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LOCAL NEWS

Local Man Loses Thousands in Scam

■ A sophisticated e-transfer scam cost one local resident thousands of dollars in a fake buy-and-sell transaction. We have the details.

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LOCAL NEWS

Law Enforcement Raises Alarm Over Rising Rats of Sexploitation

■ In an effort to promote awareness about keeping young people safe online, the RCMP have been sending officers from the Internet Child Exploitation team to high schools.

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LOCAL NEWS

Sibling Intensify Push for Debbie's Law

■ A local family is drawing attention to system gaps in the health-care system, including a proposed law to effect key changes.

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SPORTS & REC

National Volleyball Tourney Draws Acclaim

■ In March, the Providence Pilots women's volleyball team hosted the CCAA National Women's Volleyball Championship.

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The Niverville Nighthawks Claim Their First Turnball Cup

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2026 Municipal Election: Open Seats and How to Get Involved

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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Every four years, at election time, municipal governments either go through a shuffle or stay exactly the same, and it's up to the voter to decide what happens.

On October 28, seats are up for grabs on Niverville's and Ritchot's municipal councils. Some mayors and council members are choosing to run again. Others are stepping away to make space for new faces and ideas.

Last year, the mayor of Ritchot, Chris Ewen, announced his intention to step down in the fall. He will have served as mayor for nine years.

Niverville's mayor, Myron Dyck, says that he plans to run again. So far he has sat on council for 18 years and hopes to do so for at least one more term.

As for Niverville's other councillors, Bill Fast has confirmed that he won't run. Council members have until August to make a definitive decision.

With at least one guaranteed position opening up on each council, residents should be considering the opportunity. It's also not too soon to tap the shoulders of fellow community members who might be a good fit for a role on council.

Municipal elections are regulated by the province and nominations officially open six weeks prior to election day and run for one week.

Nominees need to collect 25 signatures from fellow local residents. Those who sign a nominee's papers aren't making a commitment to vote for them but rather indicating support for the candidate's decision to run.

In order to be considered, all nominees need to register with the municipality's designated Senior Election Official, typically someone who already holds a position in local government. This official can provide the details in terms of costs involved in running a campaign and rules regarding fundraising and donation acceptance.

There is much to consider before deciding to run as a candidate. Perhaps the biggest is the time commitment. Weekly council meetings can be time-consuming, especially when big decisions need to be made. Council members should have the flexibility to manage both daytime and evening meetings every month.

At least once per year, budget planning sessions can take days. As well, councillors are typically expected to sit on boards that are extraneous to their governmental role.

Not to be overlooked are the variety of events a council member is expected to attend throughout the year. These might include fundraising galas, grand openings, chamber of commerce AGMs, and the like.

While it's okay to run for council with an immediate agenda in mind, Mayor Dyck says that it shouldn't be a person's primary motivator.

"We welcome people that have an interest in wanting to serve the community," says Dyck. "When you're in municipal government, it's not about money and it's definitely not about power. It is truly about giving back."

Be prepared for respectful debates to occur around the council table, he says, and for

the possibility that things may not always move in your favour.

It's imperative, too, that council members demonstrate magnanimity and resilience in the face of public confrontation, because it will happen.

"You have to be prepared to understand why something is being said and how it's being said without having your feelings hurt," says Dyck of the job of a councillor. "Having said that, we are a team. And when one gets a little more bloodied and has some stripes on the back, we do rally around and support [one another]. Council is a safe place to express yourself."

For some, remuneration may make the difference between running and not running. In both Ritchot and Niverville, council determines their own salaries and rates of increase.

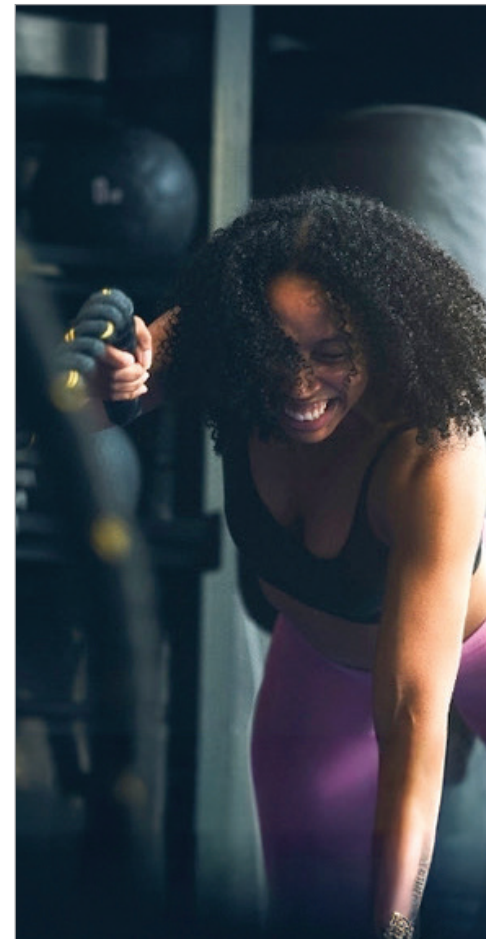
Niverville's mayor receives an annual salary of just under \$30,000. Councillor salaries run just under \$20,000 per year.

In Ritchot, the mayoral salary is closer to \$50,000 annually while the councillors receive about \$28,000.

Different levels of remuneration and per diems are available for travel and meeting attendance outside of the normal realm of activity.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- To learn more about municipal elections, visit: www.gov.mb.ca/mr/mfas/election.html
- To contact the Town of Niverville: feedback@whereyoubelong.ca
- To contact the RM of Ritchot: info@ritchot.com
- Details about Niverville's election and important dates: <https://www.whereyoubelong.ca/municipal-election-2026/>



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Hot Topic, Supportive Space: Menopause Event Lands in Niverville

By Brenda Sawatzky

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On May 20, a new event is coming to Niverville that asserts itself as the hottest night in town. It's called "Still Hot" and its aim is to shed light on, and encourage conversation around, a natural phase of life: menopause.

Hosted at the Heritage Centre and organized by Life Culture, it's the second such event organized specifically with menopausal women in mind.

The first was held in Steinbach this past February.

"The event in February was very well received and it just spoke to the need that women have in this season of life," says Susan Penner, executive director of Life Culture. "We want more information and just to be validated in what's going on [in our bodies]."

Penner says that she first realized the need for an event like this while having a conversation about her own life on social media.

"I'd done a reel on Instagram, kind of joking about my experiences with menopause and how menopause can be wild," Penner says. "It was supposed to be just

a fun thing, but I got tons of responses from women who are going through this too."

Her team at Life Culture wasted no time creating a memorable event that would highlight keynote speakers, include a Q&A period, and foster a supportive atmosphere for women in or near this stage of life.

Within hours of the Steinbach event going public, Penner says that the ticket sales exceeded their original venue capacity, causing them to plan for a larger centre.

Even with an updated capacity of 200, it still sold out.

On the heels of that event, the menopause conversation will continue in Niverville.

The local event, revolved around sharing dessert with like-minded ladies, is geared for women between 40 and 60 years of age, although all women are welcome.

The keynote speaker this time around is Dr. Dornubari Lebari, who runs a professional menopause clinic in Winnipeg.

"Her reputation and expertise speaks to how much she cares about women in this season of life," Penner says.

Jacqui Broesky, a sports nutrition coach and professional power lifter, will

provide insight into managing menopause symptoms through nutrition and strength-training.

"I anticipate that the ones [who attended in Steinbach] might send their friends or bring their friends to this event," says Penner. "It's a super fun girls night out, but also informative."

As to why menopause information seems to exist in a desert, Penner is unsure. It's clear, though, that the average general practitioner hasn't been trained to inform or guide women through it.

"I believe that that's beginning to change. Women are demanding it. A third of us are in this stage of life, perimenopause and menopause, and we need to address it and be treated for it."

Life Culture, a nonprofit based out of Steinbach, has been around since 1975. It began as the League for Life Steinbach chapter and has since evolved into its broader scope.

They provide services geared towards women, such as foster mom support, pregnancy and infant loss support, support for single moms, and divorce care.

"We just have this mission of supporting women through every season of life."

Alzheimer's Society of Manitoba Kicks Off 2026 Awareness Walk

By Brenda Sawatzky

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The last remnants of winter have faded and the Alzheimer's Society of Manitoba (ASM) is encouraging everyone to get outside and walk—more specifically, to walk in the IG Wealth Management Walk for Alzheimer's.

Since 1993, the ASM has been inviting people to join their annual fundraising campaign and assist them in delivering the needed tools and resources to the more than 20,000 Manitobans affected by dementia, plus their families and caregivers.

These resources include one-on-one support, education sessions, and dementia-friendly programming.

This year's fundraising goal is set at \$315,000.

In total, seven Walk for Alzheimer's events will take place around the province throughout May and June.

Assiniboine Park's Lyric Theatre will be the location for the Winnipeg walk on Saturday, May 30 at 10:00 a.m. Steinbach will host theirs on Sunday, June 7 at 12:30 p.m. at the K.R. Barkman Park.

More than just a fundraising campaign, the Walk for Alzheimer's provides an integral opportunity to connect Manitobans facing the same



The Alzheimer's Society of Manitoba is gearing up for their 2026 awareness walks.

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dementia challenges and show them that they aren't alone.

Last year's event drew more than 1,300 walkers across the province.

"Too often, people navigate a dementia diagnosis all on their own," says ASM CEO Erin Crawford. "The Walk really helps you to see that thousands of Manitobans are being impacted by the exact same thing at the exact same time. Nine Manitobans per day are diagnosed. Those people will be so much better off if they can see their community showing up for them."

Crawford says that the number of dementia sufferers is expected to double by 2050. Across Canada, close to 800,000 people are estimated to be affected.

This total doesn't include the

caregivers and family members who help navigate this frightening disease.

In reality, virtually every Canadian is currently being touched, or will eventually be touched, in some way.

While it's generally considered a disease of the aging, certain dementias already affect adults at midlife. For instance, frontotemporal dementia, which was actor Bruce Willis's diagnosis.

"It starts to develop probably already in our twenties and thirties," says Crawford. "We just don't see the full impact of it until much later."

Alzheimer's is still the most common dementia diagnosis. First signs usually include short-term memory loss, although a certain cognitive foginess with age doesn't necessarily point to the presence of the disease.

Signs to watch for, Crawford says, are acts of thoughtlessness: dressing improperly for a weather condition or putting the toothbrush in the refrigerator.

Disorientation is another common factor, often resulting in situations where the sufferer loses their directional bearings in a location that should be familiar to them.

A person's communication skills might also suffer. This could manifest in someone struggling to formulate a cohesive sentence.

Behavioural issues could arise, such as when a gentle-natured person becomes suddenly and unexplainably aggressive.

Regardless of symptoms or degree of impairment, the ASM is there with guidance, support, and education

to help manage life in the best way possible.

Some of the funding raised by Alzheimer's Societies across the country also goes to helping fund research.

"There have been some really exciting developments in terms of treatments," says Crawford. "We have, for the first time ever, disease-modifying therapies."

Unfortunately, she says, the drugs may not be broadly accessible to the average person for some time. As well, they need to be started at a very early stage of development.

Just the fact that they exist, though, is cause for hope that further therapies will follow.

Treatment is only one part of the equation, she adds. More research is taking place in terms of lifestyle shifts to help avoid dementia in the first place, including the effects of diet, exercise, and social connection.

"There is still a frustrating lack of knowledge in understanding and treating dementia, and really moving the needle significantly. That just tells us how important it is to keep going."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ To register for the Walk for Alzheimer's: www.alzheimer.mb.ca/wfa

■ To learn more, visit the ASM on Facebook (@AlzheimerSocietyManitoba) or Instagram (@alzheimermb).

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Local Man Loses Thousands in E-Transfer Scam

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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Sunday, April 19 began quite normally for Keith Pearce of St. Adolphe. But that all changed when Pearce discovered he'd been scammed out of \$6,000 in an online buy-and-sell transaction.

For Pearce, it was a spring-cleaning kind of weekend as he sorted through items in his garage. He'd posted an ad for some stereo equipment on Kijiji, a platform he'd used many times before.

In no time, he received a reply from a potential buyer, wondering if Pearce would hold the item if a \$100 e-transfer deposit was sent.

He agreed. What could go wrong?

"I've bought and sold things on Kijiji and Marketplace and dealt with e-transfers for a long time," Pearce says. "I've done dozens and dozens of transactions that way. This didn't seem abnormal whatsoever."

Soon a notification came to his email that the e-transfer had been sent. As always, he opened the email and clicked on the TD Bank option, since that's where he banks.

Having prearranged for auto-deposits, the transfer should have ended up directly in his preferred account.

"Something in the back of my mind said, 'Something is off here.' It was taking a long time to process. Normally an e-transfer takes seconds. There was a screen that popped up that said 'Do not close this window. This transaction might take a few minutes.'"

The transaction did finally complete, but that little niggling feeling caused Pearce to check his bank account online for some immediate reassurance that the money transfer was there.

Instead of receiving the \$100 deposit, what he found instead was that a total of \$6,000 had gone missing from his accounts.

Pearce had a \$3,000 daily e-transfer limit set up on his accounts, which likely saved him from losing even more that day.

"I didn't have \$3,000 in

my [primary] account, but he was able to go into my line of credit and do an internal transfer from there to my [primary] account and e-transfer that out."

The theft didn't end there.

A second e-transfer of \$3,000 had been successfully carried out from another of Pearce's accounts.

Immediately Pearce contacted the TD Bank fraud investigation department to report what had happened. His accounts were subsequently frozen and his bank cards cancelled.

By Monday, on a visit to his local branch, the only information the investigation could provide so far was that the money had been transferred into a BMO account in an undisclosed location.

"That money is probably in Somalia buying someone a Mercedes Benz," Pearce says ruefully.

If he's thankful for anything, it's that he listened to that little voice inside his head that had him verifying the money delivery.

Had he not, he believes the thief would have been back in his accounts on Monday stealing whatever else he could.

Pearce has since been in contact with the RCMP where he was advised to shut off his phone until it could be professionally inspected for spyware. An IT tech soon assured him that it was free and clear.

Pearce provided the RCMP with the name and phone number used by the e-transfer sender.

Still, with a scam this sophisticated, it's not likely they'll leave a trail for anyone to follow.

The incident has left Pearce feeling both shocked and let down by TD Bank, a major financial institution that claims to have security protocols to ensure a safe online banking experience for its clients.

At the very least, Pearce believes that clients of Canada's banking giants deserve warnings when this kind of security breach happens, but he won't be surprised if they choose to keep it in the proverbial vault.

"Somebody has developed a program that goes in the



Keith Pearce of St. Adolphe.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

back door and into your account," he says. "[The scammer] didn't ask for my PIN or password or anything. I just gave him the email address."

Going forward, he says, he'll only be accepting cash for items sold online.

HOW SCAMMERS DO IT

For Pearce and many others who rely on e-transfer money exchanges, this type of theft comes as a complete shock, especially given that our banking institutions assure us that they've got top-notch security protocols in place to protect clients.

"Never ever, ever click on a link that is supposed to initiate an e-transfer."

Michael Jensen | Cybersecurity expert

But for all the hype placed around creating strong passwords and setting up multifactor authentication, cybersecurity expert Michael Jensen says that it's not enough.

And he should know. Jensen, who lives in Ste. Agathe, has impressive credentials in the area of cybersecurity. He's gained some of his most significant experience helping to prevent cyber breaches at top intelligence agencies, such as the Department of National Defence.

Understanding how to prevent victimization is made easier with an understanding of how the criminals

accomplish it in the first place.

For experts like Jensen, Pearce's victimization, while tragic, isn't new. In fact, cybersecurity gurus have a name for it. They call it a "token session theft" with an "adversary in the middle" (AiTM) approach.

Putting that in layperson's terms, every time you log in to your online bank account, or any account requiring a login, such as Amazon or Walmart, the bank (or company) provides you with a session token.

This session token allows you to close the window

momentarily and then get back in without having to re-authenticate. It's essentially like showing your ID at the door of a nightclub and not being required to show it again if you briefly step outside.

If a scammer can find a way to intercept your token session, that's called token session theft. Having momentarily usurped your session, while you and your bank are unaware, the scammer becomes the adversary in the middle.

"The way these scams work is they get you to log in first, steal the session token from your computer,

and perform what's called a replay attack," Jensen says.

A replay attack simply means they've gained access to your authentication data and then retransmitted it to the source—in Pearce's case, TD Bank—allowing them to impersonate you in an online banking transaction.

When Pearce noticed that his e-transfer was taking longer than it should, Jensen says that this was the scammer at work, using his token session. For a skilled attacker, it doesn't take long to move funds, grab what they can, and disappear.

But according to Jensen, there was more at risk for Pearce than just bank account theft.

"If he had also been logged into Amazon at the time, and had his credit card attached, and if the thief was set up for it, they could have stolen those session tokens, too, and made purchases against his credit card."

PROTECTING YOURSELF

First and foremost, Jensen says that the best way for anyone to protect themselves is to never fully trust technological controls. Human controls will trump them every time.

Next, he says, it's imperative that people stop accepting e-transfers in traditional forms.

"Never ever, ever click on a link that is supposed to initiate an e-transfer," Jensen says. "What the scammers are doing is they're sending links that are very well designed, like websites that mimic Interac. When it hits your email, it looks like a legitimate e-transfer. Unless you're very schooled on what you're looking at, you don't know how to check the digital footprint."

If you're going to use e-transfer, Jensen strongly advises setting up the auto-deposit function with your bank.

"If you're having to open an email and then choose your banking institution, that's not auto-deposit because it's not depositing automatically."

For those with true auto-deposit, when they receive an e-transfer, the notification generated will simply inform them that a

transfer of a specific amount has been deposited to their account. They don't need to open an email or click on a link to direct the transfer to their bank.

If you have auto-deposit set up and you receive an email that requires you to open it and click on a link to accept, it's a scam. Further, when a potential scammer sees that you have auto-deposit set up, their opportunity for token session theft has been foiled and they'll generally just move on.

Another way to ensure that you're protected is by always being the initiator of any e-transfer. Just as everyone has the ability to send an e-transfer, online banking options also include the ability to send a request for an e-transfer.

So if you're selling an item online and someone wants to send you an e-transfer, let them know that you'll initiate the money transfer process.

"You'll have to get their email address, but you'll be initiating the transfer from your end, so you'll know that it's legitimate," Jensen says.

The final piece of advice Jensen has for those using buy-and-sell sites is to never trust a request to hold an item with a deposit. Nine times out of ten, it's a scam.

"The number one thing people can do if they're doing a transaction on a [buy-and-sell site] is meet in person in a police station parking lot," Jensen says. "People don't like that answer, but it's not just good for cyber safety, it's good for physical safety. There's been reports of people being assaulted at [general] meetup locations. So go to a police station."

It's been a week since Keith Pearce was scammed, and so far he's received no indication that TD Bank, the police, or various fraud departments are making any headway. He's not fooling himself into believing he'll ever see the money again.

Shortly after the incident, Pearce also noticed that a portion of the text conversation between himself and the scammer, then posing as a buyer, had been erased. Somehow the scammer was successful in covering his tracks there too.

CITIZEN POLL

Who should bear the most responsibility for preventing e-transfer scams?

- Banks. Since the scams are targeting the banks' online platforms, the banks should be responsible to ensure their security.
- Users. We all bear a collective responsibility to be savvy in terms of spotting and preventing these scams before they occur.
- Government. Our elected leaders must pass legislation to better protect citizens from this type of exploitation.

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

VOTENOW AT
www.nivervillecitizen.com

LAST MONTH'S RESULTS:

Given the dramatic spike in the price of gasoline in recent weeks, would you be more likely to consider an EV for your next vehicle purchase?

Yes. EV technology interests me, and it would be a relief not to have to worry so much about price volatility.

29%

No. I have concerns about the practicality of EVs and prefer to stick with a gas-powered vehicle, even if it costs more to operate.

71%

YOUR COMMENTS:

I don't think EVs are practical in locations like Manitoba where we use heat all winter and A/C all summer. This would definitely impact on the distance you would travel between charges. I'd hate to be stuck in a snowstorm with an EV. Many have experienced this in Canada this winter.

No. The cost of EV vehicles need to be significantly reduced to be more competitive in the market. Also be careful of Chinese vehicles. They will use our network to spy on us and steal our information.

The problem with EV vehicles is they don't have the range that is needed in our climate and there isn't the hydro electric and charge stations are far and few between. Nor can our power grid handle it all.

Fossil fuels are used in the production of EVs. As long as industries need oil for manufacture and production, EVs will be just a tiny step towards meaningful change.

Electric vehicles have hidden issues, like the fact that more coal-fired electric plants are being built to supply electricity. Some people cannot comprehend this fact.

It is my understanding that Canada does not have the infrastructure to properly support vehicles and the chargers are susceptible to petty theft. I would need more than government subsidies to drive an electric vehicle.

I have had a plug-in hybrid for more than a year now and it's been nothing but great.

I think with the technology that exists today, hybrid vehicles are best suited to our cold winters.

IDC Residents Tired of Policing Construction Vehicles

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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Living next to a development that's under construction has always had its downsides. In the name of growth and progress, many homeowners conclude that it must simply be endured on occasion.

But residents of Île-des-Chênes along Rosybloom Lane, immediately north of the new Oak River Meadow development, say that nobody should have to put up with the sorts of frustrations they're going through right now.

Steven Petznik is one of these homeowners. On Wednesday, April 22, he and several neighbours met face to face with Ritchot's council, hoping for assurances that something will be done.

Rosybloom Lane forms a half bay that will eventually transform into a complete bay once the street is finished within Oak River Meadow.

Ever since the new development plan was introduced to the public, Petznik and others along Rosybloom had their concerns. One was that their quiet residential street would become a construction vehicle thoroughfare.

They were reassured, at the time, that trucks would be required to use other accesses, two of which lie along Old Highway 59.

Unfortunately, someone missed the memo. Petznik says that his street has been a construction vehicle expressway for the better part of seven months now.

"We had asked for barricades and signs to be erected," Petznik told council. "We started talking about this



The dead end on Rosybloom Lane in Île-des-Chênes.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

last October and it took until February 12 to get concrete barricades put in place."

The barricade was installed at the very end of Rosybloom, around a bend where it will connect to Oak River Meadow.

A small sign at the opening to Rosybloom indicates that it's not a through street but that sign poorly visible.

According to Petznik and his neighbours, the barricade has done nothing to reduce construction traffic along their street. In fact, it effectively doubled traffic, since the heavy-duty vehicles that enter are now forced to back out along the entire length of Rosybloom in order to reroute.

"We're talking fully loaded cement trucks, multiple of them every single day," Petznik said. "We just saw a full semitruck with what looked like a 53-foot flat deck behind it. I've seen a pump truck hit the ditch

[on my street] because they had to back all of the way out. This is a big safety concern."

Petznik says that he's been reaching out to the RM and the developer since last fall, asking for a remedy, to no avail. He's seen no additional policing or ticketing and heard of no fines being issued to the developer. Seemingly no one is being held accountable.

It wasn't until Petznik reached out to Concrete Manitoba that he finally felt heard. Still, their advice left the problem squarely in the hands of Rosybloom Lane residents who were being asked to submit photos and license plate numbers of the trucks in question.

"We're not the police," Petznik said. "This isn't our development going in behind us. This is the developer's issue. It should be the RM's responsibility, as well, to

support us."

After Petznik requested a personal delegation at Wednesday's council meeting, a couple more signs appeared near the entry to Rosybloom, indicating a different access from Old Highway 59.

Petznik says that he's seen some improvement since that time.

A neighbour of his also stood before council, frustrated with the immediate dangers this issue has posed for children on Rosybloom, including his own, of whom the youngest is three.

"At what point will this get taken care of?" he asked. "Will one of my kids have to get hit before somebody steps in?"

Council listened attentively to the delegation of neighbours and agreed to address the issues raised with the Oak River Meadow developer, Terracon.

IN BRIEF

Niverville RCMP Arrest Wanted Criminal and Charge Sleeping Driver

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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March has been a busy month for the Niverville RCMP detachment. Over the course of just a few hours last month, wanted criminals were arrested and impaired drivers were safely taken off the roadways.

On March 23, at approximately 8:00 p.m., officers responded to a report of a parked vehicle in the middle of the north-bound lane of Highway 200, just north of the Ste. Agathe turnoff.

RCMP found the vehicle stopped in the dark without lights on, creating a traffic hazard. Two female occupants were found sound asleep.

They woke the driver, a 42-year-old woman from Emerson, and immediately noted signs of impairment, leading to her subsequent arrest. At the St. Pierre-Jolys detachment, a Breathalyzer test confirmed that her blood alcohol level was more than twice the legal limit.

The driver's license was suspended and her car was impounded. She faces a court date of May 15.

On March 24 at 1:00 a.m., the RCMP responded to a commercial alarm on Fernwood Way in New Bothwell. The business owner reported having witnessed a male suspect enter his property in an attempt to steal equipment.

Upon departure, the owner and another party followed the suspect to Road 33E near Zhoda, where a confrontation took place. Police arrived and arrested 20-year-old Ryder Broesky from Sundown.

At the time, three separate warrants were out for Broesky's arrest, all related to property crimes in the RM of Hanover, Niverville, and Winnipeg. The vehicle driven by Broesky had been reported stolen by the Falcon Lake RCMP in early February.

Broesky was released with conditions and a court date has been set for April 27.

A Labour of Love: Ritchot Builder's 1929 Essex Earns Top Honours

By Brenda Sawatzky

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For nearly 50 years, Winnipeg's World of Wheels show has been an annual tradition among car enthusiasts. This year marked the debut for one Ritchot man whose car drove away with not one but two esteemed titles.

Brad Neufeld is the owner of a 1929 Essex Super Six custom roadster. On March 22, his vintage beauty took Best in Class as well as Most Outstanding Hot Rod, an award of the International Show Car Association.

To qualify in the roadster class, Neufeld says, a car must have the characteristics of a convertible without the rollup side windows.

"I bought it when I was 19 years old, living in Transcona," Neufeld says. "I didn't touch it again until I was probably about 35 years old. Kids and sports and business, they came first. And then there were times when it sat in my shop for five or six years at a time without being touched."

The problem for a lot of creative car rebuilders like Neufeld is that they never have just one project on the go. In the last few years, though, Neufeld decided it was time to get hyper-focused if any of those projects were to reach the finish line.

Last summer, Neufeld proudly rolled the Essex into its very first car show at the Morden Corn & Apple Festival. Out of about 400 vehicles on display, the Essex won Best in Show.

It's the kind of recognition that means a lot to a custom designer and builder like Neufeld. Out of the vehicle's mechanical, electrical, body, and interior components, not one piece was outsourced.



Brad Neufeld wins big for his 1929 Essex Super Six custom roadster at Winnipeg's World of Wheels.

LOIS NEUFELD

What he didn't know, he learned. Everything was done with slow, methodical precision.

"I ordered Italian leather and then I bought myself an antique sewing machine and taught myself how to sew last winter," Neufeld says of the vehicle's custom upholstery.

Even the final paint job, a part of the process that few rebuilders would dare tackle, was done by Neufeld in a special paint booth he created in his home workshop.

Although the Essex has a range of fully unique features, Neufeld decided to remain true in terms of the paint colour. He found a portion of the body that still had a bit of factory paint, then had the colour analysed at an autobody supply store.

Upon discovering that the

colour was called Lorilei Blue, Neufeld was more convinced than ever of his choice. After all, his daughter is named Lorilee.

Growing up in St. Vital, Neufeld remembers the thrill of working on a custom car project with his father in the family's single-car garage. On weekends, the duo ventured off to car shows or to watch Neufeld's uncle race at Keystone Dragways near Ste. Anne.

At the age of 13, he purchased his first project car, a 1934 Chevrolet Coupe. With his dad's help, Neufeld was driving around in his own classy wheels by the time he hit 16.

Since then, Neufeld's owned a range of project and classic muscle cars, including Corvettes, Chevilles, GTOs, and old pickups.

Today, alongside the Essex,

seven more vehicles await their turn for restoration. According to Neufeld, he'll need to live to 120 to get them all done.

So he's busy passing his vintage restoration passion on to the next generations. His son has his own workshop and projects on the go. Neufeld's two grandsons, at five and three, are his latest protégés.

"My grandsons are just nuts about cars, so we started on a 1926 Chrysler truck," Neufeld says.

For now, Neufeld is enjoying the fruits of his labour and expects to keep the Essex as a showpiece, at least if his family has anything to say about it.

"I've never built a car for awards or trophies," he says. "I build them as a hobby. It's an expensive hobby unless you do everything yourself. Just don't count your hours."

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IN BRIEF

Ritchot Council Discusses Park and Grocery Store Land

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE
REPORTER

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The RM of Ritchot's April 8 council meeting agenda was a busy one.

Based on a report provided to council by the recreation committee, progress is being made on the D'Auteuil Park playground upgrades. At this stage, a new play structure is on order with an expected installation date of June.

"Our recreation services team teamed up with 377 Kindergarten to Grade 6 students from IDC School and Gab-Roy to let kids help shape the future of D'Auteuil Park," the report says. "Students were given three playground design options and after lots of excited discussion, they voted for their favourite. Classes really dug into what makes a great play space, talking about accessibility, fairness, and how all kids play differently. Their pride in having a real voice in the community was amazing to see."

Also pertaining to Îles-Chênes, council voted unanimously in favour of selling a small triangle of municipally owned land for a potential grocery chain. The parcel is located along Old Highway 59 next to the community daycare.

"We are looking to sell it off to Highway 59 developers who own the rest of the land," CAO Shane Ray told council. "Their plan is to help the Clearview Co-op establish a grocery store there. It's a huge need for the community that I think we all believe is very important."

The parcel will be sold for \$42,400.

First steps for IDC's new

fire hall are also about to get underway. Council is working with TC Energy to secure land for its construction.

"We are looking at Colliers to walk us through the process of what would be the best build method," Ray said.

Hiring consultants early would allow administration to decide whether the project method should be design-build or design-bid-build.

Councillor Janine Boulanger shared her concerns that the scale of the project doesn't appear to match the scale of the planning.

"I can see it for a hospital or a school," Boulanger said. "Those are the kinds of things where you've got so many balls in play."

"I don't want to make mistakes," Ray countered. "We don't know if we need an architect or just a single company who's going to build it. So this process will help us determine the next step."

As to the scale of the project, Ray reminded council to consider future growth in the region and the need to build to a scale that will accommodate growth.

"I think we need to look at living quarters there, potentially," Ray said. "And we need to think about whether it's going to turn into a full-time fire house... One of the things that the fire department is saying is [that] this needs to be built to hold a ladder truck, because at some point in the future we're going to go over three-storey [builds]."

Councillor Joel Lemoine suggested that an advantage may be found in researching other fire hall projects around the province.

Council agreed to table the project until further investigation has been done.



Constable Joanie Duguay and Corporal Emmie Clements make a presentation at Niverville High School

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

RCMP Internet Child Exploitation Unit Visits NHS

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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To promote education about keeping young people safe, the RCMP have been sending officers from the Internet Child Exploitation team to high schools across Manitoba.

On April 8-9, Niverville High School students sat in on a series of presentations from Corporal Emmie Clements and Constable Joanie Duguay about what they see every day as part of their jobs.

They emphasize that when you share intimate pictures online, even on apps that feel secure, it's important to understand that they are stored somewhere in cyberspace—and they're stored indefinitely.

According to Clements, that includes apps like Snapchat, whose whole premise is that shared photos and videos disappear.

Unfortunately, Clements says, that's not how it really works. She knows this better than most, because investigators like herself track intimate photos and messages every

single day.

She says there's a simple rule of thumb to follow to prevent the shame associated with being exposed online.

"Don't share any pictures that you wouldn't want your parents to see," said Clements.

A student in the audience reinforced this message with a personal story.

He shared a headshot of himself on an app called Doppelganger where viewers can comment on whether you look like someone famous. Months later, he decided to run a search for his own images online and was shocked to discover the same candid photo of himself had been posted on an obscure site created for sexual purposes.

In cases like this, Clements said, victims should report it to cybertips.ca. Investigators can ensure the photo is removed and the site is flagged.

Kids also need to keep their social media settings set to private. Passwords should be difficult to hack and shared only with parents. As well, location trackers should be turned off.

"There's websites, open to

the public and not spy software, where I can [find out] your map location, where your privacy settings are, what you shared, at what time, and [from what] location," Clements said.

The duo further emphasize the importance of not accepting friend requests from unfamiliar accounts.

It's a well-known practice of predators to send out friend requests to teenagers using fake profiles. Once accepted by one person, the predator has access to every person on that person's friend list.

These predators use grooming techniques to coerce intimate photos from their victims. If the victim is female, Clements says the perpetrator will usually blackmail them for more explicit pics. These photos likely end up on child pornography sites.

Male victims are equally at risk. The victim is typically blackmailed by someone posing as a young female in order to gain something of monetary value, like e-transfers, gift cards, or gaming tokens.

To send an unsubtle message to anyone requesting

male genital photos, Clements suggests sending an image of a naked mole-rat, a rodent that bears some likeness to the human appendage. It's quickly becoming a symbol of non-participation, she said.

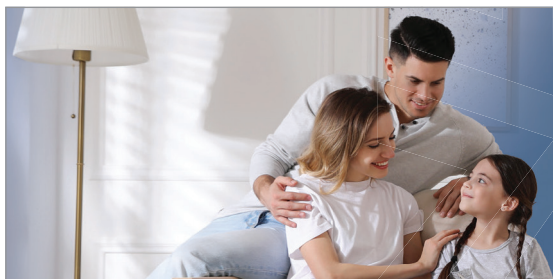
If a youth has already shared intimate information, Clements and Duguay say that it's imperative to block the perpetrator and send nothing further. Then they should tell a trusted adult or the RCMP.

"You're not alone," Duguay said. "If you're embarrassed, we understand. But we've seen it all. For us, it's our work and we're here to keep you safe."

The perpetrator may not be a random stranger. Clements says they encounter cases where the offender lives in the same home as the victim.

"If you guys find a camera in your washroom at home, that is not safe," Clements said. "Report it. Call 911 and someone will show up very quickly."

They also remind youth that it's illegal to possess intimate pictures of an underage person, even if the photos were unsolicited. Sending messages which could be



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construed as luring is also a chargeable offence, regardless of a person's age.

"We don't like to charge people who are under 18," Duguay said. "We want you to have a good life. But if we have to, we will."

Sexual offences in Canada, she says, are taken very seriously and follow a person into adulthood. Criminal records can prevent a person from pursuing jobs where they might be in contact with children. That includes the fields of law enforcement, medicine, and education.

RISING SEXTORTION RATES

In recent months, law enforcement in Manitoba has been raising the alarm on rapidly rising reports of sextortion.

Equalling concerning is the fact that the victims are often children and youth.

The goal of the sextortion perpetrator is to gain power over their victim for the purpose of a monetary payout.

The pattern often begins with a social media friend request from someone posing as a young male peer. A relationship develops and trust is built. Eventually, the perpetrator solicits nude images from the victim which, when provided, become a tool for bribery.

Failing to pay or send further images leads to threats about releasing the images to friends and family.

Sextortion can also occur within a domestic relationship where one person in the romantic partnership puts the other in an emotional hostage situation.

"Like other police agencies, Manitoba RCMP have noted an increase this decade in the number of reports of sextortion," says RCMP Corporal Mélanie Roussel. "This problem seems largely due to networks or pockets of bad actors, with offenders more often than not located in foreign countries, aiming to extort and exploit individuals for financial gain."

According to the Winnipeg Police Service, they received 223 reports of extortion last year alone, the majority being

complaints of sextortion. The number has been building year after year since 2020 when only 19 cases were reported.

Winnipeg-based Canadian Centre for Child Protection (CCCP) reports similar findings based on information left on cybertip.ca.

According to the CCCP, the number of reported sextortion victims across Canada has gone from 458 in 2020 to a whopping 2,827 in 2025.

Considering the level of shame that arises from this kind of exploitation, it's safe to assume that the number of actual victims far exceeds the reports. Other cases go unreported because victims are unaware of the resources and supports available to them.

For this reason, local law enforcers are working harder than ever to raise awareness and encourage people to get educated.

WHY SO MANY FALL VICTIM

According to a spokesperson for the CCCP, much responsibility for the sextortion epidemic belongs to the prevalence of the internet in kids' lives and the heavy use of Snapchat, Instagram, and Discord, or gaming platforms such as Roblox. These platforms have few guardrails to keep kids safe from predators.

But why do so many young victims fall prey to requests for intimate image sharing? That's another question altogether.

Meagan Walker, former executive director of the London Abused Women's Centre, says that her decades of experience helping exploited women and girls provides some answers.

"In a culture saturated with pornography, women and girls are pressured to conform to a hypersexualized image to gain attention or risk becoming invisible," Walker said at last month's Joy Smith Foundation annual gala. "And being invisible, to a young person or a child, is the very worst thing that can happen to them. The pressure to fit into our society means you have to do whatever you can to be popular."

This societal framework, she says, sets the stage for perpetrators of sexploitation.

"[Perpetrators] don't need anyone to do the work for them," Walker adds. "Society does it for them."

REPORTING AND PREVENTION

First and foremost, the key to getting help when you've been victimized is recognizing that you're not alone. Then it's imperative to report your situation to authorities so the criminals can be stopped before they have a chance to victimize others.

For minors, the RCMP can take statements and provide support without parental involvement.

"You are in control, as the victim and police will only do what you are comfortable with," reads a statement on the RCMP website. "They can get you set up with emotional supports, and they can help you try and get your images deleted from the internet."

As well, victims can call Crime Stoppers anonymously and report incidents.

It's important to immediately block a suspected perpetrator by locking down your social media accounts. Don't accept any new friends. Be sure to save any communications you've had with the extortionist as well as images you sent them.

There are signs to watch for if you're unsure whether someone should be avoided online. Check the length of their friend list and how long they've had the profile. If it's new, the RCMP say, it's a scam.

Do their photos lack a variety of candid shots in different settings? Run a reverse Google image search to see if theirs are stock photos or have been stolen from someone else's profile.

If they make excuses to avoid a video chat, it could be a red flag. You might ask them to send a photo of themselves holding up a paper with a codeword of your choosing.

Of course, the safest bet is to avoid sending nude images of yourself to anyone. Unless you're in a relationship with

someone you're confident is trustworthy, don't allow them to take nude photos of you.

As a parent, your best line of defence is to have these conversations with your child on an ongoing basis.

Also, parents need to make sure to monitor their internet use and ask questions about their online friends.

It's also important to be aware that, under Canadian law, even minors can face legal consequences if they possess intimate images of other minors, regardless of consent.

The same is undoubtedly true of anyone owning a device—like a parent, for example—where intimate images of a minor are being received or sent.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more, visit: <https://rcmp.ca/en/bc/safety-tips/online-safety/what-to-do-sextortion>



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This year's winners of the Niverville Chamber of Commerce Business Awards. Back row: Evan Wachtendorf, Will Elliot, and Jenn Elliot. Front row: Ron Parent, Stephanie Comte, and Maxine Carels. Not pictured: Dustin Krahn.

BY BRENDA SAWATZKY

Niverville Businesses Honoured with Annual Chamber Awards

By **Brenda Sawatzky**

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

✉ bsawatzky@nivervillecitizen.com

On April 10, the Niverville Chamber of Commerce hosted its biggest event of the year: the annual general meeting and awards night gala. The event saw four very deserving businesses and individuals honoured with awards.

Taking the prestigious Business of the Year award was the Niverville Heritage Centre, with CEO Ron Parent accepting on the organization's behalf. This award goes to a local business that provides significant employment opportunities, demonstrates sustainability, and actively supports the community.

Atelier Cycle was selected for the 2026 New Business award, which celebrates a fledgeling business that's making a strong impact on the community. Accepting the award were owners Maxine Carels and Stephanie Comte.

The Outstanding Customer Service award goes to a business that works at building knowledgeable staff who go above and beyond for their customers. This year's winner was Sparkline Autoworks. Owners Jenn and Will Elliot, along with staffers Evan Wachtendorf and Cody Sawatzky, took the stage to accept the award.

Finally, Dustin Krahn of Excel Graphics was this year's deserving recipient of

the Alex Fast Sr. Award. The award, named in honour of one of Niverville's founding business owners, recognizes a business leader who dedicates time and money to support the community while promoting it to others.

Krahn is longtime president of both the Niverville Fair committee and the Niverville Curling Club. He's also a founding member of the Niverville Nighthawks and *The Citizen*.

The Chamber of Commerce awards gala was held in the atrium of the Niverville Heritage Centre. Dignitaries in attendance included MP Ted Falk, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Lisa Naylor, MLA Ron Schuler, and Niverville mayor Myron Dyck.

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Niverville Residents Seek Reassurance on Group Home Proposal

By Brenda Sawatzky
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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Local residents filled the gallery of Niverville council's ad hoc meeting room at the Centennial Arena on April 21. They came seeking answers and to demonstrate cautious support for a group home initiative being proposed in front of council that night.

The property in question is a single-family dwelling located at 225 Third Street North.

Presenting on behalf of the proposed group home was Jeff Daly, CEO of Simaril, a nonprofit dedicated to offering personalized support services for individuals with physical, intellectual, and mental health disabilities.

It was at the province's recommendation, he said, that the idea for an adult group home in Niverville arose. Simaril's funding model relies fully on provincial support.

"We came and had a look around and then purchased this house with the purpose of converting it to a home for people with wheelchairs," Daly told council. "There would be three people living there and we would have 24-hour staff [onsite]."

Simaril will hire locally to provide yard and home maintenance year-round. Three residents have already been selected by the province for the home. Two currently live in the Niverville area with parents who are no longer able to provide adequate support. One group home resident would be moving from Winnipeg.

"One of the goals that we have when we establish homes is to make it a lifetime home for people," Daly said. "We generally don't have a lot of people moving in and out."

Mostly, he says, the tenants will be middle-aged or older.

A mother from a nearby Third Street residence asked how loosely and broadly the term "disability" is used in the case of this group home. She indicated that the street had many children of all ages.

The people qualifying for a Simaril small group home, Daly



Jeff Daly, CEO of Simaril, address Niverville's council on April 21.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

said, can have varying levels of physical and intellectual ability. Some are able to go to jobs. Others are completely incapacitated by their condition.

Importantly, all are monitored around the clock by a care worker assigned specifically to them.

"Our only concern was whether this would be a space for people struggling with addiction issues," a second resident said. "And if they are approved for this, would they have flexibility in the future to shift the scope of care they provide to people with addiction issues?"

There's a big difference between general disability care and addiction care, this resident said, especially when it comes to how each would affect the quality of a residential neighbourhood filled with young families.

To that, Daly replied that Simaril does, in fact, provide housing services for people struggling with addiction issues. These are called cluster homes.

However, cluster homes exist only in larger centres where

treatment is close at hand. He assured residents that this model would never be undertaken in a community the size of Niverville.

Further to that, cluster homes are unlicensed facilities with six or more bedrooms, whereas a three-bedroom single family, as is the house on Third Street North, requires annual inspections and licensing by the province.

Council, too, provided assurances that, should Simaril attempt to open another group home on a different lot, a separate conditional use permit would be required.

As well, Niverville has no zoning bylaw that would allow for an addiction centre to become a reality at this stage. A bylaw would need to be created if someone were to apply for such.

"We came here under the premise that we felt Niverville was a great place for people to be able to be in their wheelchairs, out on the street, enjoying the community," Daly said. "It's a nice town, it's growing, and it felt like it had a good vibe. We're a sophisticated

organization that doesn't just do things on a whim. We have a board and we do strategic planning. We're audited twice a year. We have all kinds of restrictions. It's not something that's freewheeling, arbitrarily picking places to land."

"From a council perspective, we really want everyone to feel that they can belong here," said Mayor Myron Dyck. "So from a person's physical needs to their neurodivergent needs, to their emotional and mental needs, we're looking to provide additional services so that all people believe this is a place where they can belong."

Council voted unanimously in favour of the group home on the condition that staff parking be maintained onsite and that their provincial licensing remain in good standing year after year.

CAO Eric King recommended that council look at better defining group homes and treatment centres in the future. As well, the various zones that would feel like a comfortable fit for each one, should future requests arise.

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Province Announces Highway 311 Funding and Transfer of Ownership

By **Brenda Sawatzky**

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

✉ bsawatzky@nivervillecitizen.com

On April 17, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Lisa Naylor paid a personal visit to Niverville to make a big provincial funding announcement.

The government has designated \$9.65 million towards the reconstruction of Highway 311. The balance of the cost-share agreement, which totals \$17.65 million, will be funded by the Town of Niverville, as well as the developers who hold real estate on either side of the highway in the reconstruction zone.

With the design work nearly complete, the project is soon ready to go to tender. A start date on construction is expected later this year.

Continuing in the vein of this provincial and municipal partnership, the province will turn over full responsibility for this section of Highway 311 within town limits to the Town of Niverville at the completion of the project.

Construction, in its entirety, will include 3.5 kilometres of roadway from 100 meters west of Wallace Road all the way to Fifth Avenue on the east end of town.

The section from Wallace Road to Arena Road will undergo a major reconstruction, including widening to create four lanes as well as turning lanes.

A roundabout will be installed approximately halfway between Wallace and Krahn Roads.

Plans also include significant upgrades to drainage and side street connection points with improved signalization, potentially in the form of traffic lights at the corner of Krahn



Minister of Infrastructure Lisa Naylor and Niverville mayor Myron Dyck.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

and Highway 311.

The project will then continue along the entire stretch of Main Street from the railway tracks to Fifth Avenue with a resurfacing of the existing asphalt.

"The [project] will contribute to a smoother surface for those travelling

to Jette Studios and other local businesses," Naylor told those gathered. "As well, it will significantly improve safety."

Mayor Myron Dyck welcomed Naylor to the community and offered heartfelt gratitude for the funding promise.

"With the redesign of this highway and the roundabout that will be at our western border, this will be the landmark that forever welcomes the individuals that come into our community," said Dyck.

In terms of new business and growth on the western end of the

community, there's still much to come, Dyck added, some of which he is as yet unable to share.

"There is a lot of interest in the community and in the couple of years it will take to build this [roadway] we will see significant investment in business and in housing," said Dyck. "A population that is currently 8,000, in ten to 15 years' time, it will be closer to 15,000 to 20,000, and we will be Manitoba's newest city."

Gordon Daman, economic development advisor to Niverville, indicated that today's announcement is the culmination of years of hard work and advocacy on behalf of the mayor, council, and administrative staff.

"Infrastructure, at its best, is not just about what we build," Daman said. "It's about what it allows us to become. It allows communities to grow, but more importantly to grow well... The goal is not simply growth for the sake of growth. The goal is to build communities that are sustainable, resilient and that continue to serve the people who call them home."

Once Niverville has been awarded stewardship of Main Street, from Sixth Avenue to Wallace Road, the town will assume responsibility for road maintenance, traffic authority, and future improvements. The province will continue to take responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the community's traffic signals.

"This project reflects our shared commitment to supporting growth, safety, and long-term infrastructure needs in Niverville," Naylor concluded. "We look forward to continuing this strong partnership."



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Ritchot's Council Presents Budget 2026

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

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The RM of Ritchot's council presented its new budget on Wednesday, April 15, with council voting unanimously to accept it.

The financial plan proposes slightly increased spending while maintaining last year's property tax mill rate.

CAO Shane Ray opened the meeting with some stats. Based on the most recent data, the RM's population comes in just shy of 10,000. The municipality includes about 2,700 private dwellings on 322 square kilometres of land.

"The preparation of the corporate budget is one of the most critical initiatives undertaken by administration," said Ritchot CFO Muhammed Zaman. "It acts as a fiscal plan that provides the resources required to make progress toward achieving community [direction] and council priorities."

Preparing for any new budget begins early in the year as the various municipal departments are invited to make their financial needs known.



CAO Shane Ray, Mayor Chris Ewen, Councillor Janine Boulanger, and Councillor Jason Bodnarchuk.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

From there, the CAO and CFO outline the budget details and present them to council for feedback.

Then the municipality tax levy can be established.

In 2026, the tax assessment value of properties in the RM comes to \$950 million, up 2.8 percent from last year.

In order to determine the amount of property taxes required, administrators must predict the revenue that will be collected through other sources, such as government grants, permit fees, and rental income.

This year, council estimates this potential revenue at almost \$9 million, making up 40 percent of their required revenue.

Another 23 percent of this year's revenue will come from RM reserve

funds, some of which are acquired from the RM's share of the landfill.

The balance, which comes to 37 percent, must be made up through local taxation. This amounts to \$6.4 million, which is \$200,000 more than last year.

Since 2025 resulted in higher property assessments overall, council determined that last year's mill rate of 7.95 could be maintained in 2026.

Operating expenditures for 2026 are budgeted at \$22 million, 14 percent higher than last year. This includes the costs of running a municipal government, equipment to maintain infrastructure, protective services, daycare operations, economic development, and recreation and cultural programming.

Council anticipates some new expenses this year as a result of the municipal election.

As well, upgrades are needed in public works transportation and equipment, as well as arenas and recreation facilities.

Capital projects planned for this year will cost the RM almost \$11 million, much of which is anticipated to come from government grants.

These projects include stucco replacement and outdoor electrical installation at the St. Adolphe daycare, the construction of a fire hall in Île-des-Chênes along with new equipment, a new landfill site, and a variety of improvements to many of the RM's parks.

In terms of utilities, the water

treatment plant will be upgraded and a new well site study performed.

When all is said and done, the 2026 budget leaves a reserve fund of just over \$5 million.

At the end of the budget presentation, Mayor Chris Ewen provided some closing remarks.

"We continue to see a hold on the mill rate, which is always a positive for the taxpayers," Ewen said. "Still, we're seeing overall improvements and business development continue to happen. Recreation is one of the strong contenders in the RM of Ritchot as well as continued growth, without having to push those taxes further and further like we're seeing other municipalities have to do."

Ewen also spoke about council's justification for maintaining the property tax mill rate even in years of increased assessment values.

"I don't think we should ever see a lowering of the mill rate," he said. "That's never a good thing. You don't see your groceries ever go down... I think the same should apply for the mill rate. We just take advantage of the assessment value going up and implement that for a positive outcome."

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Siblings Intensify Push for Debbie's Law in Response to System Gaps

By **Brenda Sawatzky**
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On Wednesday, March 18, siblings Colleen Dyck and Daniel Fewster found themselves in front of news cameras again, drawing fresh attention to a policy initiative they call Debbie's Law.

For this brother and sister, it felt like a step backward. Almost one year ago, Debbie's Law passed second reading in the Legislature—no small feat, since only four percent of new bills make it that far. It received a standing ovation.

Since then, though, the bill has gained no traction.

Fewster and Dyck have also made some startling new discoveries about the reality underlying Manitoba's cardiac care system.

"There's two things going on at the same time here," Fewster says. "Debbie's Law being rejected by the government, which is troublesome, and then the system being worse than we thought it was."

The siblings helped draft Debbie's Law with the help of SecondStreet.org, a public policy think tank. The bill was created a few months after Fewster and Dyck lost their 69-year-old mother to heart failure while she awaited a surgery date that never came.

With three blocked arteries, Debbie Fewster died eight weeks after being told she should wait a maximum of three weeks.

Debbie's Law would compel local health authorities to ensure that patients are informed when life-saving treatment cannot be provided within the medically recommended timeframe. Doctors would be required to advise alternatives, such as out-of-province treatment.

Over the past months, the siblings have had more than one in-person meeting with Health Minister Uzoma Asagwara. They were also invited to meet directly with the administrators of the cardiac unit at St. Boniface Hospital, the team whose job it was to provide Debbie Fewster's treatment.

Here, they learned some shocking truths about human error, antiquated policy, and poorly functioning systems.

DEBBIE'S CASE AND SYSTEMIC FAILURE

While excessive surgical wait times are a reality in Manitoba, it turns out that this wasn't the cause of Debbie's death.

In the end, the siblings were told, it was human error. A surgical booking form had been improperly filled out and misfiled, meaning that her file wasn't flagged as urgent.

Although this is shocking, the duo show grace in acknowledging that hard-working, well-meaning medical staff can make mistakes that sometimes result in grave outcomes.

A lawsuit, Dyck says, wouldn't solve the issue.

It's not the people that are the problem, she points out. It's the policy and systems under which they must work, and only change at the governmental level can fix that.

For starters, the siblings say that the cardiac care system is missing key safety nets.

"The [cardiac administrators] were lamenting to us that they had to operate the cardiac unit on Excel spreadsheets," Dyck says. "We were aghast at that. We said, 'Surely there must be a better way. You can't rely on an Excel spreadsheet to track all these patients in critical care. You could lose someone through the cracks so easily.'"

Fewster and Dyck were also



Siblings Daniel Fewster and Colleen Dyck.

BY BRENDA SAWATZKY

told that at least one policy of the COVID-19 era remained in effect: a written directive suggesting that unless a patient's heart condition is such that they require immediate hospital admission, a 180-day wait period for treatment is permissible.

Communication between health authorities is also a major concern. As a resident of the Southern Health-Sante Sud region, Debbie's death would have been documented by them. The cardiac team at St. Boniface, though, weren't made aware of Debbie's passing and she remained on their list until Fewster and Dyck went public with their complaints.

EFFECT OF DEBBIE'S LAW

Following meetings with Minister Asagwara, a number of things have changed, including a healthcare directive that is said to have gone out regarding patient care.

For the siblings, though, a directive isn't enough. Unless Debbie's Law passes into law, it won't have its intended long-term effect and could be rejected by future

governments.

More recently, Bill 27 was introduced in the Legislature, outlining amendments to patient care protocols, some of which Fewster and Dyck say echo conversations they've had with authorities.

One positive clause in Bill 27 relates to the responsibility of the system to provide patient advocates, bridging the chasm that exists between surgeon and client. Before, patients like their mother had no direct way to get their questions answered or see where they stood on the wait list.

This model has been used by Cancer Care Manitoba for ages, Dyck says. She's unclear why it hasn't been adopted by all urgent care departments.

Despite its value, the siblings say that Bill 27 falls short.

First and foremost, there's a need for candid conversations to take place between surgeons and patients about the true level of risk. This should be followed by a list of options to empower the patient, including information about other treatment centres that might be able to provide quicker response times.

Dyck and Fewster say that the practice of sending patients out-of-province for treatment used to be routine.

"The [government is] very resistant to anyone leaving Manitoba to get care," Dyck says. "We're wondering if they're actually more concerned about protecting the system and protecting profits than actually protecting people."

Another deficiency in Bill 27 is its lack of interest in tracking statistics and monitoring outcomes. For instance, the bill doesn't require the healthcare system to monitor how many patients die before treatment can be provided, a key indicator that could prompt improvements.

Bill 27 also has a clause that precludes any need for administrative accountability.

"A failure to comply with this Act does not give rise to a cause of action or other claim or to a proceeding in any court or before any body or person having the power to make decisions under an enactment," states the text of the bill.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Dyck and Fewster are especially appreciative of Kathleen Cook, the Progressive Conservative healthcare critic, who has taken up the torch for their cause. They say it's thanks to her outspoken endorsement in the Legislature that Debbie's Law got as far as it did.

Once it was voted through second reading, Debbie's Law went to committee for a chance at further review.

According to Fewster, committee members have 100 days to speak to the bill and recommend amendments. If it isn't debated and passed during that time, the bill dies and the

process must begin again.

As of this March, Cook has renewed her push in the Legislature for Debbie's Law to be considered. The siblings are now calling on the public's help to keep this issue from dying a second death.

"If the province is going to have a monopoly on healthcare, then the standards for that healthcare have to be so high," Fewster says. "If they're going to force us to use their system, then they can't have a broken system. That's a violation of the social contract."

According to MLA Ron Schuler, the very best way for the public to force change is to inundate the government with emails, letters, and phone calls.

"They track [these public communications] in the premier's office," says Schuler. "At some point in time they say, 'It's getting to be painful. We want to do it. Let's put it through third reading and pass it.' People getting engaged and lobbying their government officials has a huge impact."

Dyck and Fewster are convinced that there are plenty of people out there who have been directly hurt by shortcomings in Manitoba's medical system. Already hundreds have reached out to tell their stories and ask for advice.

"Canadians are among the most heavily taxed citizens in the developed world, and healthcare is central to that social contract," Dyck has written on social media. "When patients die in waiting rooms, and cardiac units are reduced to tracking care on spreadsheets, that is not a medical failure, it is a government one. It is time to put people first and solve problems with urgency and competence, not allow them to be buried in slow, bloated bureaucracy. Government must do better."



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Manitoba Budget to Reduce Grocery Costs and Offer Other Direct Savings

By Brenda Sawatzky

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Manitoba's Finance Minister, Adrien Sala, introduced the upcoming year's budget on March 24. The financial plan is said to focus on creating good jobs, lowering the cost of living, and finding new ways to improve the healthcare system.

One key strategy, with the potential to affect every Manitoban, is a promise to eliminate the provincial sales tax on all food items. This measure will come into effect on July 1.

NO PST ON LUXURY FOOD ITEMS

This new tax break is aimed at food items once categorized by the provincial government as luxury items. These include candy, pop, chips, baked goods, and all prepared foods, such as rotisserie chickens, preassembled salads, prepared sandwiches, and deli meals.

Basic or essential groceries, by contract, such as meat, produce, eggs, and milk, have already been exempt from PST for quite some time.

Non-food items, such as toilet paper and toothpaste, will continue to have PST applied.

This move is expected to cost the province approximately \$32 million annually.

At the same time, the government is promising to continue digging deeper into the cause of grocery inflation.

"We're going after the big grocery chains with everything we've got," Sala said. "We're cracking down on the property controls that grocery companies use to freeze



DEPOSITPHOTOS

out competition so they can charge you more."

HEALTHCARE INITIATIVES

This year is expected to bring more healthcare improvements.

In the last two years, Sala says that his government has been responsible for hiring 4,054 new healthcare staff, adding 384 fully staffed hospital beds, opening 145 new beds in personal care homes, and increasing doctor numbers by 317.

The majority of those doctors are practicing in rural and northern Manitoba.

This move, Sala says, has taken

Manitoba from the worst spot to the best spot in the country when it comes to the ability of Manitobans to access a family doctor.

Currently, two new emergency rooms are being built, at the Victoria and Eriksdale Hospitals.

At the same time, the province is expanding and building personal care homes, with a new one coming to south Winnipeg.

"The [Conservatives] built none in seven years," Sala says. "We'll build one for every year we're in government and we'll keep that commitment going."

Also new in this year's budget is

the promise to improve St. Boniface Hospital's cardiac unit to the tune of \$22 million.

The funding will establish a centralized care unit, add 18 beds, and have a cardiologist ready to assess patients complaining of chest pain without delay.

Improvements are also coming to women's health. South Winnipeg will soon be home to a new menopause clinic with funding directed toward women's heart health and ovarian cancer research.

"We will always defend a woman's right to choose and protect safe access to abortion," Sala

adds. "This is the Manitoba I'm proud to raise my daughters in."

CHILD CARE, AFFORDABILITY CREDITS, AND FREE PUBLIC TRANSIT

"When it comes to families with the lowest incomes, we're doing what no government has ever done before," said Sala. "We're making childcare free for parents who need the most help."

At the same time, he adds, the NDP plan to open 21 new childcare locations across the province this year.

City-based youth and children will also benefit from the elimination of public transit costs.

Some homeowners and renters are about to see increases to their affordability tax credits. Municipalities will see funding increases, too, in the hopes of assisting communities to develop local public safety measures.

Finally, for the third year in a row, farmers and producers will benefit from a freeze on crown land leases.

According to Sala, Manitoba will have the lowest deficit-to-GDP ratio anywhere in Canada, even with new spending planned for 2026.

It's also a time, he says, when Manitoba's economic future is looking bright.

"Canada is looking to the port of Churchill as an answer to the questions we face in this new world order. It's an answer that's been here all along, a trade route known to the [Indigenous peoples] for centuries. We are, after all, a maritime province with the port of Churchill as our gateway to the arctic and the rest of the world."



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Residents of Ste. Agathe Vehemently Oppose Housing Proposal

By Brenda Sawatzky

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

✉ bsawatzky@nivervillecitizen.com

On April 22, Ritchot's council chambers were filled with a large contingent of impassioned Ste. Agathe residents. All of them stood in opposition, either complete or in part, to the 16 duplex-style homes being proposed for a small tract of land to the west of Samoiset Avenue.

The municipally owned 1.29-acre plot was offered by the RM to any developer who could provide the best affordable housing solution for this vacant land.

In March, council accepted the proposal of Schinkel Properties, assuming a suitable development agreement could be reached. This development agreement will also define whether the land will be donated to the developer in the end.

In so doing, council tentatively turned down an offer by NuVision Design for the construction of nine senior-friendly housing units with garages.

The sentiments shared by many of the Samoiset homeowners at Wednesday's meeting was that there simply isn't room for 16 homes of 1,400 square feet each to be constructed here, unless they're built two or three stories high.

If that's the case, they said, it could actually inhibit seniors from living there because of the need for staircases.

While the developer proposes driveways that can accommodate two or possibly three vehicles per unit, these residents say that parking will invariably leak out onto the street.

"We're not against there being more residential opportunities for



Ritchot's council hears from a delegation of residents concerned about a housing proposal in Ste. Agathe.

✉ BRENDA SAWATZKY

our community," one resident told council. "But we shouldn't just slap something together because it's a good financial opportunity."

"Seniors' housing would be more appealing," her partner added. "Especially because, with that [other] proposal, there were less units. That would open up the space, allow for less traffic. Adding 16 units with two cars per unit, that's 32 cars to add."

He added, as well, that if council wants to make good use of the land, perhaps it would be better served in ways that would benefit the entire community.

"I think there's other places in the community where residences can be built and this plot of land can be used for something else, such as a dog run or a park. There's a school nearby, but during the school year my kids can't play there because they don't go to school there. So we're having to walk quite far to go to a park to play."

Installing a community garden was another suggestion raised.

One Ste. Agathe resident said she'd inquired with the RM about this option for the land in 2023 and never received a reply.

"Other people I know said that would make an amazing opportunity," she said. "It's not going to make you any money, but it would create community and that's what Ste. Agathe is all about."

Still another resident suggested that council consider that the land might need to be utilized by the province when they eventually make improvements to the very dangerous intersection of Highways 75 and 305.

"We're taking away a chance to improve that corner because this parcel is right south of that intersection," he said.

Another point for consideration raised with council was the lack of access to the property for construction vehicles. Invariably, they said, it would come down Samoiset, a narrow street with children at play. Even further, the condition of the street is

such that heavy traffic would break it down further.

Mayor Chris Ewen pointed out that the agenda of this Wednesday public meeting was simply to vote on whether the lot can be used for a multifamily development, not to determine the type of development going in there.

He recommended that, should the project move forward, Ritchot's newly appointed Community Safety Officer patrol the area during construction to ensure that worker vehicles don't block or restrict Samoiset residents.

"We've heard a lot of this before," Councillor Janine Boulanger told council. "Not in my backyard. That's a quote that we hear all the time. But I have to kind of agree that it does apply here. It does seem like an odd piece [of land] to be developing this on."

She wondered, too, whether reconsideration should be given for public greenspace if a local committee were to get behind it.

On the flip side, she added, there is a desperate need for housing across the nation, which is why council started to consider this option in the first place.

"Canada's in a crisis," Boulanger said. "Nobody can afford a house. Nobody can afford anything. This is one of those opportunities that we felt could help alleviate that. But is this the right location?"

Councillor Shane Pelletier recommended to council that the decision be tabled until they had an opportunity to review their recreation master plan.

"I don't think that the developer would be opposed to getting pushed back," said Pelletier. "But, as we all know, building costs go up pretty much every quarter these days, so that could be a sticking point."

Councillor Jason Bodnarchuk agreed and recommended taking it one step further by asking the developer to provide an open house for Ste. Agathe residents in the meantime, for the purpose of answering questions and alleviating concerns.

The follow-up meeting is set for July 15 at 7:00 p.m. While the public hearing portion of this meeting officially closed, CAO Shane Ray indicated that there would be further opportunities for public input if a development agreement were to be reached.

"It's really heartening to see this many people here engaged and interested in the community and wanting to speak on behalf of it," Ray told those gathered. "I take this as a very positive thing, so I thank you. We're having conversations with the developer right now, so some of the things that you brought up are things we will most likely bring forward."



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The Niverville Nighthawks Claim Their First Turnbull Cup

By Bill Burfoot

In just their fourth year as a franchise, the Niverville Nighthawks have made history, topping the Manitoba Junior Hockey League to take home the Turnbull Cup.

Next stop: an upcoming trip to nationals in Prince Edward Island, where they will compete against the best of the best for a chance to win the Centennial Cup.

But first, let's look back at their historic playoff run.

GAME 2 WINKLER FLYERS, AWAY

The Nighthawks' playoff began on March 21 with an emphatic 8-2 dispatching of the Winkler Flyers in their first round opener.

After that fast and furious start, the second game had a much slower pace, with numerous icing calls in the opening minutes.

Winkler had the first quality chance five minutes into the first period, but Austin Dubinsky made a key save. The loose puck sat in the blue paint for a moment before

Marlen Edwards tied up his man and cleared the puck with a diving effort to keep things scoreless.

Moments later, Loik Leduc found Dawson Zeller at the top of the crease, and the 20-year-old slid the puck under the outstretched right pad of Liam Ernst to give the Nighthawks a 1-0 lead.

Niverville had several opportunities to extend the lead in the first, including three power plays and a dangerous two-man rush for Evan Panzer and Leduc, but they were unable to capitalize.

Zeller struck again with the game-winner midway through the second period, this time while shorthanded.

After forcing a turnover at the Niverville blue line, he broke in alone and slipped a backhand past Ernst to make it 2-0.

Winkler responded late in the period thanks to defence-man Graeme Pickering. Fresh off celebrating his seventeenth birthday, the St. Adolphe product held the puck in at the blue line, made a beautiful move around a

Nighthawks defender, and snapped a shot just under the crossbar to cut the lead to 2-1.

Despite extended offensive zone pressure from the Flyers, the Nighthawks remained composed defensively, limiting high-quality chances and protecting their lead.

Winkler pulled their goaltender late and created a final scramble in front with just seconds remaining, but Dubinsky tracked the puck through traffic and smothered it to preserve the lead.

Merik Boles won the ensuing faceoff, sealing the 2-1 victory.

GAME 3 WINKLER FLYERS, HOME

Despite a rocky start that saw the Nighthawks surrender the opening goal just 54 seconds into the contest, the home team responded with resilience, scoring three unanswered goals before holding off a late push from Winkler.

With Winkler's second-leading scorer, Tanner George, out of the lineup after receiving a four-game suspension for spearing at the end

of Game 2, the Flyers were forced to find some offence elsewhere—and with smoke still lingering in the air from the pregame ceremony, the Flyers struck. Joshua Ingram fired a shot from the left point that redirected off a stick past Dubinsky to ignite the visitors.

Winkler carried that early momentum and continued to build pressure, creating some great looks, but Dubinsky turned aside multiple quality chances to keep the deficit at one.

The Nighthawks had a pair of power play opportunities in the first period, but Ernst came up with some big saves of his own to keep Niverville off the board.

The Nighthawks flipped the script in the second period.

Just over a minute in, Hayden Wheddon collected his first goal of the playoffs while on the power play. Adam Vigfusson sent a pass out front to Wheddon, who found space between three Flyers defenders in the slot. He snapped a shot between the legs of Ernst to tie things up.

Just 1:38 later, a defensive miscue by the Flyers proved costly. Two Winkler players collided in their own zone, allowing Edwards to pounce on the loose puck and feed Kole Mears, who buried the go-ahead goal to make it 2-1.

Winkler had several chances to respond with three consecutive power plays, but they couldn't solve Dubinsky.

The third period was defined by penalties, with the Nighthawks finding themselves on four power plays in the first 14 minutes.

They eventually found an insurance goal at even strength late in the game courtesy of John Scott. Edwards led a rush and fired a shot that caromed perfectly to Scott at the side of the net. He tucked it in for his fourth goal of the series, extending the lead to 3-1.

The Flyers made things interesting in the final minutes when Niklas Gudmundson capitalized on a power play, sending a wrist shot past Dubinsky to cut the deficit to one.

"If you give Niklas Gudmundson

that kind of time in the slot, he's going to finish," said head coach Dwight Hirst after the game. "He's an elite player."

However, the Nighthawks held firm down the stretch to secure the win.

"It was a game that felt like the urgency for either team didn't really ramp up until the final seven or so minutes of the third period," said Hirst. "Defence wins championships, no matter what sport you're playing. If you can't defend, you aren't going to win... We're up. But for Friday's game, it's not over till it's over. For us, we have to have a good first period, start in the driver's seat, and do the things we do well."

GAME 4 WINKLER FLYERS, AWAY

Five minutes into the first period, Vigfusson set up Parker Carrier at the left point, and his shot beat Ernst through traffic, with Boles providing the screen. The goal gave the Nighthawks an early 1-0 lead.

Midway through the period, Winkler's penalty troubles proved costly once again.

While on a five-on-three advantage, Aaron Krestanowich fired a point shot that deflected off a defender and into the net, doubling the lead to 2-0.

The Flyers had a late power play opportunity to respond but couldn't solve Dubinsky.

And before the period would run out, the Nighthawks found themselves on another power play.

Niverville carried that late first-period power play into the second and wasted no time capitalizing. Just 42 seconds into the middle frame, Vigfusson finished a perfect cross-ice feed from Boles at the side of the crease to make it 3-0.

The Nighthawks continued to generate chances, including a

shorthanded breakaway by Zeller that resulted in a penalty shot after he was hooked.

Moments after Ernst made that key stop, Dubinsky answered at the other end with a beautiful glove save off Charles Bernier to keep the Flyers off the board.

Then Vigfusson struck again. Wheddon attempted a cross-ice pass at the Flyers blue line, but the puck bounced off multiple Winkler defenders and landed on Vigfusson's stick. He beat Ernst with a backhand to extend the lead to 4-0.

The Flyers pushed hard in the third period, outshooting Niverville 17-4, but Dubinsky remained unbeatable, shutting the door to secure the series sweep.

Just like that, the Nighthawks were headed to the semifinals for the first time.

THE SEMIFINALS

They weren't alone. Waywayseecappo, too, was eager to make their debut appearance in second-round playoff action. Neither team looked even remotely out of place.

Although Waywayseecappo swept the Dauphin Kings in four games, the series was closer than it appeared, featuring both an overtime and double-overtime win. The Wolverines relied on strong goaltending, timely scoring, and veteran leadership.

The matchup between the Nighthawks and Wolverines would feature two of the hottest netminders in the MJHL, with Dubinsky and the Jase Wareham ranked first and second respectively in save percentage through the opening round.

Wareham stopped 135 of 142 shots against Dauphin, proving he could handle a heavy workload. Dauphin outshot the Wolverines in three of the four games.

On the other side, Dubinsky

had continued the dominant form that had already earned him the MJHL's Ed Belfour Top Goaltender Award. He allowed just five goals in the four-game sweep over Winkler, capped off by a 38-save shutout in Game 4.

So far, both teams had leaned on balanced scoring. For Niverville, contributions during the opening round came from all over the lineup, reflecting the same depth they'd shown all season. Their ability to roll lines and generate offence had made them a tough team to defend against.

The Wolverines employed a similar approach, with 15 players recording at least one point against Dauphin. Veterans Sebastian Hicks and Ben Roulette led the way with five points each, while Dylan Duzan contributed four points.

Defensively, Niverville's Krestanowich sat near the top of MJHL defencemen in scoring with six points through four games. Waywayseecappo's Kurt Rookes, who led all MJHL defencemen in the regular season with 57 points, had so far continued his strong play in the opening round.

In summary, this second-round matchup was bound to showcase two teams playing confident, structured hockey, each backed by strong goaltending and depth through the lineup.

But something had to give.

GAME 1 WAYWAYSEECAPPO WOLVERINES, HOME

With a week off between games, both teams came in well-rested after sweeping their opening-round opponents. The pace was relentless from the opening puck drop and each side generated quality chances in the first minute.

Wolverines forward Hicks broke in on a breakaway just 20 seconds

into the game, but Dubinsky made a beautiful right pad save to keep the contest scoreless.

Moments later, Wareham answered with a sharp shoulder stop on a redirected shot, setting the tone for what would become a goaltending duel.

After what Nighthawks head coach Dwight Hirst described as "a feeling out period," Niverville struck first early in the second. A perfectly executed three-on-one rush involving Boles, Vigfusson, and Wheddon ended with Wheddon burying a pass from Boles blocker-side on Wareham to give the home side a 1-0 lead.

Almost immediately after, Waywayseecappo had opportunities to respond with back-to-back power plays. But the penalty kill was outstanding and Dubinsky remained steady between the pipes.

The Wolverines finally broke through two minutes into the final frame. Noah Oughton capitalized after gathering a loose puck along the wall and fired a quick shot that caught Dubinsky off-guard, beating him over the shoulder to tie the game 1-1.

The deadlock didn't last.

Just before the midpoint of the third, Niverville's power play delivered the decisive blow. After a strong drive to the net by Leduc forced a rebound, Vigfusson pounced on the loose puck at the top of the crease and buried it for his fourth goal of the playoffs.

Dubinsky turned aside 24 shots in the win, while Wareham was outstanding in defeat with 34 saves. Niverville's special teams proved to be a difference-maker, finishing one for five on the power play and a perfect three for three on the penalty kill.

"I thought our penalty kill was fantastic tonight," Hirst said.

"Especially in playoffs, it's how well do you play defensively? And how good are your special teams? Your best special teams has to be your penalty kill, and I thought for us it was tonight."

The Nighthawks bench boss also highlighted his team's comfort in close games.

"During the regular season we had a lot of one-goal games, and so we are very comfortable in those types of games."

GAME 2 WAYWAYSEECAPPO WOLVERINES, AWAY

In this lone blemish on the Nighthawks' playoff run, the Wolverines evened up the series with a 3-1 win on the road.

Much the same as with Game 1, it was obvious early on that neither goaltender was going to give up much.

The Nighthawks had an opportunity to get the game's opening marker just past the midway point of the opening period when they had an extended five-on-three advantage. They created chances, but Wareham was phenomenal and stopped everything thrown his way.

The Wolverines took their first lead of the series early in the second period when Duzan dropped the puck to Jake Nelson at the point. Nelson moved into the right circle before returning the pass to Duzan, who brought the puck to his backhand and lifted the shot over Dubinsky.

The Nighthawks pressed after that goal and were finally able to solve Wareham midway through the middle frame. Thomas Phillips's shot from the point found its way to the stick of Mears in the slot. Mears turned and buried his second of the playoffs.

(continued on page 22)



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(continued from page 21)

The Wolverines regained the lead just under five minutes into the third when Hebert picked up the puck along the boards, moved into the left circle, and snuck a shot past Dubinsky to make it 2-1.

The Nighthawks had a late chance to even the game with a power play but they were unable to generate any offensive zone time.

With the Nighthawks net empty, Sebastian Hicks iced it for the Wolverines with his fifth goal of the playoffs to make it 3-1.

It was the first loss for the Nighthawks since February 16, a span of 16 games.

GAME 3

WAYWAYSEECAPPO WOLVERINES, HOME

Waywayseecappo came out strong in the opening frame, carrying momentum from their Game 2 victory. And just five minutes in, Collyer opened the scoring, cutting down the left side before wiring a shot past Dubinsky.

The Wolverines doubled their lead late in the period when a rebound off a Hicks shot landed at the top of the crease, where Roulette buried it.

The Nighthawks responded quickly, thanks to Vigfusson. Moments after the second Wolverines goal, he chased down his own rebound behind the net and banked the puck off Wareham and in, cutting the deficit to 2-1.

The second period tightened up, with both teams trading physical play and limiting chances. But the Nighthawks found a way to tie the game late in the period, and once again it was Vigfusson who delivered when it mattered.

After Boles picked off a pass just inside the Wolverines zone, he slid a pass to Vigfusson, who found himself alone in front. He lifted the puck past Wareham to even the game.

The third period turned into a back-and-forth battle until Calyb Moore, playing his first game of the playoffs, threaded a perfect pass across to a streaking Panzer in the slot. Panzer made it count, lifting home the eventual winner over the blocker of Wareham.

Waywayseecappo pressed late with the extra attacker but couldn't solve Dubinsky, and Zeller sealed the win with an empty-netter.

After the game, Nighthawks head coach Dwight Hirst praised his team's composure.

"Obviously down 2-0 in the first period is not the start we wanted," Hirst said. "But it's nice to see the team didn't stray from the process that has to happen in a game, and I didn't think we had much panic and stuck with the little things... I think we've shown all season that we are comfortable in close games, and we're okay if we are down a bit. We just stay with it."

GAME 4

WAYWAYSEECAPPO WOLVERINES, AWAY

The Nighthawks kept rolling in Game 4, shutting out the Wolverines 3-0 in Game 4. The opening period set the tone with a heavy, physical style of play. Both teams delivered big hits, with scoring chances being kept to a minimum.

The best opportunity came in the dying seconds of the period when Hicks found himself open in the left circle with a wide open net. But his shot sailed too high.

The Nighthawks struck first midway through the second period on their first power play of the night after the Wolverines were called for too many men.

Boles took a pass from Edwards just below the left circle and drove the puck to the net before beating Wareham from in tight to make it 1-0 with his first of the playoffs.

The Wolverines pushed late in the frame, but Dubinsky continued to shut the door.

Waywayseecappo came out with urgency in the final period, controlling the early play.

Midway through, a broken play turned into a turning point. After killing off a penalty, the Wolverines nearly sprung a rush the other way. Cale Livingston jumped out of the box behind the Nighthawks defence. Oughton tried to send him in but fanned on the pass, and the Nighthawks quickly went the other way on a two-on-one.

Vigfusson carried the puck into the Wolverines zone and attempted a pass across the crease that deflected and landed in front of the net, where Edwards buried his first of the playoffs to extend the lead to 2-0.

The Wolverines had a chance to cut the lead to one with a late power play and pulled their goalie with just over three minutes remaining, but they couldn't get past Dubinsky—and instead Vigfusson iced the game, firing the puck into the empty net to make it 3-0.

GAME 5

WAYWAYSEECAPPO WOLVERINES, HOME

The dam finally broke, with Niverville routing the Waywayseecappo 7-0 in Game 5 to close out the series. Six different goal scorers found the back of the net.

Just 26 seconds into the first period, Moore electrified the sold-out crowd at the CRRC. After collecting the puck in his own zone, he burst down the left side and snapped a shot top corner over the glove of Wareham to give Niverville an early lead.

With the crowd still buzzing, Edwards doubled the lead with his second of the playoffs, and his second in as many games, to make the score 2-0 before the game was two minutes old.

Despite the early deficit, the

Wolverines pushed back. They came inches from cutting the lead when a loose puck trickled toward the goal line behind Dubinsky, but the Nighthawks netminder recovered in time to keep it out.

Niverville continued to capitalize on its momentum. With 37 seconds remaining in the opening frame, Boles blasted home a power-play one-timer to extend the lead to 3-0.

The second period brought more of the same. Moore struck again just 15 seconds in, finishing off a setup from Krestanowich to make it 4-0.

Midway through the period, Zeller added another on the power play, chasing Wareham from the game after a stellar playoff run.

Mariko Bercier took over between the pipes for the Wolverines, but the Nighthawks weren't done yet. Mears buried a cross-crease pass from Phillips late in the second to make it 6-0.

Vigfusson rounded out the scoring in the third period with his ninth goal of the playoffs, tying for the postseason lead and putting the final touch on the series.

"Hats off to Jase Wareham," said Hirst. "He had a heck of a series and kept his team in it."

He also acknowledged the effort of the Wolverines and their coaching staff.

"Landyn Cochrane and his staff have done a great job this season. His team battled a lot of injuries throughout the season, and when they all got healthy, they were a hard team to play against... they've shown they can compete with anyone in the league."

THE FINALS

Elsewhere in the league, the Virden Oil Capitals upset the Steinbach Pistons in six games to punch their own ticket to the finals.

This set the stage for an MJHL championship showdown between two teams chasing their first-ever Turnbull Cup.

The Oil Capitals entered with confidence, having frequently dictated the pace throughout the postseason. Their ability to generate offence, with seven players recording ten or more points, while tightening defensively when needed, had made them a dangerous opponent.

For Niverville, Dubinsky had continued to be the team's backbone, allowing just ten goals over nine games while recording three shutouts. He headed into the finals on a 165-minute streak without allowing a single goal, backed by a 1.11 goals-against average and an impressive .957 save percentage.

On the other side, Virden's Braxton Burdeny, who finished the regular season with an impressive 23-11-0 record, was 11-2 in his last 13 starts, bringing a 2.71 goals-against average and a .903



Captain Adam Vigfusson and MJHL commissioner Kevin Saurette. YOUR_PICTURES_HERE



The Nighthawks and Oil Capitals shake hands after Game 4. YOUR_PICTURES_HERE

save percentage into the series.

Offensively, Virden and Niverville were both among the most productive in the league. The Nighthawks topped the league in goals with 280 while the Oil Capitals finished third with 257.

Virden's Bryce Bryant led the way with nine goals and 19 points, recording at least one point in every playoff game to date. Liam Goertzen had also been a key contributor, scoring six goals, five of them coming in his last five games.

From the blue line, Virden received strong secondary scoring from Nathan Schaefer, Austin Osiowy, and Ty Plaisier.

Niverville, meanwhile, had relied on disciplined defence, commitment to their structure, and timely offence—the same recipe that had won them 51 regular season games.

Virden held a slight edge on the power play, operating at 24.44 percent (11 for 45), compared to Niverville's 20.93 percent (9 for 43). However, the Nighthawks' penalty kill had been elite at 91.3 percent (21 for 23) while Virden sat at 76 percent (19 for 25).

With elite goaltending, balanced scoring, and strong defence on both sides, this series promised to deliver high-intensity playoff hockey.

GAME 1

VIRDEN OIL CAPITALS, HOME

Niverville wasted little time getting on the board. Just over a minute into the opening period, the Nighthawks were awarded their first power play of the night, and it didn't take them long to capitalize. Panzer sent a cross-ice pass to Phillips in the left circle, and the defenceman wired a quick shot through Burdeny's legs for his first of the postseason, igniting the home crowd.

Virden responded with pressure, controlling stretches of play and forcing turnovers, but they couldn't solve Dubinsky, an ongoing theme over the course of the playoffs.

The Nighthawks doubled their lead early in the second when Vigfusson's in-tight attempt slipped through Burdeny and sat loose in the crease, where Leduc pounced for his first playoff goal.

Osiowy cut the deficit midway through the frame, picking up a loose puck at the blue line and firing a shot under the bar to make it 2-1.

However, just six seconds later, a penalty to Osiowy sent Niverville back to the power play, and they made it count. Zeller blasted home a one-timer from the right circle to restore the two-goal cushion.

Leduc had the lone marker in the



The Nighthawks coaching staff.

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Goaltender Austin Dubinsky raises the Turnbull Cup.

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final frame, pouncing on a rebound at the side of the net for his second of the night.

"There was a week off, so there was a bit of rust for us," said Hirst. "But when you get into the championship final, it's about how your special teams perform. I thought both our power play and penalty kill were on tonight, and I think that was the difference."

GAME 2 VIRDEN OIL CAPITALS, AWAY

Just like in Game 1, Niverville wasted no time getting on the board. Moore opened the scoring early in the first period, capitalizing on a loose puck in the slot and snapping it past Burdeny for his third of the playoffs. It was the third consecutive game in which the Nighthawks scored in the first three minutes.

Despite being outshot 14-8 in the opening frame, the Nighthawks carried a 1-0 lead into the intermission thanks to Dubinsky, who turned aside every chance Virden generated.

Boles made an immediate impact in his return to the lineup after missing Game 1 due to illness. He struck less than two minutes into the second period, finishing off a strong forechecking sequence to

double Niverville's lead. Vigfusson chased the puck down in the corner and forced a turnover behind the net. Wheddon gathered the loose puck, then found Boles, who in turn found the back of the net.

Late in the second, Zeller continued his scoring surge, netting his third goal in as many games, and his sixth of the playoffs, firing a puck from the left circle through the legs of Burdeny to make it 3-0.

Virden finally broke through in the third period when Goertzen capitalized on a fortunate bounce that redirected off a skate past Dubinsky to give the Oil Capitals some hope.

However, it proved too late and time quickly expired.

GAME 3 VIRDEN OIL CAPITALS, HOME

The Nighthawks moved to the brink of history on this Tuesday night showdown at the CRRC. The game delivered offence from start to finish, with the teams combining for six goals in the opening 20 minutes and nine overall.

Niverville got the sold-out crowd roaring early when Vigfusson opened the scoring on a breakaway, outwitting Burdeny to give the Nighthawks a 1-0 lead. The play was set up by Wheddon, who took

a hit at the Oil Capitals' blue line to send Vigfusson in alone. The goal was Vigfusson's tenth, tops in the MJHL playoffs.

Less than two minutes later, Panzer doubled the lead with a sharp-angle shot that bounced off Burdeny's stick and somehow redirected into the net, making it 2-0 before the game was seven minutes old.

The hockey gods quickly returned the favour to the Oil Capitals, who answered thanks to a fortunate bounce of their own. A dump-in by Jett Deschamps hit a stanchion on the glass and kicked directly to Tyson Ulmer in the slot, who cut the lead to 2-1.

The Nighthawks restored their two-goal cushion on a five-on-three power play, with Vigfusson setting up Boles on a cross-crease pass for a one-timer to make it 3-1.

But the Oil Capitals refused to go away. Goertzen struck short-handed, chipping the puck past a Nighthawks defender at the Virden blue line, moved in alone, and slipped the puck between the legs of goaltender Dubinsky to make it 3-2.

Before the period ran out, Virden tied things up when Osiowy's shot bounced off the post, then off the leg of Dubinsky and into the net.

Niverville thought they had regained the lead early in the second when Scott scored, but a hooking penalty to Edwards negated the goal and kept the game deadlocked.

What could have been a turning point for Virden on the power play instead became a turning point for the Nighthawks, who struck short-handed. Boles collected a loose puck at the Virden blue line, slipped past a defender, and tucked the puck past Burdeny to put the Nighthawks ahead 4-3, a lead they held for the rest of the game.

Scott extended the lead midway through the third period, snapping a shot home from the left circle to make it 5-3. The home crowd could sense the win.

With time winding down, Virden pulled their goalie, and Mears sealed the win with an empty-netter.

Despite allowing three goals for the first time this postseason, Dubinsky was a difference-maker again, turning aside a playoff-high 39 shots. Virden pressed hard, aided by eight power play opportunities. The penalty kill was perfect, however. The Nighthawks killed off all eight opportunities. In fact, they had now killed off 29 consecutive chances.

"There's no magic formula on the penalty kill," Hirst said. "It's just our job to make them make decisions they don't want to make and be tenacious... We knew coming in that tonight would be Virden's best game of the year, and they put up 42 shots. I'd say the difference

in this series has been goaltending and Dubinsky has been outstanding all series."

Hirst added that the team's approach would be status quo in Game 4 with a championship on the line.

"We'll just keep doing what we've been doing. It doesn't matter if we get outshot. We just stay with what we do well, staying calm in the moment, and doing what we do best. It puts us in a position to win most nights."

GAME 4 VIRDEN OIL CAPITALS, AWAY

The Nighthawks put an emphatic exclamation mark on a historic season during this Thursday night road trip, capturing their first Turnbull Cup championship with a commanding 6-2 victory.

The win completed a dominant series sweep and capped a remarkable playoff run in which the Nighthawks lost just once in 13 games.

Virden struck first early, as Dyson Drake beat Dubinsky blocker-side from the left circle just over two minutes in.

Only moments later, Vigfusson was awarded a penalty shot after being hooked on a breakaway, but Virden netminder Micky Gross came up with a key save.

Niverville pushed back hard. Wheddon rang a shot off the post and Moore was denied on a breakaway late in the period.

But the Nighthawks' persistence finally paid off in the dying minutes of the first, when Edwards buried a power play goal from the slot to tie the game.

The Nighthawks carried that momentum into the second period. Less than two minutes in, Panzer redirected a pass from Leduc to give Niverville its lead.

Edwards struck again midway through the frame, finishing a quick setup from Vigfusson at the top of the crease to make it 3-1.

Then Niverville took control.

When Mears jumped out of the penalty box, he managed to break in alone and bury his own rebound to extend the lead to 4-1.

Virden responded late in the period to give them some life. Tyson Draper made a slick move and snapped a shot over Dubinsky's blocker to cut the deficit to two heading into the third.

Despite a strong push from the Oil Capitals in the final period, Dubinsky and the Nighthawks held firm, as they've done so many times this year.

Wheddon sealed the victory with a power play goal with under nine minutes remaining, and Panzer added an empty-netter in the final minute to send the strong contingent of Niverville fans who made the three-hour drive to Virden into celebration mode.

For Dubinsky, who was named the MJHL's Most Valuable Player later in the evening, the moment proved overwhelming.

"This is just a surreal feeling right now," Dubinsky said. "We knew we had a special team very early, but to see where it's come to now is just incredible."

He credited both his teammates and the organization for the journey.

"We had a lot of guys come back who could've chosen to play somewhere else, but they stayed and played a huge part in why we won the league. The team in front of me was just amazing all season long and made it easy for me."

Assistant coach Tyler Anderson, the longest-serving member of the coaching staff, also found himself reflecting on the franchise's growth.

"Honestly I can't put this moment into words," said Anderson. "I just think of where we started to where we are now—and we continue to push the envelope. These guys don't quit. When times got tough in the first couple years, they stuck with it believing we would be here—and here we are."

Boles echoed the emotion in post-game celebrations. "It's unreal. There's no better feeling. We knew we were special from day one. It was just a feeling we had in the group."

Vigfusson emphasized the team's bond as the foundation of their success.

"I haven't felt a feeling like this in a long time," said Vigfusson. "We were really close. Everybody had everyone's back. From the moment I stepped in that room, it was obvious we could do something special."

Hirst summed it up with one word: "Finally."

"We knew from the beginning of the season that we had something special, and to see it come to fruition is very special," Hirst said. "Good teams have rules, but championship teams set standards and commit to them, and this team committed."

THE CENTENNIAL CUP

While the celebration is well-earned, the Nighthawks aren't done yet.

With their first championship in franchise history secured, they now turn their attention to the national stage.

Niverville will represent the MJHL at the Centennial Cup in Summerside, Prince Edward Island from May 7-17, with their sights set on adding another title to an already unforgettable season.

Hirst believes that his team is ready for the national stage.

"We are going to be a really good representative of the MJHL at the Centennial Cup, and I believe we have a very good shot at capturing another championship!"



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1**

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6**

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Providence Draws Crowds and Accolades from Women's Volleyball Nationals

By Brenda Sawatzky

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The Providence Pilots may not have come out on top at this year's CCAA Women's Volleyball Nationals, held at the Niverville CRRC from March 11-14. They did, however, score big as hosts of the high-calibre event.

Niverville's Terry Martin was a volunteer on the planning committee. His team worked hard to ensure every detail was looked after, from professional advertising to securing nearby lodging and creating a VIP room with a steady flow of food and drinks throughout the four days.

"The coach from the winning team came up to us and said, 'This is the best-run tournament we've ever been to,'" Martin says. "And this was their fourth time winning the nationals, so they've been to many tournaments."

In a similar vein, the coach of the silver medal team suggested that the event set a new gold standard for tournaments.

The CCAA officials also couldn't say enough about the hospitality they experienced.

It's high praise for a small-town Manitoba team and its supporters. Many of the committee's volunteers had their first go at planning a tournament of this magnitude last year when Providence hosted the men's volleyball nationals, also at the CRRC.

A constant flow of fans filled the stands and mezzanine section to cheer the teams to their best performances.

"A highlight for me was that the elementary school brought a busload of kids and the middle school brought a busload of kids and the high school brought some classes, so it was a full gymnasium," Martin says. "One of the teachers really got them into it and they were chanting,



The Providence Pilots in competition at the CCAA Women's Nationals, held in Niverville at the CRRC. PHOTO: PROVIDENCE

'Go Pilots Go!' And it was really, really cool!"

When female volleyball players reach this calibre of play, Martin says that the competitions are incredibly exciting to watch.

"Women's rallies go on for a long time," Martin says. "In men's volleyball, it's more about power, so you get a lot of kills, making the rallies short and fast. But in the women's, they were digging up balls that you thought were gone. So they kept the play alive. Just watching it was really gratifying."

In total, eight college teams rolled into town for the competition, coming from regions as far away as Nova Scotia and British Columbia.

Manitoba had two teams represented, including the Pilots and the Assiniboine Cougars from Brandon.

Opening night began on March 10 with a banquet in Winnipeg. Keynote speaker was former Olympian Michelle Sawatzky-Koop.

By the end of the week, the gold medal went to the Lakeview Rustlers from Lloydminster, Alberta. This marked the fourth year in a row that the team took first place.

The Pilots squared off against the Rustlers at the very beginning of the tournament, setting them off to a tough start.

"The Pilots started off strong but fell to the Rustlers in three straight sets," says Martin. "They played their closest match on Thursday before a full house of fans. The atmosphere was electric as the Pilots won the first two sets in nail-biting fashion. However, the opposing Mount Allison Mounties found their groove and won the next three sets to win the match."

The Pilots completed their run by facing off with their archrivals, the Assiniboine Cougars.

Unfortunately, they ended in the bottom spot.

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IN BRIEF

St. Adolphe Playground Fundraising Efforts Still Going Strong

By Brenda Sawatzky
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER
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The École St. Adolphe School playground fundraising committee is still hard at work, keeping a sharp focus on installing a modern new outdoor play zone at the school for children to enjoy.

The old play structure was removed last summer after it was deemed unsafe for continued use. Since then, the fundraising committee, composed mostly of parents, has answered the call.

All that stands between them and their end goal is \$250,000, around \$52,000 of which is already in the coffers.

Their latest 50/50 fundraiser is hoped to be successful. Success would mean netting somewhere in the tens of thousands for both the committee and the winner of the draw.

Currently at just under \$2,500, the draw will run through the month of June, with the winning ticket pulled at the school on June 30. Tickets are available for purchase online.

Michelle Prairie is president of the school's parent advisory council and a member of the fundraising team.

Along with local donations, Prairie says that the committee is hopeful that some government funding will be accessible to them as well.

"A lot of the available grants are just opening up now, so we've been applying for all of them," Prairie says. "But to raise over \$52,000 since last September shows just how supportive our school

family is."

To open their fundraising initiative, a social was held last fall, resulting in proceeds of just under \$14,000.

Another \$3,000 has been raised through Krispy Kreme donut sales.

A variety of small and larger donations have also trickled in from individuals and businesses.

"If everything aligns and we get some of the grants we've applied for, we've decided that, if we reach a good amount, we can [get started]," Prairie says. "Maybe over the summer we can start prepping [the grounds]."

Some of that ground prep includes the removal of the existing pea gravel. To support their end goal of creating a fully accessible play zone, the gravel will be replaced by a mobility-friendly surface.

If there are landscapers, she says, or others who are willing to contribute gifts of service, the committee is more than willing to add their names to the donor board planned for the site.

While the \$250,000 goal is admittedly lofty, Prairie says that some of the committee's staying power comes from the incredible support they've received from the community so far.

"If nothing else, this experience has taught our fundraising committee how great our community really is."

BUY 50/50 TICKETS

To buy tickets or learn more about the fundraiser, visit: <https://www.rafflebox.ca/raffle/ecole-st-adolphe-school>

Niverville High School Panthers Challenge RCMP Muskrats

By Brenda Sawatzky
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It was a game that students of Niverville High School won't soon forget, with their beloved Panthers hockey team taking on the RCMP Muskrats. The friendly challenge, held at the CRRC on March 26, ended in an 8-5 win for the Muskrats.

The game concluded a full day of activities between NHS students and their local RCMP members.

"During the season, the Panthers' focus and attention had been put towards the regular season, playoffs, and provincials," says Panthers coach Brandon Lockerby. "But since the season has been over, there was more of a buzz and excitement from the players leading up to this game."

It wasn't just players who were pumped up. On game day afternoon, NHS peers, family, and friends filled the bleachers to near-capacity to cheer on the home team.

RCMP Corporal Melanie Roussel was in the stands in full red serge, proud to support this collaborative connection between fellow RCMP members and the community.

As for the team's name, the Muskrats, she says it's relatively new, as are the powder blue jerseys worn by the RCMP players that day.

The Muskrats team was comprised of officers from Niverville, St. Pierre-Jolys, and other detachments in the region.

At least one player was himself a former Niverville student.

"The goal is to show the kids that we are [regular] people," Roussel says. "They can approach us and talk to us. We're not just the bad guys arresting people. It's



The Niverville Panthers took on the RCMP Muskrats on March 26 at the CRRC.

BRENDA SAWATZKY

about developing a relationship with the school and students."

Hockey wasn't the only avenue for making connections. Beginning in the morning, RCMP members attended the school, along with police dog companions, for a presentation to the student body.

Students were put through their paces throughout the morning by RCMP members running boot-camp-style training exercises.

"The Phys Ed teachers were joking that they need the RCMP to come do Phys Ed more often because the kids were fully engaged," says NHS principal Paul Grosskopf. "It blew the kids' minds just how fit these guys are. They were showing them skills that the kids couldn't do at all."

Grosskopf views this kind of one-on-one interaction between local law authorities and students as a win-win. For the past year, members of the Niverville RCMP detachment have been attending the high school on a monthly basis, walking the halls and getting to know students on a first-name basis.

Lockerby is quick to endorse the relationship.

"Developing this partnership with the local law enforcement has been very

beneficial to our school and our students," he says. "Law enforcement plays a vital role in fostering safe, stable, and well-functioning communities... Their presence not only deters unlawful behaviour but also builds public confidence and a sense of security. We, as a school, are hopeful this partnership continues for many years to come."

Just one day earlier, local officers were invited to Ms. Happychuk's Grade 12 law class to provide students with a deep dive into the realities of modern policing.

There, students were guided through real-world scenarios and encouraged to think on their feet.

"The class didn't hold back," reads a statement on a social media page for the St. Pierre-Jolys and Niverville RCMP. "They challenged the officers with insightful questions regarding policing policy, legal frameworks, and the 'why' behind every action. This annual visit has become a fantastic way to bridge the gap between local law enforcement and the next generation of legal professionals."

As for the Muskrats, there's a good chance they'll be back next year at this time for another faceoff with the Panthers.

Grosskopf is proud of his school team, now in their second year. Fellow students, he says, have been filling the stands for Panthers home games to show off school spirit.

"The fact that we can literally walk next door and play in an arena that's tied to our school, not many schools [have that advantage]," Grosskopf says.

Panthers hockey is made up of students from Grades 10, 11, and 12.

The team is also one of the few Winnipeg High School Hockey League squads boasting a female goalie.

They finished the regular season this year with a 21-2-1 record. After a series of winning streaks, they lost the last two regular season games to Lorette.

Still, they clinched first overall and got the home ice advantage in the playoffs.

The team played in the MHSAAA/AA Hockey Provincials in Carberry where they finished first in their pool.

"The Panthers defeated Glenboro/Carberry/Baldur 4-3 in a shootout in the semifinals, then lost in the final to Carman 6-5," says Lockerby.

"Three days after provincials, we took on West Kildonan in the league semifinals and lost the series 2-0 in the best of three series."

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Little BALLERS Brings Early-Age Basketball to Local Families

By Holly Dunphy

A new children's basketball program is coming to Niverville, geared toward kids as young as ten months and up to eight years, a much earlier age than is typical in the sport.

Founded in Winnipeg by Chad Celaire and his wife Kim, Little BALLERS has now expanded across the prairies. Its introductory event was held in Niverville on March 21 ahead of its official launch in early May.

Hosted at the Niverville High School gymnasium, the free awareness day introduced local families to a program focused on building confidence and skill through play. The event was filled to capacity with families who came to experience the program firsthand.

Basketball nets with Little BALLERS logos were set up across half of the gym, ranging in height from as low as three feet up to six feet six inches, alongside brightly coloured balls, cones, hula hoops, and activity stations that invite participation and remove intimidation.

While organized basketball programs typically begin later, often around middle school with higher nets that can feel daunting, Little BALLERS introduces children to the sport through scaled equipment and developmentally appropriate activities.

Celaire led the event and guided a group of local high school student coaches through the program's structure as the community experienced it for the first time.

Sessions began with a custom Little BALLERS theme song, incorporating movement and actions like



Chad Celaire leads a Little BALLERS introductory session at Niverville High School.

▣ HOLLY DUNPHY

high-fives.

The classes flowed quickly, with music marking new activities and creating a sense of familiarity.

Engagement was built through positive affirmation, simple skill-building, and small, achievable goals.

"A lot of the activities we've created have songs that go along with what the kids are doing," says Celaire. "There is real power in combining instruction with music. We go over the top in encouraging kids. We clap, use verbal affirmation, and show them how to do things, not just tell them. We believe in the power of positive affirmation and really focus on building kids' self-esteem."

Classes wrap up with what he calls a "sticker shot," where children take a turn shooting on a lowered hoop before receiving a sticker.

Celaire has been involved in basketball as both an athlete and coach for more than three decades, including playing for the University of Regina and Rochester College in Michigan. He later spent 15 years as a youth minister.

The idea for the program was sparked after Celaire became a stay-at-home dad with his first child and noticed that he needed to find ways to meaningfully engage with his infant son.

"My son was the impetus for starting Little BALLERS," he says. "I didn't

know how young kids could start, and I wanted to create something that met them where they're at."

He envisioned a program that introduced children to basketball in an engaging way, one that sets attainable goals, develops skills, and builds confidence.

"The Baby Ballers class is an opportunity for parents to learn ways to interact with their children," he says. "It's very family-oriented. It brings people together."

That approach is reflected in how local parents responded to both the program and its environment.

"It was even better than I was expecting," says Salina Breton, a teacher and junior high and

junior varsity basketball coach who attended with her family. "There were lots of stations to keep kids interested, and it wasn't the same thing the whole time. I also noticed it was run by local students, which I thought was really cool."

Breton added that her children have tried a variety of activities, including dance, gymnastics, and soccer, but they were drawn to the program based on what they had seen online.

"It seemed like an opportunity to try something different," she says. "And it felt like they were actually learning something."

Another attendee, Jeni-lee Nacci, said that she had long been considering enrolling her child in a Winnipeg program and was excited to see it arrive locally.

"I was really impressed with the coordination, the colours, and the activities," says Nacci. "It felt structured, and the coaches were extremely good with the kids. I think it will be helpful developmentally for my son."

Since launching in 2022, Little BALLERS has expanded across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, with more than 5,000 children participating in the program.

The student coaches will launch the first eight-week semester Little BALLERS session in Niverville on May 2 at the Community Fellowship Church, one of the few spaces in town that is able to accommodate the program.

For children looking to further develop their skills, the program also offers a Little BALLERS League, with 60-minute in-depth classes, offered during the winter.

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