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Lincoln County Humane Society takes over NOTL animal control

Evan Saunders
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

The Lincoln County Humane Society is now handling all animal-related needs in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The agency was awarded a joint contract between NOTL and the Town of Grimsby to take over animal services at the end of December.

It is a four-year contract, Lincoln County Humane Society executive director

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Ashley Simpson makes final trip home to NOTL

Evan Saunders
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

With the remains of Ashley Simpson finally brought home, her parents Cindy and John Simpson say they are relieved.

"This is what we wanted. We wanted her home," Cindy said as she sat beside the urn holding her daughter's ashes.

Ashley, who was 32, went missing in 2016 in a remote community in British Columbia. Her remains were discovered in Decem-

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Polar vortex spurs icewine harvest

Group of keen photographers joins to capture the magic at Pillitteri Estates



Jamie Slingerland, director of viniculture at Pillitteri Estates Winery, drives the Great Grape Gobbler harvester early Tuesday morning. Some growers picked grapes a week earlier when the temperature dropped to -10C. Read the full story on Page 12. LARRY MATHEWSON PHOTO

Restaurateurs adapt to yet another lockdown

Jill Troyer
The Lake Report

With a weary sense of déjà vu, NOTL restaurateurs have once again closed their doors to indoor diners and turned their focus to takeout food.

Chairs are empty, cardboard cartons are piled on tables and servers take orders over the phone.

Some are open seven days a week, while others have reduced their hours to four or five days weekly. Others have

decided not to open at all.

The shift to takeout is familiar territory and the impact on their businesses is top of mind, but all business owners worry most about their employees.

At The Grist, in St. Davids, proprietor Rob Begin says, "I've got 42 employees to worry about every day, because we can't keep them all working right now."

Begin is concerned for their well-being and also wonders whether some will

come back.

For Ruffino's executive chef and owner Ryan Crawford, keeping everyone healthy and happy is job one. "Our biggest mandate is to keep as many people employed as possible, in a safe work environment."

David McDonald, the general manager at Bricks & Barley in Virgil, says, "We'll have to see what's feasible as we go on. We're trying to keep people employed and contribute to the community

with specials and family deals."

The Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit will give eligible workers up to \$300 per week, but Garrison House chef/owner David Watt notes the support for laid-off workers is inadequate.

"Hopefully they up the ante. How can someone live on \$300 a week?"

It's a sentiment echoed by Paul Dietsch, co-owner of the Sandtrap Pub.

"Staff are discouraged and

worried financially. Christmas just ended and most people spent a little bit there. What family can live on \$300 a week?" he said.

Ravine Estate Winery co-proprietor Paul Harber said, "We have 150 staff at our peak and 80 at this time of year, but we can't keep them all now. We'll keep as many as we can employed, working on summer programs and event planning."

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Average NOTL house prices break the \$1 million barrier

Kevin MacLean
The Lake Report

House prices in Niagara-on-the-Lake soared to record levels in 2021

and the president of the Niagara Association of Realtors sees no sign of the trend abating.

The benchmark average price for homes sold in NOTL last year broke

through the \$1 million barrier for the first time as prices jumped about 33 per cent.

Doug Rempel, of Bosley Real Estate in NOTL and president of the regional association, expects home sales across Niagara will continue to climb.

"I think the demand of people coming to the Niagara Region is not going

to subside," Rempel said in an interview Tuesday.

"I believe that we may very well have an increase greater than what may be projected nationally," he added.

While it's impossible to predict with certainty, across the country prices are expected to rise about 7.5

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Doug Rempel, president of the Niagara Association of Realtors, predicts prices will keep rising. RICHARD HARLEY



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Early Tuesday morning Pillitteri's Jamie Slingerland was out harvesting icewine grapes. A polar vortex created the right cold conditions. LARRY MATHEWSON

Frigid nights perfect for **icewine** harvest

Jill Troyer
The Lake Report

When the temperature plunges to -15C overnight, most of us snuggle deeper into our duvets.

But grape growers and winemakers bundle up and brave the bitter cold to harvest precious grapes for making icewine.

And that's exactly where they were in the wee hours of Tuesday morning this week.

The windchill made it -21C, but those who work in the Niagara wine industry have to be hardy.

Regulations require the temperature to be at least -8C, or colder, before grapes can be picked for icewine.

According to Matthias Oppenlaender, the chair of Grape Growers of Ontario, just about everyone is fin-

ished harvesting now.

Grower Curtis Wiley and some others picked Vidal grapes a week earlier, on Jan. 3, overnight into Jan. 4, when the temperature dropped to -10C.

And this Monday night into Tuesday morning, "there were a lot of people out picking," said Oppenlaender, adding, "It's a real relief, a really, really good feeling when you're done and you can relax a little."

With the polar vortex settling over the province and bringing frigid temperatures to Niagara, harvesters at Pillitteri Estates Winery in Virgil were among those who were out Monday night.

"Some years are colder than others. The last few harvests were right on that -8C to -9C cusp but this year was a bitterly cold one," said Jamie Slingerland, Pillitteri's

director of viticulture.

Their harvest continued into the morning, for 16 straight, chilly hours.

Also at Pillitteri this year, members of the Niagara Falls Camera Club were on hand to document the harvest.

Club member Ron Planche noted, "The icewine industry forms an important part of the economic strength of the Niagara economy. Our members are very interested in giving visual strength to this industry. The fact that harvesting icewine happens in the dark is an excellent challenge to our club members."

The photographers also had the chance to see the pressing of grapes at the winery and photograph the first batch of grapes as they were squeezed through the traditional basket presses.

Last year harvest conditions didn't arrive until February, which is later than usual.

This time of year is ideal, said Oppenlaender, explaining that the longer the grapes stay on the vines, the more are lost to birds and other pests. "We all see the huge flocks of starlings and the icewine grapes are ideal food for them."

In it's 2021 Vintage Report, VQA Ontario reported that growers had reserved 1,952 tonnes of grapes for this year's harvest, which is almost double last year's record low of 1,068 tonnes, though still well below previous years (in 2019 it was 5,789 tonnes).

The drop in the volume of grapes reserved for icewine is because of lower international sales of icewine since the pandemic began.



A group of keen photographers from the Niagara Falls Camera Club were up early and bundled up to capture the magic of the icewine grape harvest. RON PLANCHE

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