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Plans for hovercraft service from Niagara still afloat, promoter says

Richard Hutton
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

A lot of time has passed since there has been any news on the progress of Hoverlink — more than a year, in fact.

But the man behind the project says that doesn't mean work hasn't been going on behind the scenes to make the proposed hovercraft service between St. Catharines and Toronto a reality.

"There's a series of announcements coming," Chris Morgan told The Lake Report, adding that more will be unveiled next month. He said he'd like to be able to share more details but he's not able to do so yet.

"I can't say very much: there is a (non-disclosure agreement)," Morgan said. The Niagara-on-the-Lake resident founded Hoverlink Ontario Inc. and first revealed plans to launch a hovercraft service between

St. Catharines and Toronto in the fall of 2022. But, in March 2023, Morgan said plans had been delayed by a year but that the service was coming soon. The delay, he said at

that time, was the result of governing bodies on both sides of Lake Ontario wanting to "ensure full compliance is met on every level."

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NOTL vineyards survive bitter frost

Jill Troyer
The Lake Report

NOTL vineyards dodged extensive damage from the dangerous intersection of early bud break and April frost.

T.S. Eliot wrote "April is the cruellest month," and farmers often feel its sting. April ushers in the promise of new growth, and the threat of killing frost.

Vineyards in NOTL are ahead of schedule because of some warm days in April, which making them vulnerable to a spring frost, which descended with a vengeance last week.

For two nights, temperatures dropped low enough to flirt with disaster, as the tender buds had just started to push open.

"They were really cold nights," said Matthias Oppenlaender, a local grape grower, and Chair of the Grape Growers of Ontario, adding, "it was a little scary that night."

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One man's journey with ALS

From healthy to long-term care in months, Peter Earle is closing up shop. And life

Richard Harley | The Lake Report

Peter Earle is preparing to die on June 4.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake men's shop owner has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, which has robbed him of his ability to speak, his mobility and soon his life.

As the disease progresses, it is forcing him to close his popular Queen Street retail store, Halley's Fashion for Men, and prompted him to move into Upper Canada Lodge so he can have the help and care he needs.

ALS is insidious and takes a physical toll, but it hasn't affected Earle's intellect or awareness as he keeps up on the news and oversees the dissolution of his business, including a second store he opened in Kingston in 2017.

Make no mistake, his brain is working at full speed.

Now, almost completely paralyzed, he has no use of his hands. His speech has gotten progressively worse and it is difficult to understand him.

He has limited speech assistance, which helped him communicate during one of the two interviews for this story.

Earle relies on a wheelchair and inno-

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Peter Earle was diagnosed with ALS in April 2023. The disease progressed quickly and by November he was living in long-term care at Upper Canada Lodge. Now he is closing his Queen Street menswear store and making plans to end his life on his own terms. RICHARD HARLEY

Controversial King St. condo approved by land tribunal

Evan Loree
The Lake Report

The Ontario Land Tribunal has approved a controversial condo planned at the end of King Street.

The 17-unit, three-storey

project originally proposed by Josh Bice of Butler's Garden Development Inc., has been greenlit by Ontario's arbitrator of land disputes after the owner appealed the project for a non-decision late October 2023.

In his decision report dated April 26, tribunal member Kurtis Andrews ordered that the town grant Bice's appeal to rezone the land on the condition that a stormwater management plan be prepared to the

town's satisfaction. The property will be rezoned to permit the jump in density, to exempt it from rear and front yard setback standards, and to remove requirements for a children's play area.

While Niagara-on-the-Lake staff recommended the build be permitted subject to a stormwater management plan, council refused Bice's requests in January.

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The proposed condo.



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Left: Seen in his room at Upper Canada Lodge, Peter Earle uses his iPad with eye-tracking software. Right: Earle at his store, Halley's Fashion for Men. RICHARD HARLEY

‘I have no communication. And that is no life’

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vative eye-tracking technology that recognizes his eye movements, allowing him to operate a computer in his room.

With his brain fully aware and functional, it's a frustrating life.

A man who lived for social interaction and communication, Earle now is mostly restricted to creating short emails, each slowly, painstakingly constructed as his computer interprets the blinking of his eyes.

Through it all, he remains in high spirits — as high as they can be — and is still active in his business, booking advertisements to sell off his remaining merchandise.

Halley's Fashion for Men, which Earle took over 10 years ago, has been around since 1992.

It is a bona fide retail landmark in downtown Niagara-on-the-Lake. And he loves running it.

If you live in town, you've likely seen him on the street, around the shop or perhaps at the Stagecoach restaurant getting breakfast.

He wasn't always in the fashion business. He changed careers after 30 years as the head of government and media relations at steel giant ArcelorMittal Dofasco.

With his experience, he's media savvy and closely follows politics.

He accomplished most of it alone. Married once long ago, he had no children and never wed again.

Now 74, he is forced to

come to terms with his illness, which came on suddenly.

In July 2022, Earle knew something was wrong. He had symptoms of what he suspected was a neurological disorder.

"I'm pretty intuitive," Earle says during an interview in his room at Upper Canada Lodge.

He saw his family physician and was immediately sent to the McMaster University Medical Centre.

He was told his suspicions were right — he had all the signs of a neurological disorder, but doctors weren't sure what it was.

By the end of October, he was advised he might have ALS.

At that point it was manageable.

He was having issues with his hands and arms not co-operating, but he was still driving to Kingston to manage his other shop, still working.

He was officially diagnosed with ALS in April 2023.

Even with the diagnosis, he still felt mostly OK. His right hand and arm were weak and he had trouble controlling them. His body was starting to betray him.

Through July 2023, though his symptoms had progressed mildly, he was still working, still having those breakfasts at the Stagecoach, where he'd talk politics with friends.

"I was near normal," he says.

That August, he began only driving locally and stopped going to Kingston. Things were looking worse.

On Sept. 1, 2023, he fell

at home and couldn't get up. He had lost control of his arms.

Pulling himself with one arm, it took him an hour and a half to crawl to his front door, where he shouted and shouted until his neighbour Joe Rose heard him and came to help.

“My mind is still good. But it's the right thing to do. The alternative is much worse. Why would I go on like this and get nothing but worse?”

PETER EARLE
ON PLANNING TO END HIS LIFE

His condition deteriorated rapidly.

He was admitted to the St. Catharines hospital on Sept. 4 and Hotel Dieu Shaver rehab hospital on Sept. 20.

On Nov. 2, he moved into Upper Canada Lodge. Just like that.

He had left his home in September — “and I never went back.”

He says he will take his life into his own hands when he loses complete control of his body. That is happening quickly and June 4 is barely a month away.

In the meantime, friends have been taking him out about once a week to the Shaw Festival just down the road.

And while he's in good spirits despite it all, the

difficulty communicating can be frustrating.

It's particularly tough in social situations.

"I had a very hard time at a lunch meeting with my neighbours," he says.

"Five people in a social setting, who are not used to hearing me. It's very hard for everyone."

Sometimes people don't know how to interact. Because his speech is much slower than normal, they often start filling in the blanks for him, or trying to finish his sentences — which he finds irritating.

"They do all sorts of things other than listening and waiting and clarifying when they don't understand."

Dr. William Brown, a friend of Peter's, says he's guilty of the same thing.

"I mean, I noticed that the tendency for most people who visit him, is it takes so long to get it out, that they try to complete what he's saying. They kind of step on him."

"And I do it, too. But he really doesn't like that. Partly because a lot of us were guessing wrong."

As Earle notes, "Everyone is guilty of that because we take our communication for granted."

Brown, a professor of neurology (who writes a weekly column for this newspaper), met Earle by chance at the community centre in January 2023.

He noticed Earle on one of the stationary bikes and saw that his right arm was weak. He struck up a conversation.

They realized Earle's ALS specialist was John

Turnbull, a former student of Brown's at Western University, who now leads the ALS clinic at McMaster in Hamilton.

In those early days, it was just Peter's right arm giving him trouble.

They became friends and would go out to the Charles Inn for a drink about once a week.

"And then that right arm, it was almost useless within six months from my meeting him," Brown says.

Then it was his left arm and then his speech began to decline.

Brown visits him regularly at Upper Canada Lodge and admits it's tough to watch what Earle is going through.

"Here's a guy, now, almost completely paralyzed — functionally completely paralyzed in his arms — so he can't use his iPhone and can't write stuff out," Brown said.

"And I think he's found it very frustrating."

It's especially challenging for someone like Earle, who is "all there."

"It's really frustrating to tell people what you're feeling, what you're thinking about, what's really bugging you, what you want and whether they're fed up with you for the moment, or kind of whatever — or they want to go to the can," Brown says.

It also can be awkward for people who try to communicate with him.

"What do you say to somebody that's in such bad shape?"

Brown says the technology is coming along to help people like Earle commu-

nicate, but it's not there yet, nor is it affordable for the average person.

But for someone like Earle, the technology could literally be a life-saver.

"If reasonable speech could be restored to Peter, he would probably want to continue on. Probably. That's what I think. I've never asked him that question," Brown says.

Knowing the date he will die is comforting in a way for Earle.

"My mind is still good," he says. "But it's the right thing to do. The alternative is much worse."

Eventually, as full muscle control is lost, ALS would steal his ability to breathe.

"Why would I go on like this and get nothing but worse?" he says.

"Really, I have no communication. And that is no life."

Earle is full of praise for the medical system, including the staff at Hotel Dieu Shaver and Upper Canada Lodge, who have helped him manage his life and cope.

He's extremely thankful to his staff and his old friend Warwick Jones, who have helped him continue to operate and close down the business, and to longtime friend Jim Ryan.

On June 4, Earle will embark on his final life journey.

There will be a reception to celebrate his life on June 12 at the Niagara-on-the-Lake Golf Club.

If Earle could be there, no doubt the latest in news and politics would be a big part of the conversation.

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