

AYLMER EXPRESS

THE VOICE OF EAST ELGIN FOR 140 YEARS.
 PUBLISHED BY THE AYLMEER EXPRESS LIMITED - J.H. HUESTON, PRESIDENT
 PM40012174 390 TALBOT ST. EAST, AYLMEER, ONTARIO PHONE: 519-773-3126

WHERE THE COMMUNITY MEETS

12 PAGES, No. 09 March 1, 2023
 www.aylmerexpress.com

\$2.25
 Includes 5% HST 6 27843 25426 3

Express-O-Gram Province green-lights St. Thomas grab of big chunk of CE

TURNING LITTER INTO HOPE
 A contributor, Rose Beuk, was kind enough to send a photograph this week of Vienna's Laura and Bruce Edwards. They are recreational walkers, the best kind, who combine civic pride and action with their healthy endeavours. They gather trash on their walks - junk, waste and way too many alcohol containers - that is the detritus mindlessly discarded or ejected from cars by their exact opposite - community defilers.

Father always taught that it was a sad bird that would foul its own nest, but the human has that self-destructive quality in spades. Careless, thoughtless littering is only the thin edge of human laziness manifested in its most destructive form in oil field spills and abandoned wells, toxic chemistry dumping and waste sites full of easily recyclable commodities.

In the recent government simplistic prohibition of plastic bags at grocery stores, they overlook the fine example set by the beer store where beer bottles are returned, reused and recycled on a near total basis. It would be just the stroke of a pen that would cause deposits of whatever motivation needed to see that all containers were returned, reused or recycled. And there should be a substantial penalty for any one-use plastic or commodity to make that supplier consider a more responsible alternative.

But I digress. It all starts with people like the Edwards. I've seen their like before and will again. They are quiet community leaders setting a stellar example for the rest of us.

They start by taking care of the details that build toward a better, cleaner, more environmentally-responsible future.

We have seen some disgustingly, irresponsible, anti-community behaviour in recent years in East

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by Joe Konecny
 Central Elgin correspondent

Trading 1,500 acres of farmland, wetlands and woodlots for economic development and jobs is now firmly on the Ontario government's agenda for Elgin County, while local elected officials who have been briefed on it are stifled by legal gag orders.

Premier Doug Ford's government introduced legislation on February 22 that, if approved, would allow St. Thomas to annex a huge piece of land from Central Elgin in order to expand an industrial park on the city's northeast boundary.

Ontario Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade Minister Vic Fedeli, in a statement, said much of the property being assembled by the city, valued at potentially hundreds of millions of dollars, is intended to "strengthen Ontario's competitiveness" and "attract large-scale advanced manufacturing investments."

"Our government is leaving no stone unturned in our efforts to attract new investments that will create more good-paying jobs and strengthen the economy. Creating more shovel-ready mega sites will help Ontario remain competitive as the province competes for major global investments."

The province launched a "Job Site Challenge" in 2019, and municipalities, economic development agencies and industrial property owners were invited to identify 500-to-1,500-acre land parcels suitable

for large-scale manufacturing uses.

The Central Elgin land, apparently submitted by the City of St. Thomas, was "identified as one of the most investment-ready mega sites in Ontario," according to the ministry.

St. Thomas first announced a "mega-site development" on June 8, 2022, indicating that it "has entered into binding agreements to acquire over 800 acres of land in the northeast area of St. Thomas for strategic economic development purposes."

The size of the development jumped to 1,500 acres when the provincial government tabled its legislation on Feb. 22.

Mayor Joe Preston told the Express in an interview, "We said all along we're going to create a good industrial site."

"We're going to purchase the land needed to do that and to attract the largest of investments that we can. I think we knew all along that we would need to do a boundary readjustment."

"I need land to grow industrially, economically, to create jobs for that same growth in St. Thomas that requires people to buy hundreds of homes, and acres of commercial and retail property."

The mayor was referring to Statistics Canada data indicating St. Thomas's population had grown by 10.1 percent from 2016 to 2021, even higher than the 10 per cent growth rate in London.

If that trend continued, StatsCan predicted that St.

Thomas can expect another 10,000 new residents in a decade, or 1,000 newcomers a year.

Confirmation of whether or not the province is actively engaged with specific industrial suitors is kept secret by non-

disclosure agreements signed by each and every government and local official, elected or not, that is involved in the process of land acquisition and planning.

Costs associated with the acquisition are also being kept

under wraps.

Annexation was necessary, the ministry asserted, because with "land divided between two municipalities, with different permitting requirements, potential investors could face red tape and delays from unnece-

sary duplication.

"If passed, the proposed legislation will adjust the municipal boundaries, so the site resides fully in St. Thomas, speeding up construction timelines and ensuring that the site

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Amy Bartram, left, and Dawn Lewis on behalf of host Aylmer Curling Club's Business Ladies League welcoming the London Curling Club team of Stacey Farley, Dawn Lewis, Janet Legue, and Judi Le Blanc, dressed for the theme to the

annual "Winespiel" on Saturday, Feb. 25. The event paired curling with wine tastings. "It's wine-derful," Judi joked. The bonspiel involved 12 teams. (AE/Rob Perry)

Complex board opts for \$45,000 repair, even without a guarantee it will last

by Rob Perry
 of The Aylmer Express

East Elgin Community Complex board members on Tuesday, Feb. 21, approved the immediate repair of a rooftop "desiccant" (dehumidifier) unit, even though the company doing the work won't guarantee the fix will last, citing the age and state of the equipment.

Without the repair, summer ice rink rentals at the Complex would have had to be cancelled, and even the regular season,

which starts Aug. 15, might have been pushed back if weather was too hot then and even possibly in September and October.

The board is made up of all the members of Aylmer and Malahide councils. The Complex is administered by Aylmer, and town staff had recommended replacing the desiccant unit for \$200,000, which would take 10 months for parts to come in. Because of that, they urged cancelling and

cancel the summer ice schedule for this year.

Staff hoped a grant might be found that could help pay for the replacement.

Malahide Councillor Sarah Leitch asked how the closing of the one rink usually kept in ice would affect summer users groups.

"Can other arenas accommodate them?"

Aylmer Administrator Andy Grozelle said summer ice had previously been cancelled in

2015, to see if doing so saved money.

He believed one other area municipality provided summer ice rentals, but not consistently from year to year.

He was worried that cancelling the Complex summer ice season this year could result in the long-term loss of groups that now used it.

Complex Administrator Thom Pollard said EECC had gained a reputation for having

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Hildebrandt gets fine and probation for assault of Jack Dykxhoorn in 2020

by Brett Hueston
 of The Aylmer Express

Herbert Hildebrandt of Malahide was sentenced Thursday, Feb. 23 by Justice Mark Poland to two years' probation and 100 hours of community service for the December 2020 assault of Malahide resident Jack Dykxhoorn. He was also fined \$1,000 plus a victim surcharge of \$300.

Mr. Hildebrandt had been found guilty by Justice Poland on August 22, 2022 in the St. Thomas Ontario Court of Justice.

Mr. Dykxhoorn, 84 at the time of the assault, on Dec. 10, 2020, was pushed to the ground by Mr. Hildebrandt, then 37, roughly half the age and twice the size of Mr. Dykxhoorn at the former Ed Thompson farm

across from the Church of God, at the north end of Aylmer.

After receiving a phone call from his uncle Peter Hildebrandt at the church, Herbert Hildebrandt drove directly from work to the Thompson family farmhouse, across from the Church of God. Mr. Dykxhoorn and his friends had planted a "Be Kind, Wear a Mask" sign near the entrance to the church.

Mr. Hildebrandt parked so his pickup truck blocked Mr. Dykxhoorn's. Mr. Hildebrandt got out of his truck, confronted Mr. Dykxhoorn, and pushed him. Mr. Dykxhoorn stumbled back and hit his own pickup truck as he fell to the ground.

Mr. Hildebrandt is the son of Aylmer Church of God Pastor Henry Hildebrandt, who has

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Pupils at Springfield Public School, led by volunteer Maria Smith, back, have been making mats out of milk bags and have produced 20 so far this school year. The program has been running there since 2014 and gave pupils an opportunity to recycle something that might otherwise go to a dump and, develop patterning, fine motor skill and self-starting skills. The mats are highly durable and are distributed both within Southwestern Ontario and to 40 countries around the

world. Among the weavers this year has been, sitting, from left, Ashlynn Lake, Lily Wagg, Charlette Goodwill, Kamyrrn MacInnis and Kennedy Sproul; and standing: Andie Woolley, Jayme Woolley, Olivia Wilson, Rhya Shackelton, Aubrey Smith, Jerome Harriott, Ethan Geerts, Liah Goodwill and Rylee Ryckman. (AE/Rob Perry)

Milk bag weavers produce 20 mats

by Principal
 Tammy Waller Gordon
 Springfield Public School

Milk bag weaving has been a longstanding tradition at Springfield. It began in 2014 and was the idea of the Kindergarten educator team of Barb Esler and Sara McCormick.

Barb and Sara made it their mission to teach their students about how their actions affect themselves, family, community, and the world. Milk bag weaving provided the opportunity for students to repurpose something that would otherwise end up in the landfill, in addition to providing a much-needed resource for others.

The weaving also provided patterning work, fine motor skill development, and a self-regulation activity. Milk bag weaving has since evolved into a recess activity that is open to all students in grades 3-6 and is supported by the greater Springfield community through milk bag donation, cutting and preparing of the bags, coaching and donation and maintenance of the looms.

Students keep busy at least one recess per day weaving mats from the strong and colourful outer milk bag. These outer bags are made from non-biodegrad-

able plastic that is ultraviolet (light) resistant.

The bags are washable, last in the sun, and insects and snakes avoid the bags as they do not retain moisture. When the bags are woven, a soft and comfortable mat, with an unlimited lifespan, is produced.

These mats are sent to over 40 countries and to Canadian organizations that serve homeless people. Some of our mats are used in South-Western Ontario.

Springfield students, supported weekly by community volunteer Maria Smit, use donated bags that have been cut and flattened by community volunteers. The students then loop the bag rings together creating a chain for weaving.

Using a weaving loom, made for the school, and donated by fathers of our youngsters, students work to create patterns in their sleeping mats. A sleeping mat is a collaborative effort of students and community.

So far, in the 2022-2023, school year, our small but diligent weaving group has produced more than 20 sleeping mats.

Springfield is fortunate to have had the guidance of Ann Donkers, of the Aylmer United Church, throughout the years.



Finn McKenna, 9, left, and his brother Ollie, 7, of Aylmer went tubing on the icy slopes of Steen Park on Thursday, Feb. 23. The slick surface resulted in their tube travelling far further than usual at the bottom.
(AE/contributed by Ryan McKenna)

Central Elgin “disappointed” by provincial support for annexation

by Joe Konecny
Central Elgin correspondent
Mayor Andrew Sloan fears Central Elgin could be short-changed by the province’s proposal to annex property from his municipality to create a 1,500-acre “mega-site” industrial park in St. Thomas.

In a statement read at Central Elgin council’s meeting on Monday, Feb. 27, he said, “I support growth and investment for our region, but at what cost

to the Central Elgin ratepayer? “We are facing elevated costs of living, including increases in taxes and utility rates, and our employment lands were potential revenue for us to help lower these rates,” he continued, estimating that 75 per cent of the St. Thomas “mega-site” was within the current boundaries of Central Elgin.

He was “disappointed” the Ontario government resorted to annexation rather than nego-

tiating a “mutually agreeable boundary adjustment” between Central Elgin using provisions in the Ontario Municipal Act.

He has requested a meeting with provincial ministers to discuss the annexation.

“Our employment lands were our best hope to reduce the water (rates) and taxation levels for our residents,” he stated. “We have worked with (Elgin-Middlesex-London MPP Rob Flack) and the province to make

them aware of the challenges we are facing but want a firm commitment.”

Provincial and municipal officials are prevented by “non-disclosure agreements” from disclosing any details of the project.

However, some political leaders, including St. Thomas Mayor Joe Preston and MPP Flack, have broadly discussed some aspects.

Signs answer to traffic complaints

by Rob Perry
of The Aylmer Express

Aylmer councillors, after complaints and concerns from Elgin Estates resident Nancy Wolfe about new traffic lights at Talbot Street and Caverly Road creating problems for motorists exiting the subdivision on the north side of Talbot, will install “Do Not Block Intersection” signs near Linwood Drive, and Bodkin Avenue.

Talbot and Caverly is a T-intersection, with Caverly intersecting the through Talbot on the

south side of that street.

Not far to the east, at another T-intersection, Linwood Drive intersects Talbot on the north side.

Bodkin Street, a T-intersection providing, like Linwood, access to and egress from Elgin Estates, is not far away to the west, again on the north side of Talbot.

Ms. Wolfe had written to council last October, pointing out that motorists trying to turn left from either Linwood or Bodkin had a tough time doing so some of the time because stopped east-

west traffic at the Caverly Road stoplights backed up vehicles on either side of that intersection, blocking the Elgin Estates exits.

She suggested the best solution would be additional traffic lights at Talbot and Linwood, synchronized with the ones at Caverly.

Councillors in December ordered a review of Ms. Wolfe’s concerns, and Associate Director of Infrastructure and Operations Terry Koning presented a report at a meeting Wednesday, Feb. 15.

He noted that Talbot Street was also part of Highway 3, and any changes that might be made would have to be approved by the Ministry of Transportation of Ontario.

Because traffic lights could be installed or altered, the ministry would require a traffic study and detailed engineering designs that would cost \$50,000 to \$75,000.

A similar study, completed before the new traffic lights were installed at Caverly Road, found that no additional lights were warranted for traffic coming out of Elgin Estates, he continued. Actually installing additional

traffic lights and related equipment would require the removal of three large trees, and cost \$250,000 to \$275,000.

He instead recommended installing “Do Not Block Intersection” signs on Talbot Street in the area of Linwood Drive and Bodkin Avenue.

Ms. Wolfe had also raised concerns about street parking on Bodkin, which she described as curving and relatively narrow, and moving Canada Post community mailboxes from that area just north of Talbot.

He recommended and councillors approved removing street parking on the east side of Bodkin.

Mr. Koning added that Canada Post had been informed of concerns about its community mailboxes and was reviewing the situation.

Councillor Jamie Chapman said she believed the signs were a good idea.

Mayor Jack Couckuyt thanked Mr. Koning for “a quick and responsive report on a resident’s concerns.”

Province green-lights St. Thomas grab of big chunk of CE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
is truly shovel-ready for potential investment.”

The government also indicated it will continue to work with other municipalities across Ontario to identify more large-scale industrial sites.

Mayor Preston said, “Look, I’ve had more than one person come up to me and say you need to stop this,” referring to criticism the city was growing too quickly.

“I suggested, because there is a plethora of people who want to live in southwestern Ontario and particularly St. Thomas, why would I want to get in the way of that. They’re telling us they want to be here. They want to be citizens of our community.”

“We’re not stopping,” he continued. “In my inaugural address of this term in council, I promised we would grow 500 homes a year because it matches the growth that St. Thomas is experiencing. In order for that to happen, we also have to find jobs for those 500 homeowners too.”

“There are some large entities looking for large places to go. They’ve got to go somewhere. Why not here?”

“At this moment, no deal has

been signed, (but) it needs to turn out to be a great number of jobs for St. Thomas, of higher paying jobs for St. Thomas.

“Look, everybody has the same idea, they (other Ontario municipalities) all would love whoever it is, but even if you look back in our history here in St. Thomas, we didn’t always have Presstran (Industries), and Formet (Industries), and if you go back further than that, Canadian Timken (Limited) and Cannon (Ltd.), or even going back to the railways, we didn’t have them.

“At some point, all of those entities made a decision to locate to our community, by looking at the growth in the community, the available land, of course, and the ready workforce.”

“If we go back ... to the start of the old St. Thomas assembly plant for Ford, about a third of the people lived in St. Thomas, about a third of the people lived in London, and another third lived for miles around,” Mayor Preston continued.

(The plant, while named for St. Thomas, was actually situated in Southwold Township.)

“Everything we do will have a regional impact. I have to think about what does it mean

to the City of St. Thomas, but it’s great if it also affects two thirds of the employment for areas around us.

“There will always be people who disagree with you,” Mayor Preston said. “Ninety percent may agree with us doing what we’re doing from an economic point of view for the City of St. Thomas. Ten percent have a different view.”

“I learned a long time ago, it’s not all unanimous. Get as close to unanimous as you can and make as many friends along the way as you can, and hopefully you don’t visibly make any enemies.”

Diane Dubois and her husband Tom Martin fear the industrial park is a serious threat to some of Southwestern Ontario’s best farmland, as well as a treasure trove of wetlands and woodlots.

Dubois and Martin operate a 400-acre, mixed crops farm at 45254 Edgeware Line, in Central Elgin. They represent a ratepayers group called Concerned Citizens Against the St. Thomas Land Grab.

“There are so many concerns and questions left unanswered, and it seems like all is being decided secretly by the province and St. Thomas,” she said.

“What is Central Elgin getting out of this deal, specifically with respect to taxes?”

“Are all woodlots in those 1,500 acres to be destroyed? Who will ensure the quality of water flow from the industrial land onto our farm, which is now immediately at the St. Thomas city limits?”

“Once again, the loss of prime agricultural land is not mentioned anywhere by anyone, which can have tragic ramifications for future generations. We knew something was happening when more land had been purchased in the last two weeks and those who had been given a year and a half to move were recently told they have to vacate in two months. What is coming next?”

Central Elgin officials did not immediately respond to the

news.

Elgin-Middlesex-London MPP Rob Flack, who’s part of the Progressive Conservative government, is among those prevented from discussing details of the proposed legislation.

“Stay tuned,” he said in an interview conducted prior to the announcement. “I’m not at liberty to say anything. Until there’s a signed deal, I can’t comment on any potential suitors, and I mean that in the plural sense.”

“However, this works out, there’s going to be something very good for Elgin County. This potentially can be an excellent deal.”

Asked about critics of the proposal who felt excluded from the process, MPP Flack said: “Whoever this turns out to be, there are still a lot of (mu-

nicipal and other) approvals that are needed.”

Mayor Preston also addressed the secrecy saying: “That’s their right. They’re the purchaser of the property. It’s the nature of doing business. You don’t negotiate in public.”

“We didn’t do this non-politically, of course. This is about, in our case, municipal politics in its truest sense and I guess, if we had three years ago said ‘Hey, this is our strategy and we’re going to move forward’, would perhaps another local municipality have come up with the same thought? I don’t know.”

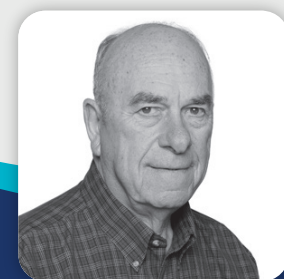
“But why advertise what you’re doing until you’re there. I’d rather than make announcements than predictions.”

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