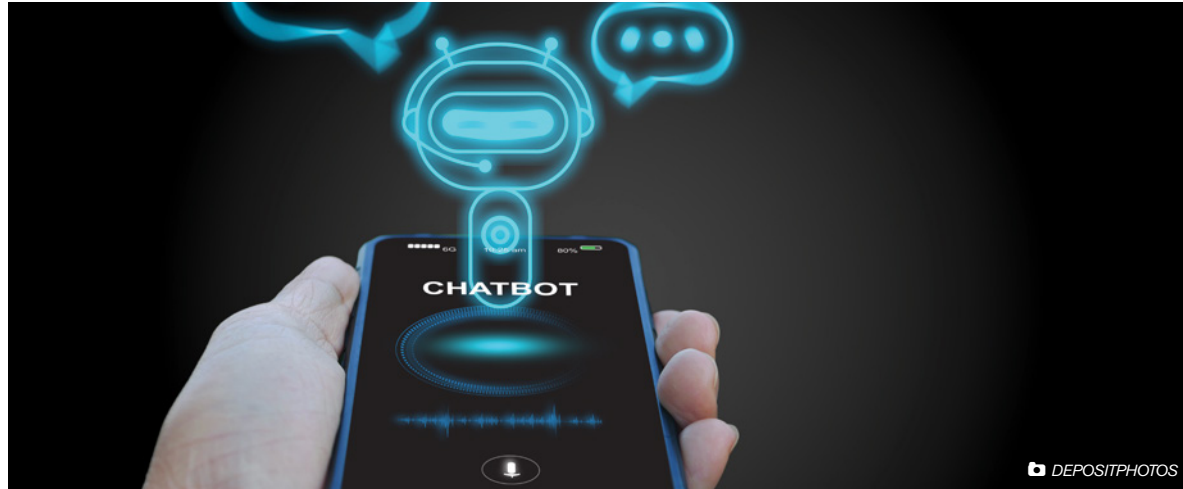
The whole notion of artificial intelligence can evoke various levels of excitement and fear when it comes up in conversation these days—and both are likely fair responses when referring to something that’s still as obscure as artificial intelligence is. No one quite knows how it will affect our lives.

On the one hand, AI is guaranteed to change our world in remarkable ways. It will be capable of filling the role of personal assistant, provide easy and affordable access to valuable advice, and make our workplaces safer, just to name a few.

But there is also no shortage of people warning us of the potential risks to mankind if AI isn’t reined in and tightly controlled. Those risks range from the eradication of human jobs to the literal takeover of the world.

Unfortunately, like so many other innovative technologies, AI is hitting the market far more quickly than governments can regulate it. And as is often the case, these technologies are being marketed to the very young, making effective governance all the more imperative.

Case in point, Mattel released a new Barbie doll last fall, just in time for Christmas. It’s called Hello Barbie, and unlike previous Barbies this one is powered by an AI platform and comes equipped with a microphone to record conversations, WiFi to transfer those conversations to a computer server, voice recognition software to understand a child’s



words, and an algorithm to help formulate what feel like human responses.

Hello Barbie also has the capacity to recall conversational points from its previous interactions with a child in order to get to know them, similar to one’s relationship with a sibling or friend.

Similarly, the Green Dino is an interactive AI-driven dinosaur toy that adapts its response to the age and development level of a child, regardless of the complexity behind the questions it’s asked.

While the first set of questions posed to the Green Dino were generated by parent focus groups, the toy can learn in real-time and come up with answers to questions that might not have been programmed in the first place.

In the field of education, new AI programs are being developed daily. These programs can provide assistance as reading coaches or

math tutors.

So whether a person falls into the “thrilled” or “fearful” camp, AI is here to stay.

It will be up to us to learn how to navigate these waters safely and talk to our children about it.

AI IS NOTHING NEW

While it may seem like AI is a relative newcomer, the earliest examples of the technology actually date back more than 70 years. In 1950, a robotic mouse named Theseus made his debut. His creator was Claude Shannon, a mathematician.

Powered by a bank of telephone relays, Theseus had the unique ability to solve a problem by trial and error and then remember the solution. Thus, it learned by experience, similar to a sentient creature.

Theseus demonstrated this ability by bumping its way through a labyrinth until it finally located the endpoint. The second time through

the labyrinth, it was able to take a direct route to the finish line without making a single misstep.

Small advancements were made to the technology over the ensuing years, but it wasn’t until the turn of the century that these baby steps evolved into giant leaps.

New developments in handwriting, voice, and image recognition have taken computers from being able to barely compete with the human brain to surpassing human efforts in almost any kind of test.

But if you think you’re going to keep AI technology at arm’s length until some future date, think again. Many of us have already been using AI on a daily basis for years, perhaps without realizing it.

The technology has made its way into cellphones through face and fingerprint recognition. New TVs, appliances, thermostats, and other household gadgets are equipped

with so-called “smart” technology.

Digital voice assistants such as Siri, Alexa, Google Home, and Cortana are commonplace. And when we use social media or run internet searches, the algorithms that work behind the scenes to identify our likes and dislikes are forms of AI. We’re told it’s all part of an effort to customize our online experiences.

When we write, our spell-checkers are based on AI. When we drive, our GPS systems and driver-assist technologies also rely on it. When we bank online or make credit card purchases, we are depending on AI fraud detection systems to protect us from danger.

And when it’s time at the end of the day to put our feet up, even Netflix will use AI to make viewing recommendations that suit our tastes.

WHERE DOES THE DANGER LIE?

There’s no question that toys like Hello Barbie are a far cry from the innocuous pull-string dolls that once came equipped with a dozen prerecorded phrases.

When a toy is capable of understanding a conversation, responding intelligently, and learning and adapting in real-time, it takes on an uncanny quality that is simultaneously not quite human and more than mere machine.

The technology is expanding. Already developers are working on toys that are capable of gesture recognition. If a child looks sad, the toy might attempt to console him without any initiation by the child. These AI toys may not realistically



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be capable of emotion or sincere interest, but is a child capable of making that distinction?

The same question may be relevant for many adults, too.

This topic has been well-explored in science fiction over the years.

In the 2013 film *Her*, the protagonist gets drawn into an unexpected romance with his AI virtual assistant, which is personified through a female voice.

But the warnings about AI gadgets go far deeper than how we interact with them.

Child privacy advocates say that AI toys violate a child's rights. They worry, too, about the risk of a toy getting hacked when it's connected to the internet.

AI IMAGE GENERATION

AI image generators have become a popular online tool. These are apps that can create a seemingly original image based on a user's text inputs.

The generator uses trained artificial neural networks to pull from online databases that contain millions of images.

This is already creating legal complications.

Just last month, the Winnipeg Police Service paid a visit to Collège Béliveau, a high school in Windsor Park, after a report of child pornography.

Underage female students there found themselves at the centre of a humiliating

controversy. Nude photos bearing their likenesses had appeared on public online forums.

In that case, upwards of 300 AI-generated photos were believed to have been created using innocent photos taken from these students' social media pages.

The nude photos were deeply unsettling.

Cases like this one test the ability of law enforcement to get the upper hand on the nonconsensual sharing of intimate images online, whether those images are "real" or otherwise.

These same image generators have been accused of reinforcing harmful biases and stereotypes on the internet. The algorithms behind them can produce images replete with misogyny, violence, and bigotry.

For instance, when a specific AI image generator was asked to produce photos of toys in Iraq, image after image was created portraying Lego-style characters or teddy bears dressed in army attire and bearing violent weapons.

When the input was "attractive people," the images produced were all those of the young and fair-skinned.

An input of "productive person" revealed images of white men in suits. Images requested for those who rely on social services displayed people with darker skin.

These harmful stereotypes are far from a true reflection of the real world and can warp people's worldview.

The influence of AI is far-reaching.

ENTER: CHATBOTS

ChatGPT is a popular AI processing tool first launched in November 2022.

Within two months, the chatbot had already reached 100 million users. ChatGPT is available to the public and free to use at its entry tier.

Chatbots like ChatGPT can answer a user's questions, drawing from the extensive databases of raw information on which they've been trained. These bots can also be used as tools to help compose emails, essays, and code.

Snapchat has its own chatbox, called My AI. And it's not alone. Soon Google will be launching an experimental version of a chatbot called Bard, geared specifically at teenagers.

The problem with chatbots, many say, is that people, especially young people, tend to regard them as all-knowing oracles which provide the final authority in an almost god-like manner.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Like AI-generated images, tests have demonstrated that chatbots are quite capable of producing wrong answers, promoting very unhealthy ideals, and generating racist

responses. So what can parents do to prepare their kids as they move into a future where AI tools will be used both in the home and workplace?

WHAT PARENTS CAN TEACH THEIR KIDS

Firstly, experts say that kids need to be reminded that there is no oversight built into these chatbots. No one is checking them for factual accuracy. Thus, the user needs to be the investigator and conduct their own fact-checking.

Next, kids need to be reminded that chatbots aren't thoughtful or caring. They cannot replace real-life friends.

Many people are concerned that young people will soon use AI to fill the voids in their social circles.

Snapchat's My AI already allows users to treat it in this way. The chatbot has its own profile that takes up space among a user's friend list. And it's always available to chat, day and night.

Finally, it's important to emphasize to our kids that the information used by chatbots is gathered through the use of algorithms which source information inspired by humans. We need to remind them, and ourselves, that it's dangerous to rely on such a broad base of information from all corners of the internet without employing some good, old-fashioned human judgment.

CITIZEN POLL

Do you believe that governments should take steps to regulate AI now, especially AI that is targeted at children and youth?

- Yes. Protecting young people in a world of advancing AI should be a high priority.
- No. Although AI comes with risk, so do many other things. Parents need to teach their children to navigate those risks safely.

Have a more nuanced opinion? Leave us a comment online.

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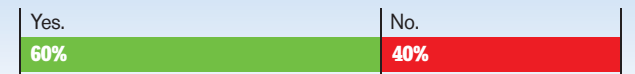
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LAST MONTH'S RESULTS:

Is a "take one, leave one" library a good interim option for Niverville until town council opts to budget for a full public library down the road?



YOUR COMMENTS:

The town is already interested in a library. Let's work towards more tangible services for and in our community.

A partial community library is a good start and better than no library at all.

I think the take one leave one idea is better than nothing. It would be great for Niverville to have a library one day. I'm not sure this is the right way to gauge interest though. The limited selection of books may negatively skew the numbers.

Niverville council is incredibly short-sighted. There is the option of having them subsidize a city of winnipeg library card or one from Steinbach. This town is so focused on sports that they neglected reading as a result. Sad.

My guess is a very few people will use it. Don't cater to the few loudest people. If you need to spend the money, lower user fees for playing minor sports in town and hopefully get more young kids involved.

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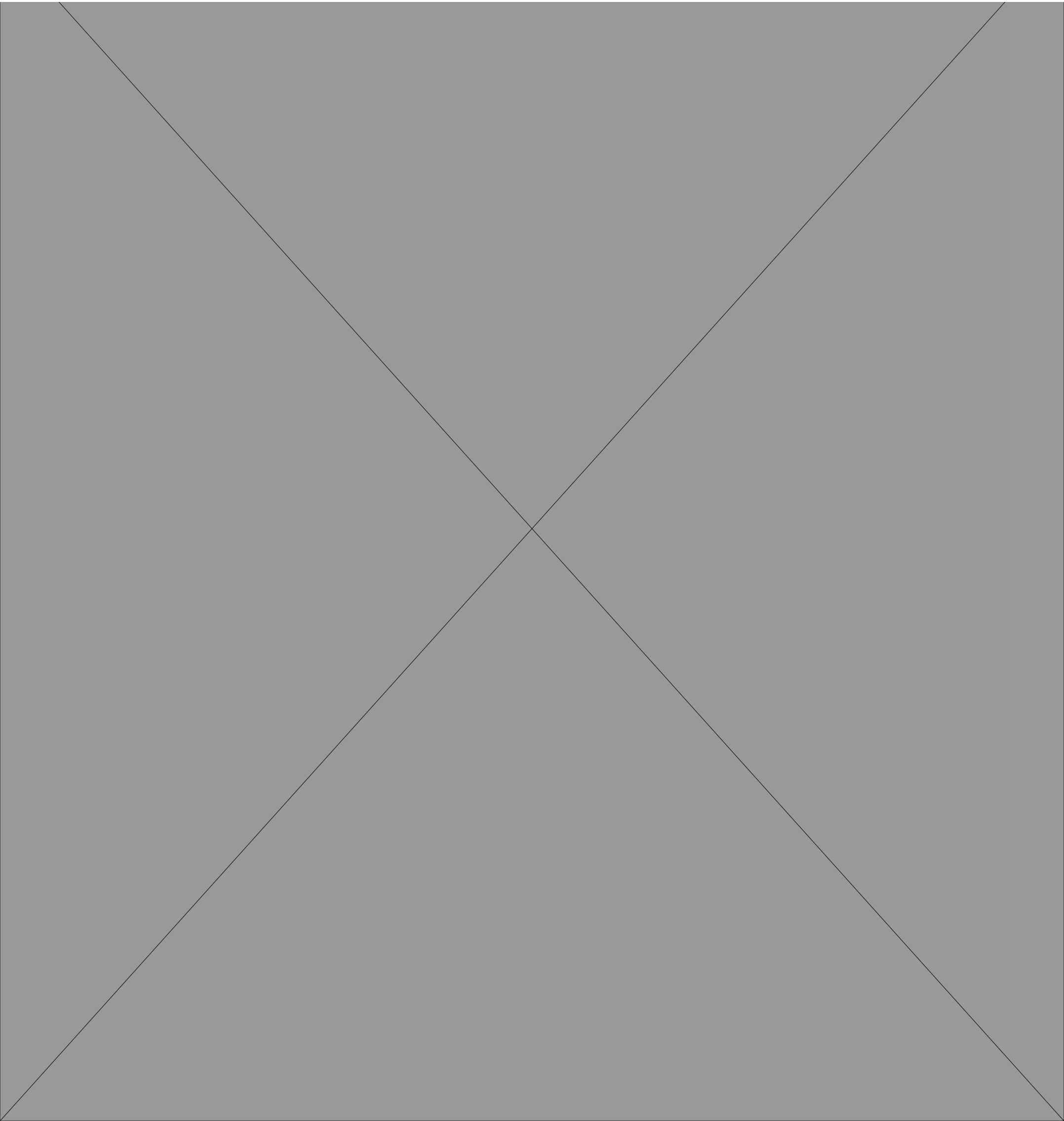
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Ritchot Hosts First Annual Business Expo

By Brenda Sawatzky

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The TC Energy Centre in Île-des-Chênes will play host to the first annual Edge Business Expo from February 21–22.

Night one will kick off with a business mixer, providing a unique opportunity for business owners and managers to meet and network in a casual setting.

As a way to showcase the centre and all its amenities, the general public is also welcome to attend this no-cost event.

Attendees will be treated to the magic of Evan Morgan and his sleight-of-hand. A variety of delicious eats will be available at the food truck fair located inside the building.

The second day will offer a full lineup, from morning to late afternoon, including seminars, workshops, a trade show, and keynote speakers.

Most notable will be Wade Miller, president and CEO of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, who is scheduled to speak over the lunch break.

Miller is also the co-founder and CEO of Pinnacle Staffing, Manitoba's largest recruitment firm and has been responsible for co-founding a variety of new businesses in Manitoba including Elite Sports Injury and Elite Performance.

His business savvy has earned him recognition as one of Canada's Top 40 Under 40. Miller was also a prairie finalist for Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur Award.



The TC Energy Centre in Île-des-Chênes.

EVAN BRAUN

Eight business-centric seminars will spread out over the morning and afternoon, led by experts in a variety of fields, including an IT professional, who will speak about cyber attacks, and a social media expert who will cover all aspects of maximizing one's online platforms to achieve optimal business growth.

The day will close with a financial round table hosted by a panel of business financial specialists who'll be discussing strategies for boosting profitability and growth.

Ritchot mayor Chris Ewen will join attendees at the two-day event, there as a local entrepreneur but also as a council member who is passionate about bringing new

business to the RM.

"We are very commercial- and industrial-driven," Ewen says. "We have a great blend of residential to commercial [business], and I think if we can showcase that it will [open doors] for new businesses that are thinking of coming out to the south side of Winnipeg."

But it's not just about bringing in new business, he adds. He also hopes that the expo will encourage collaborations between business owners from surrounding municipalities who are happy to stay right where they are.

"We want to show businesses... that [rural] municipalities want to work with them," Ewen says. "We want to engage and offer

opportunities. We want to do whatever we can to keep businesses going in the southeast region."

While the RM of Ritchot is a major contributor to the event, Ewen adds that the Ritchot Community Development Corporation (CDC) is the real muscle and backbone behind it.

In the end, Ewen is hopeful that the event as a whole will draw in several hundreds of people and help strengthen the region's business community.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more, visit:
www.edgebusinessexpo.com

IN BRIEF

Ritchot Council Talks Multifamily Housing

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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Ritchot's council held a public hearing on January 17 to discuss a rezoning application for the purpose of multifamily housing.

With a unanimous vote, council passed the first reading of the motion intended to rezone lot 1039 Old PTH 59 from Agricultural Limited (AL) to Residential General 8 (RG8). This lot is located on the north end of Île-des-Chênes.

Readings two and three will be addressed on Wednesday, February 21. At the same time, council will address a conditional use permit taken out for the same address.

Notices to property owners in the area will be sent out in February. Council will not indicate the purpose of the conditional use or the name of the applicant until then.

The agenda also included a review of the RM's building permits for the year 2023.

A total of 217 permits were taken out last year, nine fewer than the year prior. Despite this, the total value of construction exceeded 2022 by nearly \$4 million.

Revenue from building permit fees came in just shy of \$169,000 for the year, also in excess of the previous year by just over \$6,000.



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Out in the Cold: Commemorating Ten Years Since Gas Explosion

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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The events of January 25, 2014 still remain fresh in the memories of many residents of southeastern Manitobans. Just after midnight on that fateful Saturday, a natural gas pipeline near Otterburne exploded, leaving about 4,000 people without heat for days on end.

As if the sights and sounds of such a catastrophe weren't remarkable enough, the event took place in the middle of one of the coldest winters on record. On this weekend, temperatures plunged toward -30°C, with windchills hovering around -40°C.

At 1:05 a.m. that Saturday, local RCMP arrived on the scene of the accident near the corner of Highway 59 and Highway 303, responding to the sound of a loud explosion. Neighbours were awoken by the cacophony and watched from their windows in awe as 500- to 600-foot flames shot into the sky.

Students from nearby Providence College watched from campus, speculating that a massive greenhouse in the area had gone up in flames again.

One year prior, almost to the day, a massive greenhouse operation in that area suffered \$6 million in damages after a fire broke out.

The ball of fire from the 2014 pipeline break lit up the night sky to such a degree that it created an effect akin to sunset for many miles around.

Fourteen kilometres to the north, in Niverville, residents Allan and Brenda Sawatzky were snapping photos at their south-facing window, struck by the enormity of the orange glow.

The explosion had been so intense that debris landed up to 300 feet away. It created a crater 75 feet long by 37.5 feet wide.

The RCMP evacuated residents from five nearby homes. No injuries were reported.

One day prior, a special weather advisory had been released by



The natural gas pipeline explosion that rock southeastern Manitoba in 2014.

© JASON THOMPSON

Environment Canada which would affect most of southern Manitoba. A strong arctic cold front was expected to bring 80 kilometre per hour winds, poor visibility, and windchills of -40°C.

CRISIS RESPONSE

Crews from TransCanada Pipelines (TCPL, now known as TC Energy) were quickly called in to assess the situation and close off the fuel source in two major gas lines. It took 12 hours for the flames at the pipeline break to be extinguished.

Île-des-Chênes resident Dan Vermette lives not far from the natural gas pumping station where crews worked. Vermette tells *The Citizen* that he awoke on Saturday morning unaware of the explosion. Instead he was drawn outside by a loud whistling sound that reminded him of a Boeing 747 flying directly overhead.

"I could hear it through my [closed] windows," says Vermette.

"And when I stepped outside, my neighbour was out and we couldn't even communicate."

The noise continued for the better part of a day, caused by workers venting the lines at the TCPL pumping station in order to close the valves.

As the gas lines were shut down, homes heated with gas furnaces lost service. Gas hot water tanks were rendered useless.

By Saturday morning, Manitoba Hydro issued an advisory to all its customers in the southeast. Communities serviced by the damaged pipeline included New Bothwell, Niverville, Ste. Agathe, and six others further south.

Residents were advised to use space heaters approved for indoor use and conserve electricity wherever possible. It was also recommended that families shut off the water supply to their homes if they had to leave during the outage.

"No estimate for the resumption of

supply has been received from TCPL," the advisory stated. "Manitoba Hydro is advising customers to prepare for a gas outage for a minimum of one day."

DAY 1: THE COLD HITS HOME

Bryan Trottier, owner of Trotco Electric in Niverville, says that he learned of the impending gas outage before his own home's gas furnace quit heating.

"A Hydro guy phoned me early in the morning on Saturday and said, 'Get your crews ready. There's no gas because the gas line exploded... [so] get some heaters. This is pretty serious and it's going to last quite a few days,'" Trottier says.

Trottier did just that. He mobilized a team of approximately ten electricians, recognizing that about half of the community's homes were serviced by gas. One of his employees was sent out to procure as many household space heaters as he could

purchase. He returned with an entire truckload.

Meanwhile, Trottier spent the day in his company office taking calls from panicked homeowners.

"I'd be on the phone and have another call on hold," Trottier says. "Then I'd have voicemails when I was done. I had one guy sitting next to me just writing down the addresses."

For the next ten hours or so, Trottier's crew kept busy by installing breakers and space heaters near household furnaces where the heat could circulate throughout the house via the return air system.

"Originally we started installing two five-kilowatt heaters in every house, and then me and my Hydro buddy started doing some calculations," Trottier says. "We realized that the main [electricity] transmission line wouldn't take that [load]."

One heater per household, they decided, would be enough to keep a house's temperature hovering around 16 degrees Celsius, warm enough to keep pipes from freezing. Homeowners would have to get creative for anything more.

By late Saturday, Trottier's crew had installed 75 percent of the heaters they'd collected. Early on Sunday morning, they began all over again.

DAY 2: STATE OF EMERGENCY

By Sunday, the RM of Hanover had declared a local state of emergency. Manitoba's Emergency Measures teams were out helping communities like Niverville, New Bothwell, and Ste. Agathe set up warming shelters to give families a place in which to retreat.

Meanwhile, TCPL sent out trucks containing compressed natural gas to metering stations in the southeast which would supply critical services such as personal care homes and hospitals, as well as schools or churches being used as emergency warming centres.

The company also set up temporary headquarters in Niverville where residents could turn in receipts for space heaters, electrical services,



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hotel stays, and other costs incurred due to the inconvenience. They were reimbursed on the spot.

Local farmers were able to make claims for livestock losses.

At ground zero, officials from the National Energy Board and the Transportation Safety Board were running inspections on the pipeline to try and determine the cause of the incident.

DAY 3: REPAIRS UNDERWAY

Monday, January 27, marked the third day of which thousands of customers had been without heat while temperatures continued to plummet. Affected schools and businesses remained closed.

One news agency reported that by Monday morning temperatures had dropped to -32°C with a windchill of -45°C.

Pipeline workers were called in from far and wide to expedite. It was in these high wind, bone-chilling conditions that work got underway.

Riley Laurencelle worked for Somerville Pipelines, a subcontractor to TCPL. His crew was on a job site in Thunder Bay when they received the call to drop everything and head to Otterburne.

"When that pipeline blew up, we worked 48 hours straight to get it back up and running so everyone with gas in the surrounding communities could have heat," Laurencelle says. "It was close to -30°C [when we arrived] and it was a very interesting job."

Late Monday, Trottier received a phone call from a crew at ground zero, requesting immediate electrical assistance in getting warming huts wired up for the crews working there.

"I went out there at like 10:00 on Monday night," Trottier says. "It was brutally cold. I think it was minus -38°C that night. We were working a few hundred yards away from the actual break, but it was like a scene from a movie. It was all lit up and there was a big hole and people working in there. They wouldn't let you get close. The security was pretty tight."

A number of his electrical technicians continued work at ground zero over the next few days.

Security was so tight that the workers waited in their vehicles for up to eight hours before they were approved for access.

"Generally, a site is just secured from a safety perspective," says Reid Feist, media relations manager for TC Energy (TCPL). "Ultimately, we have accountability for people on our sites so... it's very standard for us to have a containment zone. It's just basically so we can account for everybody all the time. If something happens in response to the incident, then you have a sense of who's there."

All in all, he adds, there were around 300 people at ground zero throughout the course of the event, there to inspect, repair, monitor, and document.

DAY 4+: GAS RESTORED, CAUSE REVEALED

In total, approximately 80 hours passed from the initial gas shutoff to the point when the gas flow was restored.

Even after the lines opened up, many Manitoba Hydro customers had to wait for Hydro staff to attend their homes and relight their furnace pilot lights.

It wasn't until July 2015 that reports had been compiled and the cause of the gasline rupture went public.

According to the Transportation Safety Board (TSB) of Canada, a crack in the weld at a mainline valve assembly had given way, causing the sudden and powerful release of gas.

It was believed that the crack had been there since the time of the pipeline's construction 50 years prior.

At the time, the report stated, there was no requirement to inspect welding quality.

Davis Sheremata, external communications and media relations person for TCPL at the time, said that a number of factors led to the Otterburne explosion.

"The TSB has found that the weld, which led to the incident, had safely operated for more than 50 years," Sheremata said. "However, an unprecedented combination of circumstances including extreme frost, heavy equipment in the area, and the absence of gas flow in the line for 20 days likely caused the fracture."

According to Feist, it was an isolated crack.

"We did some testing along the rest of the line and didn't find anything similar, so it was thankfully

something unique in the system."

Another media outlet, Vice News, went on to investigate TCPL's track record of incidents similar to the one that occurred in Otterburne.

This natural gas explosion was the sixth such event in Manitoba since 1994 and the fourth to occur on a TCPL line.

"TransCanada, the same company that wants to build the Keystone XL and Energy East pipelines, has tallied more than 300 'reportable incidents,' including ruptures, leaks, fires, explosions, serious injuries, and one death, at its facilities since 2008," read a Vice article in 2015.¹

Another pipeline explosion occurred one year after the Otterburne event.

This one happened on September 15, 2015, at the St. Vincent Compressor Station in Kittson County, Minnesota, just across the border from Ridgeville, Manitoba.

Based on available stats from 2018, TC Energy (TCPL) operates more than 93,000 kilometres of pipeline across Canada and the U.S. Of that, 2,500 kilometres of pipeline stretches across Manitoba, supplying gas to Canada's east coast and the United States.

The company employs 62 Manitobans and contributes almost \$21 million to local property taxes. They've invested in communities surrounding their pipeline projects to the tune of \$182,000.

RESIDENTS REMEMBER

During that cold week in 2014, Kim Georgison of Niverville felt extra thankful to have the supplemental heat from a wood-burning fireplace.

But, she says, finding a local store with space heaters in stock was difficult.

One of Georgison's biggest take-aways was the way in which the emergency brought neighbours and the community closer together. Social media lit up with homeowners who had heat inviting families with no heat to take up residence in their homes or just stop in for a coffee and a warm-up.

For Georgison, this benevolent spirit echoed experiences she'd had in 1997, during the Red River's flood of the century.

"I was living on Highway 200

during the '97 flood," says Georgison. "It was both the worst and best time of my life. People rose to the occasion and opened their doors, wallets, and hearts to help. It restored my faith in people. I saw the same type of giving, on a smaller scale, during this time, so it wasn't all bad."

Myron Dyck, Niverville's current mayor, was a town councillor in 2014, actively invested in helping set up the community's warming shelter at the Heritage Centre.

He echoes Georgison's sentiments about that time.

"Interestingly enough, no one used [the shelter]," Dyck says. "There was a great show of community by our residents. Those who were impacted were able to be taken in by friends, families, and neighbours, with stories of camping out in the living room as residents opened their homes. I think about this and it brings a warm feeling to my heart. Those days were community. Those days represented what Niverville is: a place where people are willing to help others in their time of need."

Also from Niverville, Kenzie Prudhomme looks back at the event as a kind of fun adventure.

"Luckily, we could borrow a couple of electric heaters," Prudhomme says. "We sealed off our most used room and just tried to heat our main space. The biggest issue for us was water. We heated it up like we were camping. Showers were had in the city at my parents' place."

Like many others, the Prudhomme family took advantage of oven heat to add some comfort in their reduced living space.

The "fun" part of the adventure ended for Prudhomme, though, by day three when her electrical power also went out. The couple drained their water lines and began to pack up to leave.

Thankfully, the power was restored a few hours later.

Krista Carswell Shidel and her family were among those to lose both their gas and electricity on night three. Shidel and her partner had five children, the oldest of which was seven.

They also had six-week-old twins. "We managed without gas, as we had heaters, but when the power went out we had no way to heat

bottles or sanitize baby supplies properly," says Shidel. "Triple sleepers and extra blankets didn't cut it through the day, so we headed to Winnipeg to my parents' house. [It was a] crazy time! We were only five months in Niverville."

Amanda Exner of Niverville worked for Manitoba Hydro during the gas outage. She has no recall of any electrical power outages at the time but says it is altogether possible.

"We monitored closely to make sure the power grid didn't overload with all the extra space heaters [and things] running," Exner says. "I honestly believe [the electrical outage] was an isolated issue. Fuses or transformers can blow when overloaded."

Trottier agrees, saying that he remembers warning people about just such a possibility.

"I was putting warnings on Facebook about that," Trottier says. "If everyone lives very comfortably for the next few days, we're all going to have no power."

For Trottier and so many others, an overarching feeling of nostalgia returns when recalling those days back in 2014.

"That's my favourite kind of work, helping people when they're in need," Trottier says. "It's exciting and you feel like you're making a difference, you know? So I thoroughly enjoy disasters, as long as people aren't getting hurt."

Sawatzky has another outlook on the event which rendered his gas furnace and hot water tank inoperable during those chilly days.

Confronted by a news reporter visiting Niverville the morning following the explosion, he was asked whether he felt fear when witnessing the massive flames from his kitchen window.

"It wouldn't be the first time I thought it was the end of the world, and then realized it was just gas," Sawatzky jokes.

REFERENCE

¹ Hilary Beaumont, "Whistleblowers Think They Know Why Canadian Pipelines Are Exploding," Vice, November 3, 2015 (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/59eyk5/whistleblowers-think-they-know-why-canadian-pipelines-are-exploding>).



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IN BRIEF



The Tourond Creek neighbourhood in St. Adolphe. **BRENDA SAWATZKY**

Reduced Speed Limits Approved for Tourond Creek

By Brenda Sawatzky
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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It's been a year and four months since St. Adolphe resident Dee Dee Budgell made her first plea to council to reduce the speed limit in Tourond Creek from 50 to 30 kilometres per hour.

At their January 3 public meeting, council finally took the matter to a vote. They voted four to one in favour of reducing the speed in the community's most southerly development.

Mayor Chris Ewen was the only one not in favour.

The speed limit survey was mailed to 112 property owners in Tourond Creek in late 2023. Twenty-two surveys were filled out and returned to the RM office. Nine of the 22 respondents were not in favour of a speed reduction.

"I was kind of hoping that more surveys would come back," Councillor Jason Bodnarchuk told council. "It's a very small amount that did the survey, so that's tough. If this doesn't get approved, I think we need to look at further solutions of how to address the speed [concerns]."

Councillors Janine Boullanger and Joel Lemoine concurred with Budgell's assessment, citing that 50 kph felt like a high speed in some areas where street parking and pedestrian traffic were abundant.

"At some point and time, we'll look at putting up 30 [kph] signs or somehow communicating that to the area," CAO Mitch Duval told council following the vote.

Budgell first brought the matter to council in September 2022. She came bearing

a petition with signatures from 64 Tourond Creek residents, all in favour of a speed reduction.

One month later, council underwent an election and Bodnarchuk was elected in the St. Adolphe ward. Budgell says that he gave her a listening ear from the start and even attended a neighbourhood meeting she held.

Still, change was slow in coming. In November 2023, Budgell made another plea to council for a speed limit change, once again citing the safety of the development's children, especially in light of frequent construction traffic.

Council responded by sending out a survey. In late 2023, a two-vehicle collision in the development occurred. One vehicle had to be written off.

For Budgell, council's action this month was great news on which to open the new year.

"It took forever, but I am glad at the end of the day we have our request honoured," says Budgell. "It was frustrating and I've learned that sometimes they just hope you go away. I won't. I will always be respectful but won't give up if it's the right thing to do."

Like Bodnarchuk, Budgell was surprised at the poor response to the RM survey.

"It was so close to Christmas that I'm sure many put it aside and just forgot," Budgell says. "The reason for the reduction is for the safety of the community. The community consists of young families. And with so many children darting about, it's dangerous. Also, now with the new daycare, it's our responsibility to ensure the safety of the families, especially those with little ones."

Niverville Council Approves Water Utility Rate Hike

By Brenda Sawatzky
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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On Tuesday, January 16, Niverville's town council voted in favour to pass the first reading on a water utility rate hike for the community. The second and third readings will be presented to council at the next scheduled public meeting.

If adopted, Niverville residents with properties connected to the water treatment plant will see their rates increase in April of this year, based on their first quarter consumption.

Residents serviced by private wells will not be affected by these rate hikes.

Water utility rates are comprised of two primary components. The first is a quarterly service charge, which is a standard fee billed to every customer.

The secondary charge includes a predetermined dollar amount that is billed for every 1,000 gallons of water used.

The quarterly service charge will actually drop from the 2023 rates, going from \$7.37 per quarter last year to \$5.72 per quarter in 2024.

"The quarterly service charge is decreasing due to two factors," states a council briefing. "One, the staffing change where meter readings are no longer done by high-level technicians but by administrative staff, thus decreasing the cost of labour in the billing and collection category of costs. Two, the annual increases to customer base, thus, spreading the cost across more users."

The actual charge for the water as a commodity, though,



The water treatment plant in Niverville.

BRENDA SAWATZKY

will rise.

In 2023, the cost per 1,000 gallons of water sat at \$11.18. In 2024, that number will jump to \$13.32.

For a single-family household using 3,000 imperial gallons of water per quarter, this means their water costs will grow from \$40.91 to \$45.67.

"The water commodity rate has increased largely due to the need to increase the reserve to ensure funds are available for future repair and maintenance requirements," the briefing continues.

A cost analysis was provided to council based on 2021 pricing, although updated pricing is still under investigation.

According to that analysis, the reverse osmosis membranes used to filter water at the treatment plant have a five- to seven-year lifespan and come at a cost of \$80,000. The new treatment plant uses four

times as many membranes as the old plant did.

The reverse osmosis booster pumps have a 15-year lifespan. There are six of them in the new plant as opposed to the two in use at the previous one. The purchase price for one pump comes to around \$56,000.

An updated water rate study for Niverville was performed at the request of the Public Utilities Board (PUB), an independent board operating under provincial legislative authority. A completion date for the study was set as December 2023.

The PUB's goal was to review the community's water rates once the new treatment plant was fully operational in order to ensure its long-term sustainability.

According to regulations set by the PUB, all utilities such as water and wastewater must be fully self-sustaining.

In other words, the fees collected for a water utility must be equal to the cost to operate a water treatment plant and deliver the commodity to properties throughout the community.

Shortfalls, when the revenue collected doesn't add up to the actual costs incurred, cannot be made up for through dipping into the town's general coffers.

To ensure that rates don't fall behind costs, the PUB can request a water or wastewater study at regular intervals. They provide the final approval for all rate change recommendations.

The last approved rate hike for Niverville took place in May 2016. The town submitted another rate study to the PUB in 2021, which indicated that no rate increase was required at that time.

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VS. VIRDEN OIL CAPITALS



FEB. 25 @ 3:00 P.M.
VS. WINNIPEG FREEZE



MATT FALK



RAY NEUFELD

Nighthawks Gear Up for Second Annual Gala Fundraiser

By Ty Dilello

tdilello@nivervillecitizen.com

The Niverville Nighthawks are inviting you to their second annual gala fundraiser dinner on February 10.

This year's gala will feature a silent auction extravaganza, a live auction spectacle, a meet and greet with the players and coaching staff, and gourmet dining infused with community spirit.

The night will be highlighted by a range of special guests, including local comedian Matt Falk.

There will also be a one-on-one with Ray Neufeld, a former Winnipeg Jets forward who serves on the NHL Diversity Inclusion

Committee and is president of the Winnipeg Jets Alumni.

"We had a bit more time to plan and organize the gala this year, as we enlarged our planning committee by adding some great volunteers," says Clarence Braun, chair of the team's board of directors. "We were able to understand how to streamline the program and smooth it out. We added some great new fundraising opportunities to give more people the opportunity to participate. The opportunity to connect will be enhanced, too, as the venue and bar will be open until midnight."

Braun is especially excited that they were able to get Neufeld to agree to come out and speak at the

gala. "Ray is a Manitoba player who had a significant NHL career in which he spent four years with the Winnipeg Jets," says Braun. "He grew up in a small town, and his experiences as a minority in a predominantly white Mennonite town have provided him with a great perspective on challenges presently being faced by the NHL."

The other speaker on the night is Matt Falk, who has been well recognized for his comedic talent across Canada and North America more broadly.

"We wanted to inject a little more levity into our program, and he was willing to join us. We are expecting people to enjoy Matt's leading from

the emcee position to Ray sharing his story with us."

Another feature of the evening involves Kevin Pauls, the team's play-by-play voice and TV announcer. Pauls will make player introductions and conduct sit-down interviews with billet parents, as well as with Neufeld.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For anyone interested in attending the gala, one ticket costs \$175, while a table of eight can be had for \$1,400. To learn more and purchase tickets, visit: <https://tickets.mjhlhighthawks.ca/events/28584-niverville-nighthawks-gala-fundraising-dinner>.

STANDINGS ** AS OF FEBRUARY 1, 2024

WEST DIVISION

TEAM	GP	W	L	OTL	SOL	PTS
1 VIRDEN OIL CAPITALS	40	29	6	2	3	63
2 OCN BLIZZARD	40	24	12	1	3	52
3 DAUPHIN KINGS	37	24	12	1	0	49
4 NEEPAWA TITANS	40	19	20	1	0	39
5 WAYWAYSEECAPPO WOLVERINES	40	14	22	1	3	32
6 SWAN VALLEY STAMPEDEERS	44	10	32	2	0	22

EAST DIVISION

TEAM	GP	W	L	OTL	SOL	PTS
1 STEINBACH PISTONS	41	32	6	3	0	67
2 WINKLER FLYERS	40	30	6	2	2	64
3 PORTAGE TERRIERS	43	26	9	4	4	60
4 NIVERVILLE NIGHTHAWKS	41	22	17	2	0	46
5 SELKIRK STEELERS	40	18	19	2	1	39
6 WINNIPEG FREEZE	38	7	28	3	0	17
7 WINNIPEG BLUES	40	7	30	3	0	17

MJHL POINTS LEADERS

PLAYER	TEAM	GP	G	A	PTS
1 Trent Penner	WNK	39	20	32	52
2 Dalton Andrew	WNK	37	24	27	51
3 Leo Chambers	STN	41	15	36	51
4 Nolan Chastko	VIR	40	26	17	43
5 Josh Lehto	VIR	40	19	24	43
6 Kirk Mullen	STN	37	19	23	42
7 Brody Beauchemin	WNK	37	11	31	42
8 Gabriel Laffamme	POR	43	14	27	41
9 Sean Williams	WAY	40	21	19	40
10 Jack Clarke	WAY	40	20	20	40
11 Alex Walicki	NIV	40	13	27	40
12 Grady Hoffman	STN	36	23	16	39
13 Trey Sauder	STN	41	17	22	39
14 Ben Roulette	WAY	40	16	22	38
15 Mathieu Moreira	SEL	39	15	23	38
16 Noah Szabo	STN	40	12	26	38
17 Kaycee Coyle	NIV	40	11	27	38
18 Slade Stanick	POR	36	14	23	37
19 Brandon Funk	STN	41	18	18	36
20 Jakob Jones	WNK	44	17	18	35

MJHL GOALIE LEADERS

GOALIE	TEAM	GP	GA	GAA	SV%
1 Cole Plowman	STN	29	55	1.88	0.930
2 Tomas Anderson	OCN	26	55	2.23	0.930
3 Raiden Legall	NIV	24	58	2.47	0.928
4 Malachi Klassen	WNK	27	52	1.94	0.920
5 Jayden Catellier	POR	28	68	2.48	0.919
6 Liam Ernst	WNK	14	27	1.97	0.918
7 Cole Sheffield	DAU	29	68	2.34	0.916
8 Mason Lobreau	NEE	24	77	3.20	0.914
9 Eric Reid	VIR	32	70	2.18	0.912
10 Noel Olsonawski	SEL	28	68	2.59	0.909
11 Gage Stewart	SVS	20	77	3.86	0.909
12 Loic Morin	OCN	17	42	2.63	0.906
13 Gavin Renwick	POR	16	42	2.64	0.902
14 River Leslie-Toogood	WPB	28	119	4.63	0.899
15 Keegan Gordon	NIV	18	60	3.40	0.894
16 KC Couckuyt	NEE	16	60	3.74	0.889
17 Jeff Dreger	WPB	17	72	5.06	0.872
18 Braxton Burdeny	WPF	16	72	5.45	0.868
19 Nicolas Rempel	WPF	27	132	5.29	0.867

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Nighthawks Fight through Midwinter Slump

By Ty Dilello

tdilello@nivervillecitizen.com

At the end of 2023, the Niverville Nighthawks went on a tear, beating the best teams in the league by tight margins and setting up an exciting second half of the season.

So far, however, it's been a turbulent new year, with the team succumbing to a midwinter slump in which they've lost more than they've won. Too many of those games haven't been close.

However, there have been a few bright spots, including some new player acquisitions and line-up changes that bode well for the future.

As the MJHL careens towards the final stretch of its regular season, the Nighthawks continue to occupy a playoff spot in the East Division. The future still looks bright.



By and large, January has been a struggle for the Niverville Nighthawks.

TY DILELLO

JANUARY 5 WINKLER FLYERS, AWAY

The Nighthawks returned to action after the Christmas break on Friday night with a rough 7-3 loss on the road to the Winkler Flyers.

Things started off well before going downhill.

The Nighthawks led 2-1 after the first period closed, on the strength of goals from Nathan Brown and Ty Kennett.

The Flyers took over the game in the second period, outscoring the Nighthawks 6-1 over the last 40 minutes.

Niverville's third goal came from Michael Debrito.

"This was a tough loss, no doubt," said defenceman Ethan Kelly. "I think Winkler was better tonight at being first on pucks and finding the soft areas on the ice whilst capitalizing on the chances we gave them."

The Nighthawks might have been shaking off the rust, so to speak, with this being their first game back after 15 days.

"I think we all enjoyed the Christmas break we got this year," said Kelly. "It was a longer one than last year, but it is good to be back in

Niverville with the fellas again."

The whole team seemed ready to put the loss behind them and look forward to the following night's rematch—this time on home ice.

"To be successful, I feel we need to get bodies on them fast, so they are not comfortable with the puck. If we play fast and move the puck quickly then I think that Winkler isn't able to keep up with us."

JANUARY 6 WINKLER FLYERS, HOME

Niverville played an excellent first 40 minutes on Saturday night at the

CRRC, but they faltered late in this heartbreaking match to fall 5-4 in overtime to Winkler.

It was a tale of two games, as the Nighthawks were the top team over the first two periods, while Winkler was the better team for the third period and overtime.

Niverville led 2-1 after the first period, with goals coming from Michael Tanchak and Kennett. In the second period, the Nighthawks added another pair of goals to go up 4-1. This second round of goals came from Debrito and another from Kennett.

Winkler turned it on in the third period, though, and tied the game with three unanswered goals to silence the Niverville crowd. The fans went home upset as Winkler scored the game-winning goal half-way into overtime while on a power play after a controversial penalty.

"They were a disciplined team in the third period, and we ran into penalty trouble which caused a shift in the momentum I think," said Nighthawks forward Adam Vigfusson. "I thought the team performed well for the first 40 minutes for sure. We played hard, finished our checks, and went to the dirty areas. It resulted in the goals as well as the opportunities we had."

Vigfusson notes that the Nighthawks might still be shaking off the rust from the Christmas break.

"Coming back from Christmas break has been great, as I missed the boys and the icetime for sure," said Vigfusson. "So it's good to get back to Niverville and get a chance to get the legs back under us."

JANUARY 13 WINNIPEG BLUES, HOME

The Nighthawks had a big 6-1 win over the Winnipeg Blues to get back into the win column on Saturday night at the CRRC.

Niverville rolled over the Blues right from the opening puck drop and proved they were the better team all night long. Caleb Lepitre led the way with a pair of goals,

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while Debrito, Kennett, Kaycee Coyle, and Brendan Bottem had the other Niverville tallies.

Raiden LeGall stopped 11 shots in the Nighthawks' goal for the win.

"I would say we executed our systems well and had a relentless forecheck all game," said Bottem. "I would say our backcheck was also really good tonight in limiting their high-danger chances."

It was the first Nighthawks game for four new players on the team who were acquired during the league's trade deadline this past week.

Defenceman Jase Konecni from the Melville Millionaires of the SJHL, Josh Danis and Alex Walicki from the Swan Valley Stampede, and Noah Asmundson from the Humboldt Broncos (SJHL) all skated for Niverville on Saturday night.

Bottem notes that his Nighthawks worked on a ton of things in practice over the past week to get ready for this weekend's games.

"We were working a lot on our systems and getting the new guys adjusted to a new team. We added a few guys to the team, so getting them used to our systems and the way we play was definitely a big thing in practice this week."

Next up: an important match against a division rival and close neighbour: the Steinbach Pistons.

"To get on a roll, it always starts in practice," said Bottem. "If we have good practices, then it's going to translate to games. We have to push ourselves in practice every day, and if we can do that, we are going to be successful."

JANUARY 14 STEINBACH PISTONS, HOME

The Nighthawks gave it a spirited effort on Sunday afternoon at the CRRC but were ultimately thwarted 3-2 by the first-place Steinbach Pistons.

It was a very tightly played affair right from the opening puck drop as the teams played to a goalless opening period.

Things opened up in the second period as Steinbach scored a pair of counters to lead 2-0.

Bottem got one back for Niverville—that is, before Steinbach replied with a goal of their own.

Debrito scored late in the second period to cut the deficit to 3-2, but that's as close as Niverville would get.

A scoreless third period ended the game 3-2 in Steinbach's favour.

Head coach Kelvin Cech was happy with his troop's performance on the afternoon, as games like these against a first-place team are often a measuring stick to see where the club is at.

"I was for the most part

impressed with our guys tonight," said Cech. "We made a mistake or two more than the other team, and that was the difference. So we were kind of chasing for most of the game. On the whole, it was a good game. We know got some work to do and it was definitely encouraging."

Cech said that the key was for the team to come together as a unit.

"I think we've added five new players from the beginning of December," said Cech. "Everyone will have to give up some of their ice time to be successful, but everyone is on board with that, as we just all want to win as a team. It's all about the vibes for us."

JANUARY 19 SWAN VALLEY STAMPEDERS, AWAY

Niverville won big on Friday night with a decisive 4-1 victory on the road over the Swan Valley Stampede.

The Nighthawks dominated this contest from start to finish, outshooting Swan Valley by a 48-26 margin. The Nighthawks led 2-1 after the first period and never looked back. They added a pair of second period goals to extend the lead.

The Stampede mounted no comeback in the scoreless third period.

Brown and Walicki led the charge for Niverville with a goal and an assist apiece. Niverville's other tallies on the evening were scored by Carter Spirig and Danis.

The Walicki and Danis goals are significant in that both players, recently traded to Niverville from the Stampede, were facing their old club for the first time.

"I thought we really earned our offence tonight," said Cech. "Swan Valley had recently lost some of their top scorers, but they played free and without pressure, so it was a tough game early on. I thought our guys were able to handle them as the game went on. Once the puck started to go in, we played our game better and a mature road game."

The Nighthawks were rejoined on Friday night by Nathan Brown, who returned after serving a three-game suspension for a cross-check that occurred back on January 5.

"We've got four good lines right now that have specific roles," said Cech. "So it was great to slot Nathan Brown back in the lineup as he did a ton out there, not just in scoring, but in creating space for his linemates. It was awesome to see."

JANUARY 20 DAUPHIN KINGS, AWAY

The Nighthawks came down to earth on Saturday night with a de-

flating 6-0 loss on the road to the Dauphin Kings.

Dauphin scored early and scored often throughout the night, as only five minutes into the game it was already 2-0 for the Kings. Dauphin added another goal later in the period, and another in the second period.

Dauphin scored twice more in the final period to send the Nighthawks packing with a 6-0 win.

"It was a dreadful performance on our part. We couldn't make a pass, the defencemen couldn't skate backwards, and we couldn't finish a check," said Cech. "So we were very sloppy, and they made us pay early and often."

This weekend's games marked the final time this regular season that the Nighthawks made their way up to western Manitoba. It was their longest road trip against the likes of Swan Valley, Dauphin, and OCN.

"The travel in our league is really easy compared to other provinces, so we're fortunate," said Cech. "But every time you can go on the road for a night or two and stay in a hotel, there's fewer distractions, and we can just focus on hockey. We've got great character on this team, as everyone is happy to hang out with one another, and it shows up in our results once we hit the ice."

JANUARY 24 STEINBACH PISTONS, HOME

The Nighthawks put up another stinker at home on Wednesday night with a 6-1 loss to the Steinbach Pistons.

It was a sad game for Nighthawks fans as the home team couldn't muster any offence throughout the evening.

Steinbach scored twice early in the contest before Walicki got one back for Niverville late in the first period.

The Pistons would add one goal in the second period and three goals in the third period to pull away with the 6-1 victory.

"Steinbach was faster and more physical tonight," said Bottem, who had an assist on his team's lone goal. "The only positive we can take out of this is that we get a chance to rebound in two days."

Despite the skid that his club has been on as of late, Bottem still likes where the team is headed and is pleased with the new additions that the club traded for back at the trade deadline.

"The chemistry has been great. We have all bonded together well, and we are a close group on and off the ice."

According to Bottem, it has to start in practice.

"We have had a couple of bad practices, and it showed today," he said. "We need to come ready to

practice and compete if we want to get out of this funk."

JANUARY 26 SELKIRK STEELERS, HOME

The Nighthawks failed to muster any offence again on Friday evening at the CRRC, dropping their third game in a row with a 3-1 loss to the Selkirk Steelers.

It was a tight-checking game that the Nighthawks couldn't get ahead of.

Selkirk opened the scoring midway through the first period, and then Niverville's Coyle tied the game in the second period. But Selkirk replied in short order to take back the lead.

The Steelers added one more tally in the third to win the game.

"There's lots of different problems and different things we can look at, but we just have to look for answers," said Cech. "Selkirk did a good job in the neutral zone in clogging it up. They have a specific forecheck every year and pounce on mistakes when you turn the puck over. It's a patient team that's good away from the puck, and we had a tough time penetrating and getting to the middle of the ice."

"They definitely played their game better than we played ours," added forward Walicki. "They stuck to their systems and forced us to adjust. Our team is going to get out of this funk by sticking together and using this upcoming break to develop a deeper connection on and off the ice. We play best when we attack fast and get the puck up the ice fast. If we can do that, we will score a bunch more goals and win more games."

The Nighthawks will be returning in a road game on February 3 against the Waywayseecappo Wolverines.

In the meantime, several players will be taking part in the MJHL-SJHL Showcase from January 30-31 at Seven Oaks Sportsplex.

This elite showcase event between the Manitoba Junior Hockey League and Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League has taken place every January since 2018. The event provides players with high-performance exposure in front of NHL, WHL, NCAA and U SPORTS scouts.

Nighthawks' players who will be competing at the Showcase include Brown, Luke Mackenzie, Avery Laliberte, LeGall, Debrito, and Coyle.

"This week-long break comes at a good time for us, so we'll try and be better when we get back," said Cech. "Half of our guys will be at the Showcase, so that's a bit of a blessing, as we'll have a lot of prospects out at practice. We'll just get back to having fun and playing hockey and realize we don't have to be here; we get to be here."

IN BRIEF

Nighthawks Bolster Line-up at Trade Deadline

By Ty Dilello

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Due to their strong first half of the current MJHL campaign, the Niverville Nighthawks found themselves in the position of buyers at the league's trade deadline, which passed back on January 10.

Making a flurry of moves, the Nighthawks were able to add some key pieces. These roster adjustments are designed to hopefully improve the team's outlook for the remainder of the season.

"It's a very busy time around the trade deadline as there's a lot of conversations," says head coach and general manager Kelvin Cech. "I was having to take my cell phone in the shower in case someone got back to me then. Every other GM in the league is trying to do what's best for their team, and we like the position we're in. We want to show our guys that we're really going to try to win every year. And we've got very excellent goaltending, so we wanted to build the team around them."

The Nighthawks kicked things off by acquiring forward Noah Asmundson from the SJHL's Humboldt Broncos for a player development fee.

Asmundson had one point in 10 games with Humboldt this season before the trade and has since scored one point in his first two games with Niverville.

Shortly thereafter, the Nighthawks acquired forwards Josh Danis and Alex Walicki from the Swan Valley Stampede in exchange for forward Ian Ness and future considerations.

Walicki is the key player Niverville added, as he's a big-scoring centreman who has put up 36 points in 34 games this season with Swan Valley.

Danis hasn't exactly been a slouch either, however, having scored 23 points in 31 games.

"We had to say goodbye to Ian Ness, which was tough, but he's doing better in his situation now. We had room to add 20-year-olds, and we did," said Cech of the trade. "Alex and Josh just fit really well in the middle of the ice for us. Alex is putting up points already and playing big minutes, and Josh is taking a lot of faceoffs for us and doing great in his role."

Finally, the Nighthawks capped off the trade deadline by acquiring defenceman Jase Konecni from the Melville Millionaires of the SJHL for future considerations.

Konecni had zero points in 13 games with Melville before being traded to Niverville.

With the addition of these four new players, Cech and the rest of his coaching staff believe that this Nighthawks team is well-positioned for a playoff run come spring.

"We just take things one day at a time, but it's hard not to be excited as these new players we've acquired are already fitting in like a glove on this team."



UPCOMING HOME GAMES



FEB. 7 @ 7:00 P.M.
VS. WINNIPEG FREEZE



FEB. 16 @ 7:00 P.M.
VS. OCN BLIZZARD



FEB. 17 @ 7:00 P.M.
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A Niverville Gold Rush Bingo night in February 2023.

C/O SHIRLEY HOULT

Bingo Program Enters Second Year

By Sara Beth Dacombe

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Niverville Gold Rush Bingo is held every Tuesday evening at the Golden Friendship Centre in Niverville.

The social event is open to all who wish to attend to have fun, win prizes, and fundraise for local projects.

Now in its second season, organizers are hoping to increase attendance to show community spirit and rally support for their selected causes: renovations at the Golden Friendship Centre and programming for young people at Niverville Youth For Christ.

Volunteers from Youth For Christ and the Niverville Nighthawks are regularly on hand to help with setup and takedown and a group of committed residents from Niverville make up the organizing committee, including Jolene Pauls, LeeAnn Giesbrecht, Erin Reimer, Jeannette Fast, Rachelle Baker, Shirley Hoult, Louise Hiebert, and Monique Lasko. Tech expert Cal Reimer also comes out to ensure that each night runs smoothly.

"We do have some loyal patrons that play regularly and kindly help with takedown

each and every week," says organizer Shirley Hoult. "Volunteers are needed. We currently have a spot open on our committee. Or if you would like to help out on a more casual basis, that would be welcome, too, when available. But more help would be great."

The level of community involvement has enabled the event to thrive during its first year and the group is excited to see the fundraising proceeds reach those who need it most in the community.

The Golden Friendship Centre provides dedicated meals and programming for seniors, as well as adult day programs that provide activities such as games, lunch, socialization, and exercise.

"For our first full season, the Niverville Gold Rush Bingo Committee decided that net funds raised would be donated to the Golden Friendship Centre," says Hoult. "For our second season, we wanted to provide an opportunity to give 50 percent of the net funding to a second local charity. Local not-for-profit and charitable organizations were invited to submit a request for funding. All submissions were considered and a committee vote

determined that this year the local Youth For Christ programs would be the recipient. The more people attending these fun evenings, the more funds will be made available to the charities."

Hoult herself is involved in many community fundraising efforts.

Bingo night has become a particular passion for her after seeing how the volunteer committee really makes a difference. The ripple effect of goodwill, she says, is contagious.

"In the first season, the volunteer committee members put in at least five hours each week to provide an opportunity for those interested in bingo to get back out into the community after the two years of [COVID] isolation and reduced quality of life."

Volunteering has proven physical, emotional, social, and professional benefits. Volunteering in a town where you can see and know exactly where and who your efforts are benefitting creates a big impact for both volunteers and the community.

Hoult invites everyone to attend a bingo night to see what it's all about.

"The weekly events are

relaxed, fun, and welcoming to all," she says. "It is a mixed demographic and we have added some new games this year to appeal to the various age groups. The bingo experience level is also varied so anyone wanting to try it out can feel comfortable."

A particular point of fun is when bingo night falls around a holiday on the calendar, such as Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, and Easter.

Hoult says that they go out of their way to make sure the door prizes reflect each theme.

"This season, bingo is held every Tuesday from mid-October to the end of April," says Hoult. "It is located at the Golden Friendship Centre on Second Avenue South. Doors open at 6:00 p.m. with bingo starting at 7:00 p.m. Everyone is welcome, but you must be 18 to purchase sheets and claim any prize."

Bingo sheets are purchased by cash upon arrival.

A person can play every game on the program for only \$20.

The potential payouts as of January 9 are a jackpot of \$1,100 in 59 numbers or less.

Big payouts are accumulating for the Lucky Star, Odds/Evens, and Bonanza games.

IN BRIEF

No-Cost Mental Health and Wellness Resources for Farmers

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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Thanks to a collaborative funding initiative between the federal and provincial governments, farmers, their families, and ag workers of all stripes will have access to free professional counselling services when and if they're needed.

A total of \$450,000 will be invested into the Manitoba Farmer Wellness Program (MFWP) over the next three years.

"Farmers face unique stressors and challenges, but they don't complain, and they always get the job done," says Lawrence MacAulay, the federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. "If they're struggling with their mental health, we need to be there for them. Through this shared investment under Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, farmers across Manitoba will have better access to the tools and supports they need to continue producing the high-quality products we depend on."

MacAulay adds that these mental health services establish a focus on the ag industry by employing counsellors who understand the unique stressors faced by their clients, often brought on by extreme climate events, global and market fluctuations, disease outbreaks, and the everyday dynamics of rural life.

"We support the hard work that farmers have committed their lives to and know that being a producer in the ag industry can be difficult," says Premier Wab Kinew. "This is why it is important to have specialized mental health

resources available specifically for producers and their families, and why we are proud to partner with the federal government on this key initiative."

The Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership is a five-year, \$3.5-billion investment into the agri-food and agri-products sectors.

The first \$1 billion is carried solely by the federal government. The remaining \$2.5 billion is cost-shared, with 60 percent from the feds and the rest being supplied through programs developed, designed, and delivered by the provinces and territories.

The MFWP is managed by a non-profit organization and was first launched in Manitoba in 2022. The organization's goal is to provide longer-term counselling support that looks beyond crisis intervention in order to prevent a mental health crisis from occurring in the first place.

MFWP works alongside more than 32 industry partners to provide professional counselling services to those in the ag industry.

"We understand the many challenges that come with farming and how difficult it can be to know where to turn for help when stress on the farm begins to feel overwhelming," says Marcel Hacault, chairman of MFWP. "This funding will allow us to continue our focus on getting the support producers need without the worry of incurring additional costs."

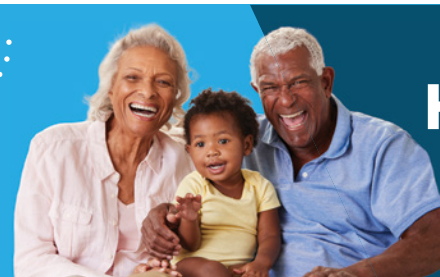
FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Manitoba Farmer Wellness, visit: <https://manitobafarmerwellness.ca>

How it started



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How it's going

SRSD Under Microscope with Budget Cuts and Teacher Losses Imminent

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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Following some intensely difficult months for every stakeholder in the Seine River School Division (SRSD), the provincial government has opted to take action by appointing a specialist to perform an internal investigation into the division's recently reported deficit.

The SRSD oversees schools in St. Adolphe and Île-des-Chênes as well as six other communities across southeast Manitoba.

The specialist, Vince Mariani, has worked as a chief financial officer in the public school sector for 35 years.

Mariani was appointed by Minister of Education Nello Altomare after Altomare met with the SRSD trustee board and senior administration on December 11.

According to a recent letter received by the division from Altomare, Mariani was given a deadline of January 31 to confirm the cause of the budget deficit, to review SRSD's procedures for budget preparation, and to make short- and long-term recommendations for the elimination of the shortfall.

At a public board meeting held in November, the SRSD board presented a rather dire report on the division's financial outlook.

While the board was initially led to believe that a \$3.1 million surplus could be realized by the end of the 2023-24 school year, a budget review this past July showed otherwise.

In actuality, the figures revealed a \$1.3 million deficit. Add to that new contracts with EAs and other groups, and the board had to face the reality of an estimated \$5.3 million shortfall by the end of the current school year.

According to provincial legislation, such a significant budgeting error needs to be communicated to the Minister of Education.

Since then, the SRSD board and



The SRSD board at a public meeting in January.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

senior admin have been tasked with the difficult job of determining where cutbacks can take place.

INITIAL CLAWBACKS DETERMINED AT JANUARY MEETING

Potential cuts and clawbacks became the focal point of the division's public meeting held on January 9.

"We need to cut about \$4 million out of our budget right now just to get to zero," trustee Van Osch explained. "So we have a choice. We can start looking at programs or we could lay off 40 full-time equivalent positions, which I don't think is going to happen because it's not going to make our school division feasible. So we have to look at programs."

Some of the programs recommended for discussion were Kids at Play (KAP), Kindergarten to Grade Four bussing, the divisional music program, and extracurricular activities.

In the end, the only definitive

budgeting decision made by the board was to claw back surplus funds held by nine of the schools in the division. These divisional funds were being carried over by schools, year to year, to assist them with grounds upgrades and maintenance.

Traditionally, schools have been allowed to carry over these surplus funds year after year, allowing them to build until such a day when larger expenditures are needed.

In some cases, parent advisory councils work alongside school admin to raise additional funds that are added to the grounds surplus savings when there is a specific goal in mind.

A report presented to council indicated the availability of almost \$135,000 in surplus funding.

Only \$50,000 of those funds had been designated for specific grounds projects.

After much deliberation, it was determined that the five schools who had presented specific project

goals would be allowed to keep their surplus. These include École St. Adolphe, Dawson Trail School, Ste. Anne Collegiate, Ste. Anne elementary, and Ste. Anne Immersion.

DIVISION ON SHAKY GROUND WITH TEACHERS

While the prospect of teacher layoffs has not been a topic entertained by the division board so far, the gravity of the situation has many teachers in the division worried.

Jonathan Waite is the president of the Seine River Teacher's Association (SRTA).

In recent weeks, Waite has offered the board some grave warnings about this staffing uncertainty.

A survey sent out by the SRTA last November to all its members revealed some shocking results. Out of some 350 members, 68 submitted a response.

"Of those members that responded, a not insignificant portion of them indicated that they would

be considering moving outside of the division," Waite told *The Citizen*. "[Thirteen of them] indicated that they would be seeking employment in another school division for the next year and 41 of them were unsure if they would be staying in our division."

That means that nearly 80 percent of those who responded have doubts about continuing their tenure as a teacher with the SRSD next year.

That doesn't bode well for the division, especially if non-respondents feel similar levels of discontent.

Waite says that he can't put a definitive finger on the reason for these responses, since the survey didn't allow for comments.

Even so, based on conversations with other teaching staff, he's confident that the number one concern teachers face is that impending budget cuts will negatively affect supports for their students.

"That has come through loud and clear in conversations that I've had with staff," Waite says. "They want to make sure that the needs of the students are taken care of. I can't imagine that [their response is] not related to the situation that might come for next year [due to] the budgeting process."

Facing this level of angst and uncertainty among SRSD school staff is a first for Waite, who has worked as an educator in the division for 23 years.

"My personal concerns is that, if people don't see short- and long-term stability and sustainability in the school division, and they decide to go elsewhere for employment, we're losing a lot of experience and a lot of great educators," Waite concludes. "If the assumption is that the system can absorb this level of stress and that dealing with the costs to run the system are more important than the system itself, I have a great fear that my members and I will find ourselves in a place for which there is no return."

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Some Things are Best Left to the Professionals!



Dean Delorme outside the new Santa Lucia Pizza in Niverville.

by SARA BETH DACOMBE

Santa Lucia Gets Off to Busy Start in Niverville

By Sara Beth Dacombe

sdacombe@nivervillecitizen.com

Santa Lucia Pizza is now open at 31 Main Street in Niverville. After renovation and utility hook-up delays, the takeout pizza place has been steadily busy.

“You have no idea what it takes to get something like this built,” said co-owner Dean Delorme before opening. “I was that guy. I had no idea. I’ve ran the stores. I’ve worked in the stores. But starting from scratch, it’s a lot.”

Delorme has a close friendship with fellow co-owner Kosmas Simeonidis. The Simeonidis family founded the Santa Lucia Pizza chain, which won Consumer Choice Award for Best Restaurant–Pizza Company in 2023.

Delorme, who lives nearby in Mitchell, brings with him 15 years in restaurant experience and had been considering retirement from construction

when the opportunity came to join his friend’s pizza business.

“I told my friend Kos I was going to retire early, and he said, ‘I’ve got a better idea,’” says Delorme.

After some research, the friends decided that Niverville would be the next location of a new takeout and delivery Santa Lucia location.

“It’s a beautiful growing town that feels like family,” says Delorme. “And Santa Lucia, we’re really one of the last mom-and-pop type shops left in Manitoba. We make everything from scratch and do prep the night before. We source our own meats and even make our own sausage called Brokenhead Sausage. It’s a family. We’re like family.”

Delorme is excited to become more involved in the community. Prior to opening the location on Main Street, he operated a Santa Lucia kiosk at Niverville Nighthawks game nights at the CRRC.

He now hopes to begin local pizza lunch programs where they’re needed in town, and more.

He says the Simeonidis family has a history of giving to local charitable organizations and they are looking forward to contributing community support wherever it is needed.

Meat, deli, and speciality foods will also soon be available at the location. Delorme invites everyone to come in for pizza and also check out the display cases for any meats and incidentals customers may be looking for.

There will be minimal seating for those who want to buy a slice and eat in. When the weather turns nice, they plan to have patio seating and host a grand opening event for the community.

While Main Street parking may be limited, Delorme wants to remind visitors that there is ample parking in the back of the building.

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Core Water Main Open House

The Town of Niverville is exploring the possibility of installing water mains in town where they do not currently exist.

If you are a homeowner not currently connected to town water, we want to hear your comments, questions, and concerns before making a decision.

The Town of Niverville will only move forward with this project if there is substantial buy-in from affected homeowners.

Details:

Core Water Main Open House
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IN BRIEF

Volunteers Seek Funding for Mobility Van

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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A group of five Niverville volunteers have banded together to help reduce transportation barriers for the community's seniors and those who are mobility-impaired.

Shirley Hoult says the volunteers were partly motivated by the federal government's initiative stating that all Canadians have the right to take full part in society.

The other motivation is the limited local availability of a wheelchair-accessible van.

When the committee started researching the possibility of purchasing vans, they contacted other communities. In the process, they discovered the Rural Transit Solutions Fund, a federal funding program.

This fund, Hoult says, promises to provide up to 80 percent of the cost of mobility transportation.

"This was an opportunity we felt should be taken," Hoult says. "Without this funding, any purchase of vans would be unrealistic."

By January 31, the committee hopes to submit their application to the federal government. The application will be accompanied by 11 letters of support from various community organizations and individuals.

They are proposing to purchase a pair of 10-passenger mobility vans and believe the application will be looked upon more favourably if they can demonstrate the plan's viability. smoking.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more or receive a pledge form, contact Shirley Hoult (0250shi@gmail.com).



Lucien Sylvestre of St. Adolphe is celebrating his 100th birthday.

DIAN SARASWATI

St. Adolphe Man Marks 100th Birthday

By Jennifer Lavin

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Lucien Sylvestre of St. Adolphe will be 100 years old on January 30. Turning 100 is surely an accomplishment, but Lucien's real accomplishment appears to be that at 100 years old he remains the patriarch of a large family filled with love and affection for one another.

Lucien was born on a farm near the hamlet of Bellegarde, Saskatchewan and served in World War II. After his service, he worked as a grain buyer for Saskatchewan Pool Elevators.

In 1948, Lucien married Noella Bauche from the nearby town of Antler, and together they welcomed six children into the world.

In the late 1950s, the Sylvestres bought a grain and cattle farm where they stayed until Noella became ill.

In 1997, they sold their farm and moved to St. Adolphe where their two eldest sons had raised their own families.

The couple settled into their new home well, but Noella passed away in 1998.

Lucien's granddaughter Joelle

recalls how the whole family took care of him during the years after his wife passed on. He would eat dinner at his son Dominique's house twice a week, at his daughter Joanne's house twice a week, and at Joelle's family home twice a week.

"But the best part of the week was Friday," Joelle says, "when we would all meet at his house and have traditional pizza night, all homemade!"

These days, one of Lucien's children, children-in-law, or grandchildren visits him every day. In the evening, Lucien and whichever loved one has come to visit that day will relax and watch baseball, football, curling, or hockey together.

Lucien has no health problems, doesn't require homecare, and is very independent. He credits his sharp mind and memory to the word puzzles he loves to complete.

And he credits his longevity to his family.

Residents of St. Adolphe may not know Lucien's name, but they will surely recognize him as he strolls the streets on his mobility scooter.

Towards the beginning of 2023, Lucien told his family that he'd like

to celebrate his centennial with a party. Ever concerned with the wellbeing of others, though, he suggested that it should be held in summer so the roads would be safer to drive on.

Lucien and his children began the planning process.

Because his two daughters live in Ottawa, it was Joelle who spent her evenings party planning with her grandpa.

"He knew exactly what he wanted," she says. "He wanted it at the Pioneer Hall at the community centre. He picked the menu. He wanted bottles of wine at every table. He made his invite list, [and] the list grew and grew... He made most of the decisions and left the rest up to us."

On August 6, 2023, 165 guests attended Lucien's party. Family members flew in from all across Canada, Belgium, and Australia for the big day.

"The day was amazing," says Joelle. "Along with a hot lunch, a few speeches (including my grandpa), a video montage, pictures, antiques on display, and even a life-sized cutout of him from his honeymoon in 1948, the love in the hall that day was so

heartwarming!"

On Lucien's actual one hundredth birthday, the family will celebrate again. They will gather at his house for Chinese food, cake, playing cards, and what's most important: spending time together.

"One thing I love about Grandpapa is the way his face lights up when anyone he loves walks into the room," says Maryse, another of Lucien's granddaughters. "He's always so happy spending time with his family. He's a very wholesome man!"

Lucien's grandson Zach says that his favourite thing about his grandfather is his inclusivity.

"He welcomes everyone into his home regardless of background or how little room we have left at the table," says Zach. "He welcomes the company and is always happy when someone walks in the door."

"My grandpa and I have always been very close," adds Joelle. "He's my rock. He's always there to listen, support... and he gives the best advice. He is the most patient man I know! We have always been a close-knit family and I attribute that to my grandpa. Family is everything to him and all of us."



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Sports & Recreation

Local Athletes Helping to Grow Speed Skating in Manitoba

By Sara Beth Dacombe

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Despite being part of the national culture of all-ages recreation in other northern countries, like Norway and the Netherlands, speed skating in Canada has long played second fiddle to other on-ice sports like hockey, ringette, and figure skating.

Southeastern Manitoba has a growing speed skating club with two new up-and-coming athletes who are excited to try to change that.

Mia Tetrault, age 12 from Ste. Agathe, and Willa Dowse, age 14 from Niverville, are proud members of Speed Skating Manitoba's provincial team.

Together, they aim to use their recent award-winning performances to enhance the profile of the sport locally—and encourage new enthusiasts to come out and try it for themselves.

YOUNG TALENT

Both Mia and Willa are relatively new to speed skating, though winter sports run strongly in their families.

Mia played hockey before she learned to speed skate. When her mom Cassandra, who is a master speed skater herself, saw how much Mia loved to skate, she brought her to an Eastman Speed Skating Club (ESSC) practice in Steinbach, where the club was located at the time.

"After my first time on the ice, I was hooked and wanted to join. I just loved it, and really loved the endurance component of the sport," said Mia. "You get to go so fast and there is always something to work on. It is also so satisfying to put everything you have into a race."

When the club relocated to Niverville in 2020, Mia and her mom continued to be involved with the ESSC. Mia advanced her skills, claiming a spot on the provincial team, and Cassandra continued to be involved with coaching, skating, and volunteering.

Mia now skates both short track and long track and has started to rack up some notable wins.

"Last year, I won all of the



Willa Dowse and Mia Tetrault.

RAY DOWSE

distances for my age class at Canadian Youth Long Track Championships in Fort St. John, B.C.," she says. "I also won all distances for my age class at the Canadian Western Short Track Championships in Saskatoon. We also brought home a silver medal in the team relay event."

Focused on improving on last year's milestones, the young athlete says that her goals for this season have been to improve technically and continue to get faster.

In January, Mia achieved a personal fastest time, bringing home a silver medal from a competition in Calgary. She is now preparing for the National Long Track Speed

Skating Championships, which take place on February 10 in Quebec City. From there, she has her sights set on the next Canada Games and as many national competitions as possible.

"A long-term goal of mine is to make the Olympics in short track and be the first Manitoban to do so," says Mia. "Also, I hope to transition to long track when I'm done with short track and make the Olympics [in that], too."

Mia's teammate, Willa, is also heading to Quebec City in February. Willa grew up playing many sports and learned to skate around the age of three. She tried ringette,

hockey, and figuring skating and found herself discouraged.

When she first tried speed skating in 2019, she enjoyed it but still didn't see herself pursuing the sport long-term.

When the ESSC moved to Niverville's Community Resource & Recreation Centre (CRRC), the proximity made it even more accessible. She kept finding reasons to continue with her training.

The number one thing that piqued her interest? She loves speed.

"I started getting faster and that made a difference," says Willa. "And then I felt like I could really do this

and go somewhere with it."

Aside from the thrill of high speed, Willa says that the close-knit and encouraging community has made her feel at home with speed skating.

"Speed skating is a community. Everyone knows each other and everyone is so encouraging and thoughtful," she says. "In my first year, I already felt like I fit in there and everything."

Willa says that she enjoys travelling with her team and really appreciates the opportunities she's gotten to meet notable people in the professional speed skating community, including Olympians Isabelle Weidemann and Ivanie Blondin.

"In Calgary, that's where the national team trains, we got to meet them," Willa says. "Especially, with Ivanie, my coach set up a whole dinner and we got to train with her. A lot of other people wouldn't have the opportunity to do that."

Willa took home two gold medals from the Calgary meet. She says the ice in Calgary made a big difference in her performance.

"In Winnipeg, we have an outdoor oval," she says. "With the wind and stuff, it's not as fast. But if you go somewhere with really fast ice, like Calgary, it does feel like you're flying."

Her experiences in Calgary have given her a lot of inspiration to work hard. Her progress is starting to accelerate, along with her personal best times.

"My goals for Quebec City are doing my personal best and being able to compete with the top girls in my age category. Last year I was definitely up there, but I didn't do as well as I personally hoped to."

The humble athlete would also like to encourage anyone with an interest in skating to come out and try it.

"Just try it. A lot of people don't know enough about it to give it a fair chance," says Willa. "Some people I would meet have never even heard of it. Take the opportunity to try it, and chances are you'll really like it."

Willa's parents, Ray and Cara

Dowse, are also keen to see the club continue to grow in Niverville, saying that it has been eye-opening to learn the sport and see how much the community has rallied around it.

"Willa had been skating since she was three [with ringette and figure skating]," says Cara. "She was a good skater, but we never felt the support quite like this."

Cara found the intergenerational aspect of the sport to be extremely positive, and possibly unique. It truly felt like a sport for everyone in the community.

"Something I found interesting is, like, it's for ages 4 to 70, so you literally have seniors in the club that skate for fun. It's not like that in any other club I know of," she says. "One of our Eastman club members is in his seventies and he is an amazing community volunteer. He zambonis the ice and volunteers at the oval in Winnipeg. And that's just one example... I mean, figure skating isn't really something you really do as an adult. But speed skating, we found out, was."

GROWING INTEREST

In Manitoba, anyone interested in speed skating typically gets involved in a local club. The ESSC was first established in Beausejour, then moved to Steinbach before relocating to Niverville.

"Ever since that move, it's been such an opportunity for that club," says Elizabeth Williamson-Derraugh, executive director of Speed Skate Manitoba. "They used to struggle with membership numbers, but now they're one of our strongest clubs. It's really great to see how the community has embraced that club. They do a good job



Eastman Speed Skating Club at the Western Canadian Outdoor Classic in Winnipeg.

RAY DOWSE

of offering a well-rounded program."

Reece Williamson-Derraugh is the provincial team coach.

"The development team is a bit more open, for those just looking for more ice time to get more exposure to more racing and development-specific coaching," says Reece, who coaches Mia and Willa.

Reece says that the two girls are a bright, shining example of what a community is capable of, not just because of their skills but because of what it means when families get involved.

"Speed skating is a small sport," he says. "Not in many sports do you have the opportunity for a seven, nine, twelve-year-old, and a mom and dad all involved doing something they love together."

Reece adds that the sport is important because it helps fill a gap in what is offered in terms of physical activity for all ages in the winter. Speed skating is rarely considered.

"We are winter athletics," he says. "Speed skating is another form of just getting out and being active and finding a way to have fun in

a Canadian environment... People think they have to wear a skin suit, a tight suit. You don't. You can wear anything you want and step onto these blades that are designed for gliding. You can wear padding. You can learn safely. You will go fast. That's what [the blades are] made for. I would just say, skate and be active in your community. You don't have to be a competitive member if you don't want to be. But speed skating could be great for you."

Elizabeth agrees that sometimes speed skating is seen, erroneously, as a niche or elite sport.

"The perception is that it's an elite sport, but it's accessible," she says. "You can start when you're 60 years old and still skate and enjoy it for another 20-plus years. I want people to know that it's not just an elite level sport."

One barrier to growth for the sport is the available ice and size of rinks in Manitoba.

Short track speed skating refers to the length of one lap (111 metres) and most hockey rinks, including what is available at the Niverville CRRC, provide this.

The Cindy Klassen

Recreation Complex in Winnipeg has a 400-metre oval, which qualifies as long track.

"Imagine a 400-metre running track of incredibly smooth ice," says Elizabeth. "It's made for skating laps. You can just skate laps, no sticks or pucks. You just glide. It's active. It's enjoyable.... And [Niverville] seems just a bit ahead of game when it comes to caring about its community and looking for ways to put in place what people will want and need for the future. I love to see that kind of commitment to what is best for people and their neighbours."

HOW TO TRY SPEED SKATING

On January 28, Speed Skate Manitoba hosted Skate the Oval at the Susan Auch Oval in Winnipeg, a public come-and-try-it type of event. These sorts of events are great opportunities to give the sport a try.

Looking forward, the 2024 Manitoba Short Track Provincials will be held in Niverville on March 3 and everyone is invited to come and watch. Also, a local come-and-try event is being planned by the ESSC for the spring at the CRRC in Niverville.



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Arts & Entertainment

Pet-Child Bond Inspires Children's Book

By Jennifer Lavin

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Allison Antonio has spent her whole life telling stories, but it wasn't until the birth of her son that she decided to actually write a story down and have it published.

Antonio was born and raised in Niverville and has lived here almost her entire life. She attended Providence University College, then got her Bachelors of Education at the University of Winnipeg.

Her husband Matthew is a youth pastor at the Niverville Community Fellowship and together the pair have one son, Wesley, who is the inspiration for her book.

Telling stories and working with children have always been passions for Antonio. While attending university, she worked as a substitute childcare provider at Growing Minds. Whether she was babysitting, working, or playing with her nieces and nephews, she was always telling stories.

"Growing up, I really liked Robert Munsch," Antonio says. "I loved that his stories made kids laugh with their silliness. I learned a little bit about Robert Munsch, and how in his stories he often wrote about a kid he knew. He would take a child's interest or something they said and turn them into stories. So that is something I would often do with the kids at daycare or school."

After Antonio got her degree, she began teaching in the Hanover



Allison Antonio with her son Wesley and dog Arthur, the inspiration behind her book.

PHOTO BY MATTHEW ANTONIO

School Division and found that her passion for stories was a perfect match for teaching her Grade One students how to read.

"It's so exciting to see the joy that kids have when they can read a word

on a street sign or in the hallways of the school!"

Over time, Antonio found another children's book author whose work she both enjoyed and appreciated—namely, Mo Willems.

"The simplistic drawings and expressive speech bubbles made Willems' books really accessible to my beginning readers," she says. "By the end of Grade One, they could pick up one of his books and read it all by

themselves."

After her son Wesley was born, during maternity leave, she noticed how attentive to him her dog Arthur was.

Arthur would proceed to follow Wesley everywhere, bring him a ball to play with, and put his paws up on the edge of the bathtub while Wesley took a bath.

Watching their interactions inspired her to write a book taking to heart the lessons she had learned from her two favourite authors, employing the silliness of Munsch and simplicity of Willems.

"What's a Wesley? is a story from Arthur's point of view as we brought Wesley home for the first time," Antonio says. "Arthur tries to figure out what a Wesley is, and why it sounds and smells so funny. The book goes through different guesses that Arthur makes about Wesley based on what he looks and smells like. For example, he smells Wesley's diaper and thinks it is a skunk. Included in the book is a list of sight words, comprehension questions, and pictures of the real Wesley and Arthur."

As Wesley and Arthur continue their lives together, Antonio hopes to write more books about their bond, with the pair exploring their world and learning about each other.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

What's a Wesley? is available at www.amazon.ca

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Local Artist Lights Up the Fairmont as New Artist in Residence

By Sara Beth Dacombe

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Local artist Dawn Schmidt is the new featured artist at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown Winnipeg. Although primarily a landscape painter, Schmidt's collection for the Fairmont blends a bold, vibrant colour palette with the lively study of Winnipeg's iconic places and historic streetscapes.

Schmidt debuted her collection at the private Fairmont Gold Lounge on January 17. Her work will now be displayed throughout the main lobby of the hotel and the Velvet Glove restaurant.

The residency also involves live painting events and exclusive meet-and-greets for Fairmont Gold guests. Schmidt's Fairmont residency concludes mid-April.

A LOCAL START

It has taken time for Schmidt to establish herself as a professional artist.

She lived in Niverville until the age of five when the family moved to Winnipeg. After becoming a self-proclaimed "city girl," Schmidt said she would never move back to Niverville—but things didn't turn out that way.

Along with her husband, Schmidt moved back to the town after they had children and realized they wanted to raise them in a rural environment.

"It's a funny thing and you get to eat your words sometimes," Schmidt says. "It was back when we'd had kids and they were younger and I thought we'd move and just stay awhile in Niverville and see how it was. And then we made it home."

Schmidt was the primary caregiver for her family. When the kids all entered school, she took a job at the Niverville NCU Manor in various caregiving and administrative roles before settling into events management at the Heritage Centre.

"Both my grandma and my oma were at the Heritage Centre at the time. So it was really fun to be seeing them daily. But planning weddings and event management was really a great stepping stone for me and I loved it."

While she had always been an extrovert, Schmidt felt a desire to explore her creative side.

She had begun to paint for fun, and to relieve stress, and realized that she wanted to take her art from a hobby to a more disciplined



Dawn Schmidt with one of her paintings at the Fairmont in Winnipeg. JUSTIN BRAUN

pursuit.

She started by taking painting classes at the Steinbach Arts Council (SAC), including in acrylic, watercolour, and abstract. She also joined a painting group that met once a week to support and critique each other's work.

The slow process of learning to paint reminded Schmidt of studying jazz music in university.

"In jazz, they tell you that you should learn by being inspired by the masters," says Schmidt. "First, before you could find your own voice in something, you sort of had to know how this thing worked. I don't know if that's how everybody does it, but for me, I didn't know how else to start."

STEPPING INTO THE LIGHT

Schmidt amassed a large volume of work and began to book herself as a vendor at local craft shows.

"It was great to talk to people, but it wasn't the right place for my art," she says. "People wanted to buy, you know, easy gifts. Crafts. Not the type of art I was there with."

When she realized it wasn't the right fit for her style of art, she applied to bring her work to Winnipeg shows dedicated to visual artists, such as Artarama, Local Colour, BrushWorks, and the Winnipeg Art Expo.

"I found I had a passion for that. I loved it. I was creating way more than I was selling, because I couldn't stop creating work."

Schmidt also began visiting art galleries for visual stimulation.

In 2018, she visited the Pulse Gallery in the Johnson Terminal at The Forks in Winnipeg and found herself chatting with owner Lesly Dawyduk, who asked to see some of her work.

Dawyduk then offered her a spot as a guest artist, enabling Schmidt to show a small collection of pieces at the gallery. And the paintings began to sell.

From the guidance she received at Pulse Gallery, Schmidt was able to refine both her art style and business model.

"Lesly really believed in me. She really saw something in what I was doing."

Pulse Gallery features diverse, ever-changing collections of artwork, created by established artists as well as new and emerging talent. Schmidt was supplying scenic landscapes.

"I grew up in the prairies, so it was fields," she says. "And we went to the lake a lot, so it was Canadian Shield. It was rocks and trees. Or yellow fields... I think in the gallery at the time, they didn't have an artist that was really doing that one thing. So it was a good fit."

From sun-kissed lakes to winter evergreens laden with snow, Schmidt's work makes an impact with its depth of field and shadow. Using contrast, she has been successful in bringing light to the forefront of a piece.

"I would say I am visually attracted to light and where light comes from and how it reflects. And how it makes something glow," she says. "There's a million ways in which light reflects. It's in the shadows and in the depths. There is so much complexity and beauty and I love trying to analyze that. Like, how can I make that come to life on a canvas?"

In 2023, as demand for her paintings began to increase, she quit her job in property management to focus on producing more pieces in new styles. She takes

commissions and is always willing to try new subject matter, including a recent collection of cityscapes featuring the Winnipeg Exchange District.

"My goal this year was to be accepted into the Manitoba Society of Arts and into the Federation of Canadian Artists, which is in Vancouver. And so I've now been accepted into those. And once you get accepted, then there's chance to do more shows."

CREATING BRAVELY

Even though she finds her recent accomplishments affirming, Schmidt is humbled by her acceptance in the art community.

"I've had lots of rejections, too," she says. "You end up feeling like you're not good enough and you look at other people's art and you go, 'I'm just a baby at this.'"

Schmidt knows that many creative people don't receive the accolades they should.

"You can be a great actor and not get big parts in TV shows. Or you can be an artist and be overlooked. You just have to believe that you're worthy of doing this... and it's worth putting out there just to see what you can see happen to it in the world."

It can take a lot of bravery to make art and Schmidt credits some of her creative bravery to a choice she made to pursue gaining self-confidence.

She recommends the book *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. Cameron helps her readers harness their creative talents and skills, removing artistic blocks and fostering confidence.

"What this did was open my heart to believe that I had all of this inside of me," says Schmidt. "But I think life tramples some of it out of you, or maybe your art teacher told you you were terrible, or your parents said you're not creative, or other outside forces spoke things into you so you felt like you just couldn't. This book helped my heart to see that I was worthy of it. And I was."

Schmidt says that her way of seeing the world is intensely personal and that when she struggles with self-doubt, she only tells herself to paint one more painting.

"It's about taking it one step at a time, in life and in art. And sometimes I ask myself, 'What can I do?' I can do one more painting. And I put that out into the world. And then you know what? I can do one more painting."



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