

# The Sarnia Journal

Your Local Independent Newspaper

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Thursday, October 25, 2018

## Skeleton Crew



LAST YEAR MORE than 260 children descended on the Cathcart Boulevard home of Natalie Parkkila & Nick Aveling despite – or because of – their creeped-out front yard. What began with a few pumpkins and skulls has grown into a full-fledged frightfest that haunts their yard and that of neighbour Jeri Lynne Charron at 1071 and 1065 Cathcart. The lights are on from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., and even more decorations and animated props come out Halloween night.

GLENN OGILVIE The Journal

## Heavy metal

HOW COPPER THEFT HAS BECOME PART OF A THRIVING UNDERGROUND ECONOMY IN SARNIA

TROY SHANTZ  
THE JOURNAL

Most nights in Sarnia at least a few uninvited guests arrive at job sites, abandoned buildings and homes under construction with one objective in mind – stealing copper. Wire, piping, fittings — anything that can be lifted or ripped out and sold for a profit. And their handiwork often leaves behind damages in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Metal theft has become a thriving underground economy in Sarnia, one police and building contractors know all about but have had little success curtailing.

And like much of the city's street crime, police say, it's driven largely by people with a drug addiction in need of quick cash. The thieves are most active between midnight and 4 a.m. and scouting is often done on bicycle. Some pull makeshift trailers on which to pile their haul.

The tools of the trade are utility knives, hacksaws and bolt-cutters and the main currency is copper, which fetches about \$3 a pound on the open market.

"They know where they're going in, they know what kind of tools they need, and they have some kind of plan to get it out," said Shawn Urban, a Sarnia Police constable and night-shift specialist.

Continued on 2

## Police chief irked by public pot smoking

CATHY DOBSON  
THE JOURNAL

Sarnia's police chief wants tighter restrictions on where cannabis can be consumed.

"I don't want to see someone walking down Christina Street smoking marijuana, and I don't want it in our parks," said Chief Norm

Hansen.

"I don't see it as a positive thing for our community."

Bill 36, which was approved by Ontario's Conservative government hours after Ottawa made recreational marijuana legal, permits the smoking of cannabis in public areas including sidewalks and parks.

Hansen advised his officers that smoking marijuana in

public is permitted, and there were no incidents reported in the first days of legalization.

"As it is, you can't drink alcohol in a park but you can smoke cannabis there," Hansen said.

"I can't imagine it will stay this way."

Under the provincial legislation, individual municipalities can limit smoking pot in public places, something the

chief hopes Sarnia will act on.

"There may be an opportunity for the (Sarnia Police Services) board to encourage city council to tighten control on where it can be smoked," Hansen said. In the City of Markham, its council voted unanimously in favour of a new bylaw to restricts cannabis consumption to private residences.

Continued on 3

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# Local

## Metal:

*Continued from 1*

Recent targets have included the Tricar highrise under construction at 275 Front St. and a former plant at Imperial Oil's Sarnia manufacturing site.

In February, half a tonne of copper wire was heisted from a business compound on Confederation Street. Even the copper flashing on the exterior of the Sarnia Library was struck recently.

But the motherlode is the former Sarnia General Hospital on Mitton Street, where metal thievery reached industrial levels before its demolition began.

One man who made hospital stripping his full-time job, and who boasted of making \$50,000 annually doing it, said it wasn't unusual for 20 scavengers to be in the building some nights.

At one point, crews even established a zip-line to more

efficiently move bundles from upper-floor windows to the ground.

"They look like coal miners," said Urban. "It's a dirty, hard way to make a living (but) the risk scale is pretty low, and it's lucrative."

City police made dozens of arrests and laid countless charges at the hospital, but lacked the manpower to continuously monitor the site.

In fact, after neighbours said the free-for-all in the mouldy and asbestos-filled building had become a health and safety issue, former Chief Phil Nelson prepared a report for council that estimated 24/7 patrols would cost taxpayers \$1.2 million a year.

So much metal is being stolen it's given rise to at least one opportunistic middleman. Multiple sources have reported seeing a late-model pickup truck towing a large trailer equipped with a scale.

One of them is Fred Mast, who owns Thanks-A-Latte in North Mitton Village.

One night in June he spotted a thief dragging eight-foot lengths pipes down the sidewalk at 5 a.m. He ran out and yelled at the driver of the truck, who had arrived to meet the thief. The truck quickly sped away.

The truck and trailer has returned twice to the area and both times Mast said he was ready for the illicit metal-buyer.

"This is kind of how I roll," he said with a laugh.

Hughes Intelligence is a Sarnia-based investigation



**COPPER THIEVES HAVE** made a small fortune off the former Sarnia General Hospital since it closed in 2011.

TROY SHANTZ The Journal

and security services company founded by former police officer Barry Bentley.

He said construction contractors have taken to locking up their copper and brass in shipping containers overnight, and even churches are being hit.

Metal theft, which five years ago represented 5% of the company's business, is now an "epidemic" that accounts for about 30%, mostly through security guards hired to watch over construction sites, he said. "In all honesty, our presence is the biggest deterrent."

To be prosecuted, metal thieves have to be caught red-handed, so prevention through security cameras and lighting is important, police say.

Several times this summer contractors showed up at new home construction sites in the morning only to discover all the newly installed plumbing has been ripped out, said Sarnia Police Detective Jeff Rovers.

Not only was the copper long gone, but the basements were flooded, he said.

Great Lake's Secondary School on Wellington Street is scheduled for closure in 2019, and many officials are worried the elegant but mothballed SCITS building will be metal scavengers next big target.

And until Sarnia's opiate addiction crisis is addressed, Bentley said, the problem will get worse before it gets better.

"It's a way of life. It's a way of survival."

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## Local

# Memorial plaque thefts 'gut-wrenching'

TROY SHANTZ  
THE JOURNAL

Remy Boulbol said it was like "a punch in the gut," when she heard upwards of 18 plaques were stolen from a Centennial Park Memorial Garden sponsored by the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON).

"How desperate must someone have been to do something so horrific. It's gut wrenching," said Boulbol, a manager with the Sarnia chapter of the homecare and outreach charity.

Police say the brass plaques were first noticed missing on November 18. By the next afternoon even more were gone.

They were located near the Suncor Agora band shell, and appear to have been ripped or pried from a concrete mount. Before the theft there were about 30 plaques, each weighing about 10-pounds each and eight inches wide with varying lengths. On them are names of loved ones in the community who have passed away.

For a \$100 donation to VON, families can have their loved one memorialized on the plaques, Boulbol said, and this year they added 100 new names to the display. For some families the plaques are the only memorial they have for deceased family, she said.

"It's a place that's supposed to be one of



ABOUT 30 MEMORIAL PLAQUES were mounted near Suncor Agora at Centennial Park. Since the theft, the owners of the display have removed the remaining ones.

TROY SHANTZ, The Journal

calm... reflection, and memory, but right now it's a place that's sad, and that breaks my heart."

Boulbol said they notified families about the thefts right away, and they're focused on replacing the missing plaques as soon as possible. They each cost over \$2,000 to produce and she estimates it'll take about \$20,000 to replace them all.

VON officials have since removed the remaining plaques to prevent any more from being stolen.

It's widely suspected thieves nabbed the

plaques in hopes of selling them as scrap metal. Sarnia Police constable Shawn Urban wondered if the recent end to the Sarnia General Hospital demolition has anything

to do with the bold theft. "It's been a steady source of income for a bunch of people," he said of the hospital, which has since been levelled after a 14-month demolition.

But while it was standing it saw a steady stream of copper thieves rummaging through the halls.

But unlike the generic wire and pipe pulled from the hospital, these

plaques are unique and easily identified - even if cut into tiny pieces, said Doug Slipacoff, fourth generation owner of Sarnia metal recycler Trijan Industries.

But that doesn't mean the thieves still won't try to sell them.

"We've had people steal from the cemetery... trying to steal brass urns off grave sites," he said. "We called the police."

Slipacoff says they're on the front lines of metal theft in Sarnia, and work closely with police to curb it. He said metal sellers that come to Trijan are verified with proper identification. He thinks most area metal recyclers do the same.

"Of course there's probably some bad actors out there who really don't care where they're buying the material from... but 98% of all companies in scrap metal are honest companies that don't want to deal with stolen metal."

## Airport to undergo economic impact study

City Hall has asked the MBA program at Wilfrid Laurier University to conduct an economic impact study of Sarnia Chris Hadfield Airport.

The research will be done by students under the supervision

of professors, and be similar to studies the university has completed for Waterloo Regional and Toronto's Pearson International Airport.

Transport Canada provided a capital fund when Sarnia took ownership of the airport,

but with that money now gone taxpayers are responsible for any improvements.

In a bid to increase overall airport usage, Air Canada cut the number of daily flights but began using larger and more reliable Dash-8s on Nov.

1. The impact study will complement an airport strategic plan already in the works and could be ready by June, said assistant city solicitor Daniel Byskal.

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# As bold as brass

**SARNIA TAKING STEP TO CURTAIL THE SALE OF STOLEN SCRAP METAL**

TROY SHANTZ  
THE JOURNAL

Changes coming to a city bylaw are a good first step toward curbing metal thieves, says Coun. Mike Stark.

Pending public feedback, metal recyclers would need to obtain the same business licence as pawn shops and second-hand stores starting Jan. 1. Recyclers would follow a list of rules including retaining information about metal sellers and cooperating with investigators.

“At the end of the day it’s giving the police more tools to investigate what they may consider as potential thieves,” said Stark, who had originally proposed a \$25 permit for metal sales over one pound.

“It’s actually modifying the existing bylaw to accommodate what’s workable with respect to metal recyclers.”

Unlike pawn shops, recyclers would not have to place a 30-day hold on goods purchased from the public.

Stark, a member of the Sarnia Police Services Board, was responding to a recent scourge of drug-fuelled metal thefts that have angered residents and caused major damage to homes, construction sites, monuments and municipal facilities.

In April, for example, metal thieves stripped heavy copper electrical cables from the Sarnia Bay Marina.

*Continued on 3*

## Gotcha!



ADAM DAVIDSON, A Chemical Valley process operator, gets the royal splash treatment while visiting Canatara Beach on July 10 with his daughters. Julia, 10, Grace, 8 and Aili, 5, worked hard to ensure dad stayed refreshed. The temperature reached 32 C. that afternoon, making it the hottest day of the year so far.

GLENN OGILVIE The Journal

# 19-storey tower proposed for Water Street

CATHY DOBSON  
THE JOURNAL

Sarnia’s housing market can support another waterfront tower in addition to the Tricar apartment building currently under construction, says realtor Patrick Coutu.

Coutu, of Coldwell Banker Southwest Realty, represents

Sarnia businessman Henry Mehta, who has plans for a 19-storey condominium on Water Street where Sarnia Rent-All is located.

“Tricar is rental only and we will be condos, two completely different markets,” Coutu said. “Our preliminary market analysis shows there’s a demand for both, especially on the waterfront.”

The final drawings aren’t complete but Mehta’s project currently incorporates a ground floor with a small commercial component, four floors for parking, and 15 residential floors with 120 two-bedroom units. The top two floors are reserved for larger penthouses.

If the building is that tall it would exceed the 45-metre

height restriction and require minor variance approval by City Hall, Coutu said.

Condo prices are expected to range from \$300,000 to \$600,000.

Ideally, construction could begin by the end of this year with completion in early 2021, Coutu added.

*Continued on 4*



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# Local

## It's a boom year for messy and destructive gypsy moths

JOURNAL STAFF

Pockets of the city have been hit hard by an infestation of gypsy moth caterpillars this year, and nowhere more so than at Our Lady of Mercy Cemetery.

As many as 60 mature hardwood trees on the Michigan Avenue cemetery were stripped bare of their leaves in a matter of days, said site general manager Rosario Muscedere.

"I've been with the cemeteries for 28 years and I've never seen anything like this."

With the canopy eaten and their bellies full, the caterpillars are now pupating in untold numbers on the trees, grounds and memorials.

"They can be rather unsightly," Muscedere said. "It can be kind of disturbing at times."

Similar scenes of defoliation have played out here and there across the city in recent weeks,

said Mike Raaymaker, arborist and owner of Guardian Tree Service.

The invasive caterpillar, which is native to Europe and Asia, attack many species of trees but in Sarnia are primarily targeting oaks.

During outbreak years trees can be completely defoliated as caterpillar droppings, or "frass," rain down from above.

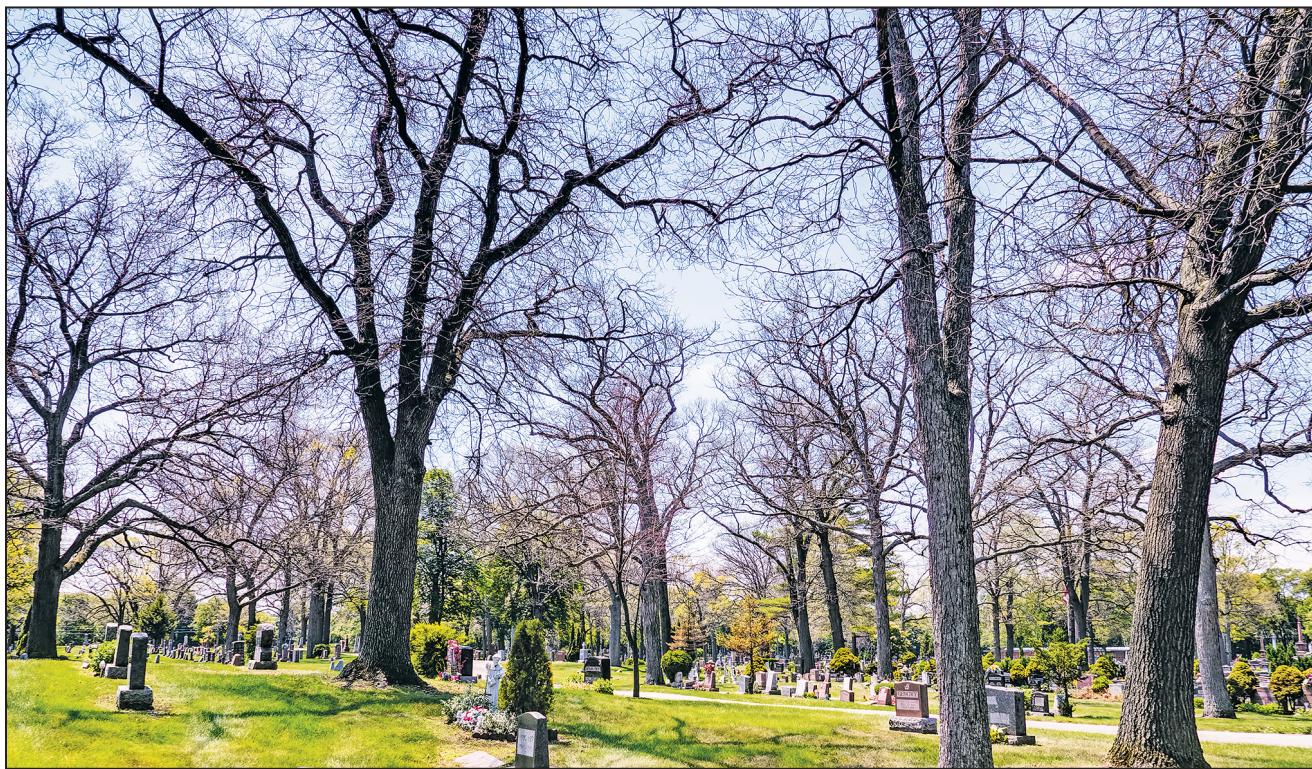
*"I've been with the cemeteries for 28 years and I've never seen anything like this."*

— Rosario Muscedere

Usually a stripped tree bounces back and the damage isn't permanent, Raaymaker said.

"It's more of a nuisance," he said, adding it can take three or four successive years of infestation to kill the tree.

One north-end property owner said gypsy moth caterpillars are



OAK TREES IN Our Lady of Mercy Cemetery have been stripped of their leaves by gypsy moth caterpillars.

GLENN OGILVIE The Journal

so thick and messy it's been impossible to enjoy outdoor life this summer. He urged city council on July 8 to address the mess.

Some municipalities

use pesticide sprays but Sarnia doesn't have a formal combat plan.

"This pest generally runs in cycles with two years of light infestation with minimal defolia-

tion, and then a year or two of moderate to heavy infestation, and then a population collapse," said parks and recreation director Rob Harwood.

An amateur scientist

deliberately imported gypsy moths to the Boston area in 1869 to start a silk industry.

They escaped and continue to spread.

## Brass:

Continued from 1

Damage to the docks and pavilion cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and took two months to repair.

But Stark's call for a \$25 permit on metal sales died at the public consul-

tation phase last month following pushback from residents and business owners.

Requiring a municipal permit to sell scrap metal will do little to curb the cost and damage done by metal thieves, Bryce MacDougall of Premier Recycling Sarnia Ltd. said at the June 26 public

meeting.

"The metal is going out of town. I can't stress that enough," he said at the forum moderated by city staff and Sarnia Police Chief Norm Hansen.

Premier owner Phillip Horwood explained that local metal recyclers are already following protocol by requiring identi-

fication and cooperating with authorities.

While satisfied with the bylaw changes, Stark said he isn't convinced all stolen metal is sold out of town.

"I believe the main recyclers that we know of in town are playing by the rules," he said. "I believe there are others

who are not. To suggest that none of it is being marketed here, I think that's somewhat naive."

Chief Hansen said the rules make it difficult to prosecute metal theft, which often requires thieves be caught in the act.

Those arrested are often released on bail the next

day, and though curfews and other bail conditions can be requested the Crown doesn't have to follow through, Hansen said.

"It's very frustrating for us as well, and we're trying."





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