



This week in the Highlands

Six drunks in seven days

ALMAGUIN – In a seven-day period the North Bay OPP charged six people for impaired driving.

On Nov. 13, around noon, members of the North Bay OPP attended a two-vehicle collision on Highway 11 in the City of North Bay.

Police arrested and charged the driver of one of the vehicles, a 29-year-old North Bay man, with driving with more than 80 mgs of alcohol in his blood, careless driving, and novice driver, blood alcohol content above zero. He was released from custody and is to appear at the Ontario Court of Justice in North Bay on Nov. 24.

On Nov. 14 at approximately 3 a.m., a member of the Powassan OPP was on patrol on Highway 11 when he stopped a southbound

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Council shoots down big raise

Rebecca Zanussi

News Staff

KEARNEY – A motion to give council a raise crashed down hard at the Town of Kearney.

During the Nov. 18 regular meeting, Deputy Mayor Yvonne Willis put forward a resolution to increase Kearney council's honorariums by \$75 per month over the next three years. The increase would add \$2,100 per year onto council's honorariums (which currently sit at \$600 per month, per councillor), totalling a \$6,300 increase by Jan. 1, 2018.

The motion was defeated four to one in a recorded vote.

"Upfront, I don't agree with the increase," said Councillor Liz Sternsek.

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Hospital meetings go

Rebecca Zanussi

News Staff

KEARNEY – The future of Muskoka hospitals may be up in the air, but Almaguin leaders aren't letting the pieces fall without them there. A new committee formed by the North Simcoe-Muskoka health authority is discussing the options for creating one, single hospital in Muskoka – likely either in Huntsville or Bracebridge – and Almaguin is well represented at the table.

"Reeve Cathy Still will be the voice for Almaguin at the table talks and I will be her official backup in the event she cannot come to the meetings," Kearney Deputy Mayor Yvonne Willis told council during the Nov. 18 regular meeting.

"She communicated to me yesterday that she attended her first meeting and she has advised them that I'm going to be the official backup. So, I will be getting all of the official correspondence that she gets, the follow ups to the meetings, so I will always be apprised just in case I have to step in, which is good because now I can submit council reports to you and bring you up to speed as to where we are with this."

The single hospital has been a hot topic for more than a year. This past summer Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare, which operates the Huntsville and Bracebridge hospitals, voted to move forward with a plan to close the two existing sites and build a single hospital between the two towns.

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Late bus cut goes deep

Rob Learn
News Staff

ARGYLE – Grade 11 student Megan Schonberger has a decision to make this year – whether to play on the high school volleyball team or hockey team. She can't do both.

It is not some edict from the coaching staff, or conflict in the practice/game schedule, but rather that she and her family don't have the benefit of support from other students at Almaguin Highlands Secondary School where – late buses.

For Schonberger, every team practice that happens after school means a three-hour round trip for her mother Michelle or another family member from their home in Lost Channel to the high school in South River and back again.

"At the start of the school year we talked about how I'll have to choose between volleyball, soccer and the hockey team," said Schonberger.

It wasn't always this way. In Grade 9 the school provided a late bus for the students from the Argyle region, including Schonberger, made up of the rural region out Highway 522 including Golden Valley, Arnstein, Port Loring and Loring.

During that school year, 2013/14, the school cut the service off. Petitions, community outcry and anger from parents staved off the cut with a van being put into service for the trip from Trout Creek out the highway for the 50-plus km run.

But last school year and again this one the busing stops in Trout Creek. Parents of the 25 or more Almaguin students from Argyle are without support families in most other communities the high school serves benefit from.

Almaguin principal Donna Breault says cutting the service off was an easy decision in terms of math but difficult for the consequences to the students of that area.

"I don't think it is ever a comfortable decision to say to the stu-



PHOTO BY ROB LEARN

STRANDED: Some of the Argyle families upset with the cut of a late bus are Isabella Whitehead, front, left, Rebecca Brooks, Megan Schonberger and Felicity Whitehead. Behind are parents Jennifer Whitehead and Michelle Schonberger.

dents, 'You would benefit from a late bus but the school can't afford it,'" Breault said. She says the cost of the late bus, used by four to five students every night the last year it was running, cost the same as running a full-size bus to Ermsdale or Powassan, "that can hold up to 44 students."

The late buses, which about a decade ago ran four nights a week so students can spend up to two hours after school in extracurricular sports, drama, projects or studying, are now down to two days a week. The buses were the core of programming and sports for a school population that from the opening of Almaguin was more than 99 per cent bused in.

Parents in Argyle say they are finding it frustrating to see the advantages they expected to see their children benefit from at the

high school disappear or at the very least cut back.

Jennifer Whitehead, of Argyle, worries about her daughter Felicity who started Grade 9 this year at Almaguin. The girl wants to play volleyball and hockey too. Jennifer runs her own business says she has to make a choice.

"I was going to do hockey but it was too much without the late buses," said Felicity.

Jennifer was one of a group of parents from the region who tried to get a meeting with Breault on the topic this past spring – a meeting Breault didn't attend, saying it isn't her place to advocate for the students.

"We've had some pretty big graduating classes from in here and they should really be making an investment in them," said Jennifer.

Trustees Corrine Green and Al Bottomley have met with the parents in Argyle but so far haven't come back with any answers. The decision about the busing is with Breault, though the Near North trustees have supported funding the program at current levels.

The principal at Almaguin says she hasn't been keeping track of how many students from Argyle are participating in extracurricular activities, and doesn't know if the number is up or down.

"It is the second year of not having the late bus so I didn't see the point," said Breault.

Students, though, are feeling the pinch. Schonberger is trying out for the volleyball team where she was a starter last year with a trip to the provincials. There are a lot of talented girls trying out this

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New term, new role, same outlook for MP

"Life is too short

to be negative for negativity's sake."

Rebecca Zanussi

News Staff

ALMAGUIN – Tony Clement has been in politics for more than 20 years, but he's about to face a challenge he's never encountered before: the opposition.

"I'm excited, actually," Clement told the News on Nov. 19 at his Huntsville constituency office.

"Obviously the role changes because you're not government, but the fundamental role that I play, being an advocate locally here for the community and for the community's interest, that is a role I've played in government, and it's a role I continue to play as a Member of Parliament."

Clement was re-elected as the Parry Sound-Muskoka MP in the Oct. 19 election, winning over Liberal candidate Trisha Cowie by 2,268 votes. While he regained his seat, entering into his fourth term as the riding's Federal representative, his Conservative party wasn't as lucky. The former majority government lost the national campaign, gaining only 99 seats compared to the Liberal Party's 184 seats and the NDP's 44 seats – ushering in a new majority government.

It's the first time in his political career – federally and provincially – Clement is in the opposing seat.

"When I decided to run for re-election, it was knowing full well there could be a scenario where we don't get re-elected to government, but I could get elected as the MP for Parry Sound-Muskoka," Clement says.

"I was fine with that. I think there's something important about being an opposition MP. There's something noble about being an MP regardless of your status, per

say. I always looked at this as a long-time role, that this is something I want to do for years to come, and now I've been given that opportunity."

Clement credits his win, in what he calls a tough campaign, to his local track record. "It's with a great deal of gratitude I have for the people of Parry Sound-Muskoka that they have faith in me for another term, despite the obvious trend that was unfolding across the country," he says.

"I have a lot of gratitude for that. It's a great privilege to serve and I get to serve again for another four years again. It's fantastic." Students, though, are feeling the pinch. Schonberger is trying out for the volleyball team where she was a starter last year with a trip to the provincials. There are a lot of talented girls trying out this

"There were very few days that we were on message," Clement says.

"Our message should have been we have managed our economy well and you want that management for the future as well, and really, we weren't really talking about that a whole lot. To me, that was a clear indicator that we weren't being effective as a national campaign, and that was having an impact."

The Conservative Party of Canada announced on Nov. 20 Clement will have a senior role in the shadow cabinet, taking on the critic position for Foreign Affairs – the ministry led by former Liberal party leader Stéphane Dion. Clement is excited for the opportunity, both to dig into foreign affairs, and to hold the Liberal government

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PHOTO BY ROB LEARN

BAR AND GRILL: Highway 11 southbound at Burk's Falls was closed on Saturday night for a couple of hours as emergency responders helped clear a tractor trailer that lost control coming into the Highway 520/Magnetawan River bridge. The accident happened shortly after 7 p.m. and Griffith Bros. out of South River had the rig and this set of moose bars cleared out by 9 p.m. There were no injuries reported with the accident.

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Starts with a premier, ends with our kids

By Rob Leorn

All roads in Ontario still lead to Dalton McGuinty. Or at least that is the way it can seem some days as we struggle to do the simple things like keeping the lights on.

This week the road being driven down, or rather not, is Highway 522 from Trout Creek to the Argyle area.

Late buses serving the families of that area are currently in their second year of hiatus with little movement at the moment to bring them back. For anyone with their formative years tied to the Almaguin Highlands, we know this is a travesty and an attack not on some tradition but a key piece of our identity.

But this isn't about a school

principal who is out-of-touch or school board that doesn't care or some other ridiculous scenario where a failing to understand means both sides have to lose. No, it is much simpler than that. It is about money.

Which comes back, in recent history, to Dalton McGuinty, who happens to be out and about these days logging a book on the many lessons he learned while serving as the 24th premier of this province. It is probably a safe bet that what you won't find in those pages are how he caused what we hope is not permanent damage to the education system, that most recently has hit Argyle and could hit the rest of our communities in the next few years.

Wrapped in the legislative bow of the "Healthy Schools Act" was very crippling regulations pull-

ing pop, chips and chocolate bars from the vending machines of high schools. With the sweets went the revenue from the sales.

As far as Donna Breault, Almaguin's current principal, can track the revenue loss for a school like Almaguin was devastating. Enacted in full around 2010, Breault can recall the school she was working in at the time watching revenue from vending machines go from \$40,000 to \$1,500 in a single year.

"When I say it plummeted, I mean it plummeted."

Next thing we know the high school is charging kids bigger and bigger fees to play team sports and services like the late buses are cut in half with the Argyle route gutted altogether.

The last year it ran the late bus - a van actually - out to Argyle cost

about \$130 plus tax per day. Throw some HST on it and let's go with the round number of \$300 per week for two trips. It's not huge, but it is not small either.

And while that math is pretty simple, the tougher calculation is how do you put a price on a kid being able to join the school band, join the drama troupe or make the starting line of the high school team?

Those are things that are not for everyone, granted. But, by gosh, it should really be more than some sort of fantasy teenage ideal that every kid would at least start from the same place when it came to an opportunity for these experiences.

Make no bones about it, the kids and their families in Argyle are getting the raw end of the stick here and, if we don't watch it, this is something that could easily

spread to other opportunities that kids, people, parents, who grew up here took for granted and used as the baseline for their own independence.

It'd be nice to think there are enough of the lessons still kicking around that we'd be able to do something about this, to stop the cuts from rolling back over these kids and protecting some of the items we are only now appreciating.

As a kid who grew up on a farm at the end of the road in Restoule, unquestionably the late buses opened up places for me to play and learn I would never have had a chance at otherwise. Most importantly, they gave all of my teammates, castmates, friends and me the independence to get there on our own.

We know we can do better. Let's start talking about how.



PHOTO BY REBECCA ZANUSSI
DOLLARS AND SENSE: Kearney council met on Nov. 18 to discuss, among other agenda items, a possible honorarium increase. Councillors Cheryl Philip, left, Carol Ballantyne, and Ron Patton all voted against the increase, as did Coun. Liz Stermsek, not pictured.

Honorarium pay raise leaves council uncomfortable

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the first to speak to the proposed resolution.

"Number one, it works out to about approximately four per cent and I think that's too high, first of all. ... With our budget cuts and with the negotiations for the union, I just don't feel that council should be increasing the honorariums. I think it's up to the previous council to do it for the new council and as I understand that did happen."

The previous council, under former mayor Paul Tomlinson, voted to increase council honorariums from \$300 per month, to \$600 per month in 2011. At the time, the council made the payment a fixed, monthly income, rather than a per-meeting payment.

Stermsek wasn't the only one to oppose giving council an additional boost.

"I feel the same way," Coun. Carol Ballantyne said.

"We did receive a substantial

increase bestowed by the last council. I do not feel comfortable voting on a raise for myself."

Coun. Ron Patton also agreed with Stermsek and Ballantyne.

"I think we have to set an example here," he said.

"Some people have said our costs have gone up from being on council, but being on council is partly being a volunteer. On other committees you don't get paid anything. Also, our costs have not actually gone up, because gas is quite a bit lower price than it was last year."

Coun. Cheryl Philip was not as adamant as the others, but she, too, expressed concern about upping council's pay.

"Well, it's a hard decision to make," Philip said.

"Four per cent is high, but I understand expenses of councillors who work harder than others who are on more committees and do more running around, but hopefully those who do that are

putting in expense sheets for mileage and getting paid, because you should be. So, that given, I guess we should be ready for the next council, giving the next crew their raise."

Wills, the person who brought the raise forward for consideration, was the lone voice in favour.

"My data that I gave you was based on fact that other municipalities of comparable size, councillors are getting paid more money for doing the same services," Wills said.

"Now, albeit, some of them upfront are not receiving council honorariums as high as ours. You will notice some of them are receiving meeting pays as high as \$125 per meeting, including council meetings. So, when you roll that

into the basket, they're still making more than Kearney council members. I didn't look at percentages. I looked at what I felt was a fair increase per year."

Wills also noted the previous council had voted in their increase in 2011, while there were still three years left in the term.

Her arguments, however, didn't convince the others at the table. In a recorded vote, requested by both Stermsek and Patton, all councillors but Wills voted against the increase. Mayor Lance Thrall and Coun. Paul Ziraldo were not in attendance.

"I don't feel comfortable voting myself an increase," Patton said.

"If I could have done that when I was working in the ministry, I wouldn't be sitting here."

Health authority asking council's understanding

Continued From Page 1
Wills informed her council about the steps the health authority, chaired by Robert Morton, is taking when looking at the single-hospital issue. Wills and Kearney Clerk Brenda Fraser met with Morton on Nov. 2 to go over the issue.

"We know it's going to be one hospital. That is the conversation we had," Wills said at the Nov. 18 council meeting.

"But what Mr. Morton has asked is that the councillors and reeves and mayors in our catchment area, which is Almaguin/Parry Sound district, understand the need going forward for the single-siting of a hospital and to work with them to support the

single site location, as opposed to maintaining the two locations we currently have now that are no longer feasible based on the demographics of such."

The committee met for the first time last week with Still at the table. Wills is going to continue providing updates to Kearney council as the work progresses, though that could take some time.

"This is not going to happen tomorrow," she said.

"It's going to happen over a ten-year period. So, all they're asking for at this point is that you understand what they're faced with in the LHIN and that we need to focus on the ten-year window and prospects of only one hospital."

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