



Cenotaph committee needs \$28k to complete urgent repairs

Julia Sacco
The Lake Report

The Niagara-on-the-Lake cenotaph needs your help.

One of NOTL's most recognizable landmarks is in desperate need of restoration and the cenotaph committee is \$28,000 short of the \$81,000 that is needed by Sept. 15 to complete the work in 2023.

The committee, a partnership between the town and the Legion, is calling the community to action, hoping that those who already have pledged donations – and those who haven't yet done so – will contribute immediately.

So far, the committee has amassed \$53,000 to restore the 101-year-old cenotaph and memorial clock tower.

It commemorates the residents of Niagara-on-the-Lake who were killed in action during the two world wars.

Donations can be made in person at the town administration offices at 1593 Four Mile Creek Rd. or the Canadian Legion Branch 124 at 410 King St., by mail to 1593 Four Mile Creek Rd., Box 1030, Virgil ON, L0S 1T0, or online at notl.com/recreation-events/community-initiatives-events.

Anyone who donates \$25 or above will be issued a tax receipt.

'We have to say no'

Community urged to not tolerate vandalism of Pride crosswalk



People cover hateful comments painted on the Pride crosswalk. Police are investigating the damage as a possible hate crime. SOMER SLOBODIAN

Somer Slobodian | Local Journalism Initiative | The Lake Report

After four separate vandalism incidents, many Niagara-on-the-Lake residents now just seem to expect that the new rainbow crosswalk will continually be damaged.

Many commenters in public, in letters to the editor and on social media have suggested such vandalism is just a fact of life.

Suzin Schiff thinks that attitude is wrong and people should not accept repeated defacing of the crosswalk as a fact of life.

"That makes me more sad, almost more sad than seeing the vandalism itself," said Schiff,

who works in administration at the Shaw Festival.

She got in touch with the town to organize a group photo at the crosswalk in support of LGBTQ+ community after vandals defaced the crosswalk for a third time on July 31.

"I called the town and I said, 'I need to talk to someone about this. Do you know that it's here? What can we do? How can we respond?'" she said in an interview.

"It's not enough to see it and then clean it up," she said.

She wanted to show her sup-

port in-person, she said, and not just through social media or the newspaper — but to stand on the crosswalk where it happened.

"We need to be physically present to feel our feet on the place where this transpired and to physically show people that we stand and support them and to show them that they should feel safe where they live," she said.

When the crosswalk was first put in, she said "it was very meaningful" to her.

This topic has always been one that's close to her heart since she

has friends and family who are queer, she said, and she's always been a "strong ally" to the LGBTQ+ community.

The group photo was scheduled last Friday at 9 a.m., barely two days after the damage from the third vandalism was cleaned up.

However, people arrived to find the crosswalk defaced for a fourth time — this time with more hateful comments.

She said it's "disheartening for queer people or allies of queer

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Medically assisted endings for people with Alzheimer's

DR. BROWN

Dr. William Brown
Columnist

Patients who suffer from dementia, of which Alzheimer's disease is the

most common cause, are usually looked after by a spouse or partner, with the help perhaps of nearby family members when that's possible and part-time support workers.

It's exhausting for those

who provide the care because it goes on so long and the situation only gets worse for the patient and those helping out.

When home care no longer works, patients are usually transferred to a

long-term care facility, hopefully nearby, of which Niagara residents have several choices.

But wherever the patient is looked after, the clinical course continues downhill as patients lose

their lifetime's store of memories, struggle to make sense of the present and increasingly unable to form warm sustaining relationships with staff and

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Police treating crosswalk vandalism as 'potential' hate crime

Somer Slobodian
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Niagara Regional Police said they are investigating the latest vandalism of Niagara-on-the-Lake's Pride crosswalk as a possible hate crime. As they arrived for a group photo to show support for the 2SLGBTQI+ community last Friday morning, residents were shocked to discover that the Pride crosswalk had been defaced for a fourth time.

This time, someone had taken the time to spray paint even more hateful comments toward LGBTQ+ people.



Suzin Schiff leads the crowd with a brief speech.

"Die f-gs" and "f--k gay ppl" were written in large black letters as was "BLM," presumably a reference to Black Lives Matter.

The latest defacing of the crosswalk came just two days after the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake cleaned up a third act of vandalism on the crosswalk, located at Anderson Lane and Niagara Stone Road, near the public library.

In barely two months since it was installed at the end of May, the crosswalk now has been vandalized repeatedly.

Suzin Schiff, who organized and planned the photoshoot, said every time vandalism happens, people need to complain to the town and show up to express their views.

"What is expected should

not be accepted, that's my motto," said Schiff.

"If nothing is done, if no voices rise up, then there's a perception that it's accepted," she added.

She was especially shocked to see the BLM acronym used this time.

"Who's next?" she said.

More than 100 people from across Niagara-on-the-Lake and elsewhere in the region showed up for the photo at 9 a.m. Friday, not expecting to see hateful comments once again on the crosswalk.

"To use the word die, how angry can you get?" said Pat Klotz, one of the NOTL residents who was there.

Another resident, Neeti Mehrotra, was visibly upset after seeing the latest vandalism.

"What scares them so much?" she said.

If it's a young person doing it, she said, she wonders who is teaching them that such behaviour is OK.

Mel Thivierge, a worker at the Shaw Festival, said he's, sadly, not surprised it happened again and suggested the vandals won't stop.

When he got to the crosswalk, he hung up a flag nearby that read, "Hate has no home here."

"Hate is easy and hate is cheap when you're doing it

at night and blacking out cameras (and) can't be held accountable," he said.

"It's very cowardly," he added.

The amount of support from the residents who showed up and from the ones who honked while driving by appeared to show the latest vandalism has upset many people in the community — and enough is enough.

George Webber, a member of the town's diversity equity and inclusivity committee, said the number of people who gathered is an indication that "people have to say no, we've had enough."



More than 100 people showed up to NOTL's Pride crosswalk on Friday to show support for the 2SLGBTQI+ community. They arrived to find it had been vandalized again. SOMER SLOBODIAN

'Disheartening' when hateful vandalism is to be expected

Continued from Front Page

people" when this type of vandalism is so routine it is just expected.

She wants to make sure her voice is heard — and believes everyone should be doing the same every time something like this happens instead of just accepting it.

There are plenty of people in the world who are against public expressions like rainbow crosswalks, she said,

but the latest vandalism is more than just pushback. In her view, it was a hate crime.

"This is a different level. The people who are doing it have to be stopped," said Schiff.

Given how many time's the NOTL crosswalk has been intentionally damaged, it's probably going to happen again, she acknowledged.

But she's motivated to

continue to stand up for what she believes is right and encourages everyone to contact the town every time it is damaged.

"It's not about reacting afterwards. It's about preventing it from happening," she said.

She hopes by people showing up in person every time, it will eventually "tip the tables."

"If you want to show your love and support, it has to



The latest crosswalk vandalism contained vulgar messaging. This photo was edited to smudge one of the offensive words. SOMER SLOBODIAN

be a physical action and not just typing or talking to a friend or sitting and

thinking about it — it has to have some kind of action," she said.

"We have to stand. We have to speak. We have to stand on it. We have to say no."



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NOTLers send books to Jamaican elementary schools | Page 3

Dig by the docks reveals 'menagerie' of historical artifacts

Evan Loree
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

An archeological dig at the site next to the King George III Inn has turned up a trove of artifacts from

over a century ago, painting a vague picture of life by the Niagara River from a time gone by.

Mike Pitul, an archeologist with Detritus Consulting Ltd., says the old hotel at 61 Melville St.

in Niagara-on-the-Lake has been resting on a "plethora" of historical artifacts.

This dig was part of a larger process of preparing the site for a potential condominium development, that would replace the inn

on the site once known as the American Hotel.

Originally, Pitul and his team went in looking for the structural remains of the Niagara Harbour and Dock Company's warehouses, he said.

The company operated from 1831 to the late 1840s, according to the Ontario Heritage Trust.

Over the course of a seven-day archeological dig, which started on Aug. 8, the team did find

some remnants of the warehouses, Pitul said.

However, ceramic household items comprised the majority of the artifacts.

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Rainbow crosswalk vandalism part of troubling trend: Experts

Evan Loree
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

A small stretch of painted pavement has become the site of a symbolic battle in Niagara-on-the-Lake

The town's new rainbow crosswalk was targeted by vandals for a fourth time in early August. This time they left a message on the painted asphalt reading "Die f- -gs," and "f- -k gay people."

The letters BLM were written as well, presumably referring to the social justice movement, Black Lives Matter.

Attacks on LGBTQ+ symbols like these are not unique to NOTL. They are playing out on a national scale.

A report from Statistics Canada shows police-reported hate crimes targeting people's sexual orientation rose to 423 in 2021 from 265 in 2019.

That's about a 60 per cent increase in two years.

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Swimmer conquers the river again

This time with his hands tied, Dylan Rumsey swims for Pathstone



Dylan Rumsey and 13-year-old Liam Berry emerge from Lake Ontario after swimming the Niagara River on Saturday. DAVE VAN DE LAAR

Julia Sacco | The Lake Report

Dylan Rumsey swam 12 kilometres down the Niagara River on Saturday – with his hands tied.

"It was definitely easier than expected," said Rumsey, who completed his second annual

swim in around two hours and 30 minutes.

He didn't do it all alone, though.

Thirteen-year-old Liam Berry decided to join Rumsey, 26, in his support of Pathstone Mental

Health, but kept his hands free.

"Well, I saw him do it last year and I was just amazed," Berry told The Lake Report.

He explained that one day while he was out for ice cream with family friend Rumsey, they

decided they would swim from the Queenston Boat Launch to Queen's Royal Beach together.

"Bringing Liam out is a prime example of just believing in

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NOTL crew races to glory in Shark regatta – winning by a foot

Kevin MacLean
The Lake Report

After almost a week of racing on Lake Ontario, the Shark World Championship in Niagara-on-the-Lake was decided by the narrowest of

margins.

Less than one foot. And a single point.

After 10 races over six days, the regatta came down to the finale on Friday.

In the last race, Crunch, with the NOTL Sailing

Club's Josh Wiwcharyk, Chris Clarke and Alex Letchford aboard, nosed out a Sarnia crew by barely a foot.

That gave the Wiwcharyk's team fifth spot in the race and just enough

points to edge fellow NOTLers Levi, Jacob and Malcolm Harper for the overall championship.

The Harper brothers' boat, Rampant, ended the final race in second place and second overall in the

regatta.

The top two crews were so evenly matched over the week that only a single point separated them in the end.

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Rainbow crosswalk vandalism part of **troubling trend**, experts say

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According to a report published in June by the U.S. Anti-Defamation League, there were 356 documented extremist – and non-extremist – incidents against the LGBTQ+ community in the United States from June 2022 to this past April.

Of those incidents, 305 were harassment, 40 were vandalism and 11 were assaults.

Just as the symbols of the LGBTQ+ community are targeted with hate, so too are its people.

For the first three months of 2023 Egale, a Canada-wide LGBTQ+ advocacy group, documented 6,423 instances of online hate messaging and anti-trans protests targeted at the community.

Many of the posts documented by the group can be read on its webpage for the Pride Unravelling project.

Egale describes the targeted harassment as a “rising tide of hate” which can “no longer be ignored.”

Community activists and diversity experts contend the targeting of Niagara-on-the-Lake’s crosswalk isn’t just part of a national trend, but a historical one.

Margot Francis, an associate professor at Brock University’s centre for women’s and gender studies, said a lot of anti-trans talking points are nothing new.

“These ideas have circulated for a long time, probably a couple of centuries,” Francis said.

One argument often marched onto the political stage is that educating children about LGBTQ+ identities is a form of child grooming, pedophilia or indoctrination.

Francis remembers when she co-founded a student advocacy program called Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia in 1993 – much of the rhetoric stemmed from Christian groups.

“There was a lot of mobilization by Christian parents against the idea of human rights for LGBT students,” she said.

Francis said conservative religions “never actually followed the larger societal trends,” even as the LG-



Left: Joshua Russell, co-chair of OUTniagara. Above: Dr. Samah Sabra, Niagara College’s manager of workplace diversity, equity and inclusion. She said hate groups typically are loudest when social activists are making the most gains. SUPPLIED

BTQ+ community gained more acceptance.

She said the groomer narrative has “come back with a vengeance.”

“There is an authoritarian kind of string that is gaining more popularity and legitimacy throughout the Western world,” she added.

The York Catholic District School Board’s decision not to raise the pride flag in May was a “super troubling” example of the authoritarian shift in politics, she said.

In her work as a professor, Francis said she hears “over and over again” about the “lack of any kind of comprehensive sex education” in Catholic schools.

More locally, Natalia Benoit, a school trustee for the Catholic board representing Niagara-on-the-Lake, also tried to pass a policy that would have prohibited schools from raising the Pride flag.

Benoit’s motion framed the policy change as an attempt to “promote education instead of indoctrination.”

The motion made an exception for the Catholic faith after proposing a prohibition on employees advocating for students on “any partisan, political or social policy issue.”

A spokesperson for the Catholic school board of Niagara said the board does not support Benoit’s view.

The People’s Party of Canada, led by Maxime

Bernier, also frames LG-BTQ+ activism as indoctrination.

On its policy page, the far-right party frames itself as the protector of women and children, just as it frames LGBTQ+ activism as a threat to those same groups.

“I think people here in Canada are emboldened by what they see in the United States.”

JOSHUA RUSSELL
CO-CHAIR, OUTNIAGARA

Bernier’s tactics are similar to those of the Republican party in the United States.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis pushed through a law to prevent “classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels.”

Infamously dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” law, it was somewhat less infamously called the “Anti-Grooming Bill” by DeSantis’ spokesperson Christina Pushaw on Twitter.

Pushaw said people who are against the law are probably also groomers.

Samah Sabra, director of equity, diversity and inclusion at Niagara College, said pushback like this often comes when social activists are making the most gains.

“When an equity-deserv-

ing group gains rights they have fought hard for, the gains come with increased visibility,” she said.

As minority groups like transgender people become more visible, it becomes harder for prejudiced people to ignore them, she added.

“It might feel to them like their world is changing and they are not yet ready or equipped to respond to that diversity,” she said.

The problem may be that people take comfort in the “sameness” of their neighbours, Sabra said.

And they are more likely to oppose change if they see “difference as threatening rather than enriching.”

Sabra stressed the importance of using education to combat the fear.

Joshua Russell, co-chair of OUTniagara, said the perceived increase in transgender people is best explained by increased acceptance of the community.

The activist pointed out that adults and seniors, not just kids, are coming out as trans in greater numbers.

“They see that there’s a place for them,” he said, and that makes them more comfortable about coming out.

Russell, an openly gay man, remembers when he was young and “coming to terms” with his sexuality.

“I heard a lot about the dangers of sex education,” he said.

Growing up as a gay man, there was much fear over the AIDS epidemic and

much worry about the gay community indoctrinating children into the “promiscuous gay lifestyle,” he said.

Russell said the fear that children are “under threat” from the LGBTQ+ community is a “false narrative.”

And the groomer narrative is an easy way to attract support, too.

“No matter who you are, you might agree that children are worthy of protection,” Russell said.

But he thinks the threat is greater when children are not allowed to freely express themselves.

A report from the Canadian Medical Association supports Russell’s view.

The study involving 6,800 adolescents found that transgender kids are five times more likely to think about suicide and 7.6 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual kids.

The authors of the report said transgender kids receiving gender-affirming therapy think about suicide at a similar rate to non-transgender kids.

Gender-affirming care, according to the Canadian Paediatric Society, may include psychiatric counseling, hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgery.

Gender-affirming surgery is a sex change operation and it is the target of much concern by right-wing political pundits.

For example, the People’s Party of Canada refers to

gender-affirming surgery as “mutilation” and argues any form of sexual reassignment surgery should be unavailable to minors.

The Canadian Paediatric Society, however, points out that these surgeries are restricted to people who are 18 years and older.

Francis explained the fixation on transgender people best.

“Trans people, especially, have become a larger-than-life symbol for what social conservatives seem to describe as a world upside down,” Francis said.

They are also easy to target, she added.

While some news pundits have argued that anti-trans bigotry is filtering into the Canadian media system through American media, Russell thinks the hate has always been here at home.

“I think people here in Canada are emboldened by what they see in the United States,” he added, pointing to the People’s Party as an example of how American political trends can get picked up in Canada

However, Russell also argued that Canada’s multi-party political system somewhat insulates the country from discriminatory legislation like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill.

He argued that while there are probably plenty of people in Canada who would support anti-trans legislation, they haven’t amassed the power to make an impact at the federal level.

When The Lake Report informally surveyed the community in late 2021 about how they felt about the crosswalk, a slim majority of respondents were in favour at 51 per cent.

Another 5.8 per cent said they did not care and 42.8 per cent said they were against it.

Despite Russell’s optimism, he is concerned the rhetoric of the People’s Party will give momentum to hate movements – opening the door for people who may hold similar views.

“I don’t think we should be complacent,” he said.

“These small symbols of hate are certainly indication that there are people out there who would support such policies.”



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Contributed by Patty Garriock

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 - Charles Weeks

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Smog covers the sun



A haze in the sky from forest fires in Ontario and Quebec blocks the sun in all parts of town. The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks recommends staying indoors with air conditioning. EVAN LOREE

Editorial

We need to be better than this

Kevin MacLean
 Managing Editor

Not once, but twice last week within days of the installation of Niagara-on-the-Lake’s rainbow crosswalk, someone vandalized it by driving vehicles on the new paint and doing “doughnuts” to burn rubber into the surface.

A classless act.

Was it hate? Youthful stupidity? Outright bigotry toward the people the rainbow is meant to celebrate and acknowledge: the LGBTQ+ community, including people of colour, our Indigenous population?

Without more evidence, we’ll probably never know. But it was someone among us.

Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of the whole affair is that the vandalism was totally expected.

In fact, NOTL’s diversity equity inclusion committee had urged the town to budget for vandalism repairs when the crosswalk was a subject of much debate.

Modern-day social media chatter is seldom a reliable barometer of public opinion in our experience. It can be a messed-up microcosm of parts of society that we always knew existed but in “the good old days” didn’t have a public platform.

Now, keyboard warriors often are prone to saying things online that they might never utter in public.

They espouse ideas ranging from righteously good to reprehensibly awful, misinformation, disinformation and ... well, you get the picture.

When The Lake Report disseminated its first news stories and photographs online late last week about the damage inflicted to the crosswalk within days of the paint drying, many people were quick to loudly decry the behaviour.

But it seemed that at least an equal number chose to tell the world in no uncertain terms just how fed up they were with the whole Pride agenda and people’s sexuality being flaunted and shoved down everyone’s throat.

“Well, that’s my opinion” and “freedom of speech” (an American concept; in Canada we have freedom of expression) were bandied about readily.

The message from many was “I don’t have anything against them, but ...” and what about “straight Pride.” And then there was the concern about children and indoctrination and agendas – and more.

It was sad to watch unfold.

While we debated whether to turn off commenting, in the end we decided it might be better to let people vent – so the rest of society could see just how divided we seem to be on an issue that is not about “special” rights, but fundamental “human” rights.

The rainbow paint is a powerful symbol for a long-marginalized community whose members are here to stay and have no plans to cower and hide.

Are acceptance, understanding and tolerance really so difficult? Is the LGBTQ+ community and a

rainbow on the road really such a threat to the status quo that people need to fight back against the tide while many others shout about how unfair or unnecessary it all is?

Many, including this publication, have talked about “how far we’ve come” and how far we still have to go – as if human rights abuses, bigotry and vandalism can just be neatly explained away.

Last we checked, it was 2023. Why can’t we be better than this?

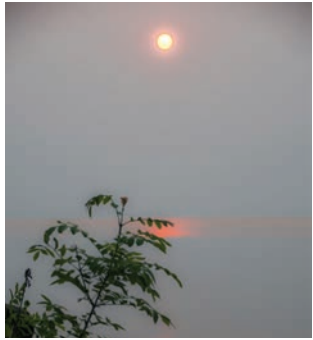
Thankfully, one of the first positive social media comments we read last week inspired some hope. It came from Phil Leboudec, the respected Virgil grocer and community volunteer.

Under our story headlined, “NOTL’s rainbow crosswalk vandalized three days after installation,” he cut straight to the heart of the matter: “Thus explaining why Pride month and the flag is required in the first place.”

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John DeLorenzi's photo shows NOTL's smoggy skies.

No soccer, schools keep kids indoors, fires banned due to smog

Somer Slobodian
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Smog from wild fires forced cancellation of all NOTL soccer practices and games Tuesday and Wednesday, and will keep District School Board of Niagara students indoors at least on Thursday.

"It's the right move, but it is hard to do after keeping the kids off the field during COVID," NOTL Soccer president Carrie Plaskett said in an email to The Lake Report.

"Hopefully, we can get the kids back playing as soon as possible."

The move came at the urging of the Ontario Soccer Association and the Niagara Soccer Association.

The school board told parents in an email Wednesday that it will keep monitor the situation.

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Pride crosswalk vandalized – twice

Evan Loree
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

With a little soap, water and degreaser, it's as if it was still brand new.

Town staff spent some time

scrubbing the new rainbow crosswalk clean on Tuesday after it was vandalized twice last week, says the town chief administrator Marnie Cluckie.

After the new rainbow crosswalk was marked up by vandals twice in two days, the town's

leaders agree there's still work to do.

Lord Mayor Gary Zalepa thinks as a society "we're making improvements," but that we're "unfortunately not done yet."

He suggested that the vandals

represent a small minority in the community.

"There's a large group of people out here that don't think this is cool," he said of the vandalism.

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Rainbow raised at Crossroads

Inclusive flag raising ceremony aims to help all students feel welcome



Crossroads students gather outside the school to raise the Pride flag for the month of June. Story on Page 2. EVAN LOREE

Massive new pollinator garden at Southbrook a win-win

Jill Troyer
The Lake Report

A hardy group of volunteers has taken on the daunting task of planting 5,000 native pollinator plants on 1.8 acres of land

surrounded by vineyards at Southbrook Winery.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake project is a collaboration between Southbrook and Land Care Niagara, for mutual benefit.

"This is part of a monarch

butterfly habitat restoration program," explained Mike Weber, a species-at-risk technician for Land Care Niagara.

"So, we've got a couple of different kinds of milkweed going in here, as well as

all the native pollinators to provide habitat for adults as well as all the larval stages of the monarch butterfly."

Other plants include dense blazing star, heath aster and green headed coneflower.

"Hopefully it will be a

good place for the monarchs to come. And it's great to have a symbiotic partner," added Weber.

The same plants that attract monarch butterflies



Continued on Page 6 Red clover.

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Town ‘not daunted’ by vandalism

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And Cluckie said she sees a bit of a “silver lining” in the response of residents who have been overwhelmingly positive in their feedback to the town.

“I think we probably should have had a camera on there right from the beginning,” said Richard Mell, a member of the town’s diversity and equity committee.

He pointed out it would be simple to install one on the side of the firehall near to the crosswalk.

Cluckie says a security camera was the first solution discussed by staff and they installed one at the firehall near the crosswalk Monday morning.

To date, she estimates that the town has spent \$20,000 on the crosswalk, a third of the estimates made by commenters on The Lake Report’s social media page. “This is a symbol of inclusivity and to have someone damage it challenges the values that are important to the town,” Cluckie said.

After investigating the first incident, staff were reluctant to call the markings vandalism, she said.

“The second time, it was much darker. They were big dark circles and this was an incident that occurred in close proximity to the first,” she said.

A Niagara Regional Police official told The Lake Report the markings were caused by an “unknown suspect(s)” who likely used a motorbike and an ATV to leave burnouts in the concrete.

“There is very limited information that has come forward from the public,” Const. Phil Gavin said. “We don’t have any actionable information.”

He urged people to check security camera footage between the morning of May 30 and the evening of June 1, and also let police know if they have any information about someone driving a dirt bike or ATV in the area in that period.

Coun. Erwin Wiens said he originally was “relatively agnostic” on the crosswalk when council first discussed it, but after seeing some of



Above: George Webber, a member of Niagara-on-the-Lake’s diversity, equity and inclusivity committee, examines a new set of darker tire marks on the rainbow crosswalk Saturday morning. Left: The Town of NOTL cleaned the marks, but they’re still visible.

JULIA SACCO

the vitriol posted online and the vandalism, he’s more supportive of the idea.

The backlash “is not acceptable. It’s not tolerable. It’s not inclusive and it’s not what the town stands for,” Wiens said.

And he said it’s “foolhardy” that people take issue with the cost of the crosswalk.

“We spend money for a lot of things in the (tax) levy that we think are important. Inclusivity is one of those things,” he said.

He added that the town also uses tax dollars to pay for flowers.

The town has yet to install four more Pride benches as well. The first of them was vandalized in November.

“I am concerned,” Wiens says. “But not daunted. We won’t be intimidated by vandals.”

Mell worries that the crosswalk, along with other symbols of inclusivity, will draw bigots out of the woodwork.

“I don’t think it’s a reason to not push forward,” he said.

After The Lake Report posted news of the vandalism to Facebook, Mell found a comment on it that summed up his feelings.

“Pride is important, because somewhere out there, there’s a confused teenager who still thinks maybe being dead is better than being gay. And that’s not OK,” he said.

Mell, who identifies as gay, says he’s one of the lucky ones because he doesn’t get much pushback and is very confident with who he is. But he worries about youth who may still be “figuring things out.”

“Social media is a garden for negative messaging.”

JAMIE KNIGHT
DIVERSITY COMMITTEE MEMBER

Enzo De Divitiis, chair of Niagara Pride, agrees that Pride’s symbols draw the attention of bigots, but said the backlash is one of the reasons it’s important to push the message.

“Visual representation is very impactful and meaningful, which is exactly why they damage them,” he said.

People deface inclusive symbols to dampen the spirits of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, he said.

Neither Mell nor De Divitiis were surprised the crosswalk was marked up, but both were disappointed.

It’s not a new reaction. De Divitiis remembers 10 years ago, when Pride first flew its flag in Niagara Falls, it was stolen within a half-hour.

Jamie Knight, a lawyer who also sits on the town’s diversity committee, said it’s a small minority who

would take the time to vandalize the crosswalk.

He said he wasn’t going to get “too excited” about the “wrongdoing” of a few bad actors.

And like Mell, he was also encouraged by the supportiveness of the Niagara-on-the-Lake community.

Since The Lake Report’s first story on the vandalism was posted to Facebook Friday it has received thousands of views and more than 600 comments, a mixture of supportive, hateful and misinformed viewpoints.

“Social media is a garden for negative messaging,” Knight said in an interview with The Lake Report.

“I guess they feel emboldened on social media to say things that they wouldn’t say directly to somebody in a normal conversation,” he added.

The hostility that does exist, Knight said, is probably caused more by misinformation and ignorance than by anything else.

George Webber, another committee member, said he doesn’t want to jump to conclusions and call the vandalism hate.

“Hatred is too powerful. It’s too powerful a word,” he said.

He wonders if it isn’t more a case of teenage delinquency, “just people being silly, people being dumb.”

De Divitiis thinks whether the act is one of hate or delinquency, “It’s still wrong.”

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