

Sales at Port Bruce area businesses down since bridge collapse

by Craig Bradford of The Aylmer Express
Several businesses are reporting similar amounts of lost revenue due to the Port Bruce bridge still being out.

The Aylmer Express asked some Port Bruce and Copenhagen business owners how their sales have been so far this year compared to past years and the answers were strikingly similar.

The bridge over Catfish Creek connecting the lakeside village to Imperial Road and communities to the north collapsed on Feb. 23. A dump truck and its driver were stranded on the bridge during the collapse.

While the driver was rescued by Malahide volunteer firefighters the same day of the collapse, it took over a month for the dump truck to be lifted and removed from the bridge deck.

Since then, the collapsed section of the bridge has been broken up and the debris taken away.

Elgin County has bought a \$625,000 temporary one-lane bridge that will connect Bank Street with Dexter Line.

The interim fix, including the temporary bridge purchase, is estimated to cost \$1.52-million.

The temporary bridge is expected to be operational by early August if there are no complications.

The county is holding a public information session on the subject at East Elgin Community Complex on Monday, June 11, from 7 to 9 p.m.

The hope is that a permanent bridge can be in place by June 2019.

Sandcastle

Sandcastle owners Gary and Barbara Scrivens took over the beachside restaurant four years ago and they opened for this season on weekends in April.

Now open throughout the week, Mr. Scrivens has been tracking sales so far this season to compare them to last year when Port Bruce still had a bridge.

"I did an analysis of all

seasons we've been here and this year's season is down 30 percent so far," he said. That equated to over \$25,000 in lower revenue so far this season compared with the same period in 2017.

"And we can't get it back," Mr. Scrivens said. "And we're spending money to tell people we're still open and it's only 12 more minutes to get here."

His last comment was a reference to the official detour from the north that has motorists destined for Port Bruce travelling south on Imperial Road to turn west onto John Wise Line and then south on Quaker Road.

The detour takes motorists through Sparta south to Dexter Line where they are instructed to turn east onto Dexter Line and into Port Bruce.

Mr. Scrivens said he was "very disappointed" with the county signage for the detour.

He said some customers coming from the west got confused with the wording of a sign at Quaker Road and instead of continuing east on Dexter, they would turn north and end up in Sparta.

Mr. Scrivens said the sign at Imperial Road and John Wise Line also confuses some customers.

The Sandcastle also gets calls from some motorists who ignore or don't understand the "bridge closed" signs on Imperial Road and wind up driving south to where the bridge used to be.

While on average about 50 percent of his customers come from the Aylmer area, Mr. Scrivens said the Sandcastle has had none from there for the restaurant's popular Sunday brunches so far this year.

"Not getting the temporary bridge until August takes

away half of our business," Mr. Scrivens said. "If this trend continues, I don't know where our business will be."

The Scrivens have tried to inform their customers they are open for business and have bought signage to help guide them to Port Bruce.

Mr. Scrivens said he emailed Malahide Mayor Dave Mennill and urged him to have the detour signage changed to make the directions more clear.



"So far we've received no response which is disheartening," he said. "The least they can do is pay for some newspaper and radio ads."

Mr. Scrivens said the business was "very competitive."

"We were first hit with the minimum wage increase and then the bridge collapsed," he said. "I don't know how to counteract it. If this continues, staff will lose hours or even their jobs when we aren't able to pay them."

The couple have turned to their creative side to help their own business and invented a new culinary sensation: the Broken Bridge Burger.

The couple paid "a couple hundred bucks" to produce specially designed boxes to serve the new burger meal in.

The burger box looks like a dump truck.

The Broken Bridge has an eight-ounce beef patty, bacon, cheese, lettuce, tomato, pickle slices and two pieces of perch with tartar sauce.

The burger weighs about a pound, Mr. Scrivens said.

"It's surf and turf on a bun served in a dump truck!"

"It hasn't been a fun season so far but we are selling a lot of Broken Bridge Burgers," Mr. Scrivens said.

Corner View

Corner View Café owner Nathan Smale has for eight years owned the business that's located across the street from Wonnacott Park in Port Bruce.

He opened the restaurant on Good Friday, March 30 from Thursday to Sunday and recently extended the hours from Tuesday to Sunday and will be seven days a week when school ends near the end of June.

"There has been a drop in sales compared to last year," Mr. Smale said. "Approximately \$4,000 less in April compared to last year."

"It is too early in the year to determine if the bridge collapse has any impact on loss revenue," he continued. "The weather is the biggest issue as we have not had decent weather until recently. The weather in April was cool and wet most weekends."

He has spent about \$500 in advertising so far this season in local publications and regularly updates Corner View's Facebook page to attract and retain customers.

"We still have our best customers make the journey daily around the detour just to enjoy the food and socializing at Corner View Café," Mr. Smale said. "Sure there may be a few that do not come as often but the majority of our clientele come just as much as if the bridge was still operational."

He has customers who come from Brantford every week that make the trip despite the extra time for the detour.

"The biggest issue is staffing," Mr. Smale said. "A few of my employees feel the drive around is too much for them to work at the restaurant. Most of them still do the drive which I am very blessed and proud to have them as part of Corner View Café. I agree with them that it is extra time and expense to get to work."

"On the bright side of the detour though is that it is such a beautiful scenic drive," he continued. "I see all types of wildlife everyday coming and going from work and I actually enjoy the drive."

He tried to have Malahide officials change one of the detour signs and was told that it couldn't be altered.

Then a month later, Mr. Smale saw the sign in question had been changed from "Local Traffic Only" to "All Businesses Open."

He said the "Local Traffic Only" deterred potential Port Bruce visitors.

Rush Creek

Ron Barr of Rush Creek Wines, located west of Copenhagen on Jamestown Line, took over the business last November.

"We've seen a significant drop in business," he said since the Port Bruce bridge collapsed. "We are probably down 25 to 30 percent [in sales] and I track daily."

"We are very dependent on transient traffic down to Port Bruce and then to Port Stanley," Mr. Barr continued. "That has been cut off with the 14-kilometre detour. We have had to invest heavily in advertising and area signs."

Those signs include Elgin County blue tourism signs. "This bridge has to get fixed," Mr. Barr said. "Someone should be held accountable for the dump truck being on the bridge for a month."

He was told the holdup was because of a "conflict between the truck company and the insurance company."

"I would like to see something addressed about the

bridge on my road on Jamestown Line," Mr. Barr said.

The single-lane bridge west of Rush Creek Wines was closed right after the Port Bruce bridge collapse as it isn't suitable for trucks or winter traffic, Mr. Barr said.

"Let's make all the bridges safe so we're not inconveniencing travellers and local businesses," he said.

"We've spent significant dollars to keep us afloat," Mr. Barr continued. "We are scrambling, no doubt. I don't know if I can keep the business open if this continues for another year."

He estimated his business had spent between \$15,000 and \$20,000 on signage along with print and radio advertising.

Wood Connection

Long-time Wood Connection General Store owner Bob Trimmer said he hadn't officially kept track of whether or not his business has lost revenue so far this year compared to past years as his busy time was a bit later during the tourist season in the warmer summer months.

But he estimated sales were down about 25 percent.

"Customers come this way to go to Port Bruce and I get some customers from Port Bruce," Mr. Trimmer said. "Most visitors stop in before going to the beach."

"I have a lot of people asking me how to get to the beach," he continued.

He tells them to take either Sparta Line, which has a gravel section before getting to Sparta, or the official John Wise Line detour to Port Bruce.

Village Market

In contrast, the Village Market in Sparta, located on Quaker Road on the official detour route, is seeing an uptick in business.

"We've noticed some increase," owner Vanessa Warner said, but she couldn't quantify the change.

"The first little while after the bridge fell, we noticed more newspaper sales," she said, including of the Express.

Ms. Warner said it was hard

to tell if her convenience store was seeing more customers because so many were seasonal residents at campgrounds and trailer parks in Port Bruce along with the visitors attending the now-open St. Thomas Raceway Park just west of Sparta.

"Joe [Goncalves, the owner of Papa Joe's Pizzeria located at the back of the Village Market] has noticed more pizza sales," Ms. Warner said.

Since it opened, Papa Joe's has always delivered to Port

Bruce, she noted.

Ms. Warner had noticed more milk and bread coming off of her store's shelves along with hamburger buns and "hot-dog buns are flying out of here."

Ms. Warner said the Express started selling out just after the Port Bruce bridge collapsed. After that she noticed a bump in sales when there's a story about the Port Bruce bridge.

"Tell your editor to keep those bridge stories coming," Ms. Warner laughed.



Anita Miller and Tyler Nancekivell, both of Aylmer, were crowned queen and king of the East Elgin Secondary School prom that was held at Quai du Vin Estate Winery near Sparta on Saturday evening, May 26. Mr. Nancekivell will attend Brock University in St. Catharines in the fall where he will study kinesiology. Ms. Miller, originally from Paraguay (her family moved to Aylmer in 2008), will return to South America on a bird conservation mission. (AE/Craig Bradford)

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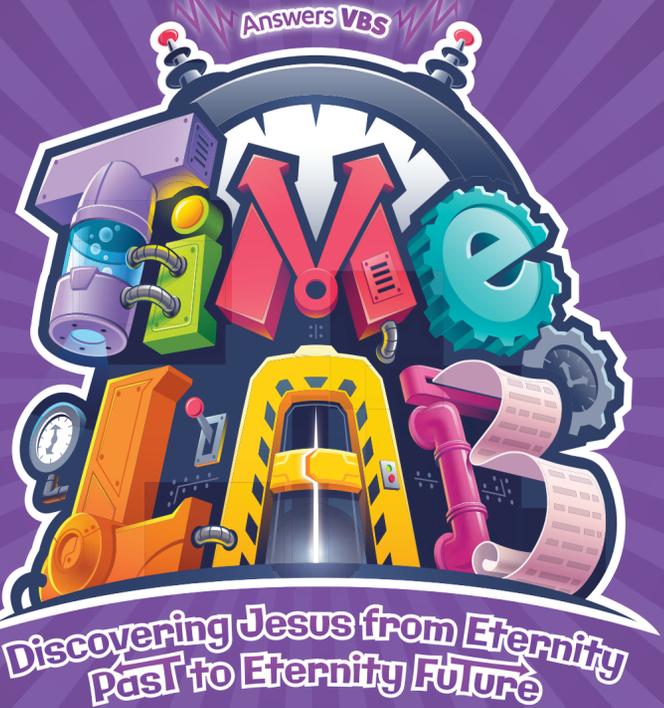


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