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Vol. 15 - Issue 5 | Wednesday, February 4, 2026

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A faster way to ride the transit in Whitecourt is coming



A big change is coming to the community's transit system this summer. An option to get riders to popular stops quicker will be hitting the streets. Pictured is a full bus during a peak run after school. See story page 10.



Patrick Carew

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If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, you need to know that you're not alone. You can also call if you are not in crisis, seeking additional information. The new Canada Suicide Prevention Service (CSPS), by Crisis Services Canada, enables callers anywhere in

Canada to access crisis support by phone, in French or English: toll-free **1-833-456-4566** Available 24/7
Crisis Text Line (Powered by Kids Help Phone) Canada Wide free, 24/7 texting service is accessible immediately to youth anywhere

in Canada by texting TALK to **686868** to reach an English speaking Crisis Responder and TEXTO to **686868** to reach a French-speaking Crisis Responder on any text/SMS enabled cell phone.
KidsHelpPhone Ages 20 Years and Under

in Canada **1-800-668-6868** (Online or on the Phone). First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness 24/7 Help Line **1-855-242-3310**
Canadian Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line **1-866-925-4419**
Trans LifeLine – All Ages **1-877-330-6366**

Putting a face on suicide



Caitlin Jennifer Moody
Age 17

Every 40 seconds somewhere around the world someone dies by suicide, that's 99 people every 66 minutes. Every day, that's almost 100 people in the United States alone, and over 2160 worldwide. Putting a Face on Suicide (PAFOS) is a suicide awareness project that creates posters and videos to pay tribute to those we have lost to suicide with dignity and respect. PAFOS humanizes the daunting statistics; lovingly replacing numbers with faces.

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Your Story Matters

If you or someone you know has been affected by bullying, your voice can make a difference. We are looking to hear your story and raise awareness about the impact of bullying in our community.
By sharing your experience, you can help others understand they are not alone in their struggles, and together, we can take a stand against bullying.

How to Share Your Story:

- Reach out to us at thepresswtc@gmail.com
- Your submission can remain 100% anonymous if you prefer.
- Every story shared helps bring us one step closer to ending the cycle of bullying.

We believe in the power of raising awareness. Your story could be the one that helps someone find hope and strength. Let's take a stand together.

I never thought I'd be writing this. If you'd asked me a year ago, I would've just shrugged it off. But the truth is, bullying is something I've been living with for years, and it's time I speak up about it. This isn't just my story. It's the story of so many people out there who feel trapped, too scared to talk, or too tired to fight anymore.

I don't remember when it started. It wasn't a big thing at first, just some comments here and there. But over time, it grew.

The jokes that weren't funny, the looks that didn't need to be given, the whispers behind my back...it all built up.

They'd call me names, laugh when I walked by, or make jokes about the way I looked, dressed, or acted. At first, I told myself it didn't matter. "Let it roll off your back," they'd say. But it didn't. It sticks to you, like mud that never quite washes off. Every time I hear those comments, every time I see those sneers, it digs a little deeper.

You start wondering if they're right. If you really do look that dumb. If you're really that weird.

Sometimes, the hardest part wasn't the stuff people said directly to me. It was seeing the way they acted when I wasn't around...like they couldn't wait to talk about me behind my back. And it wasn't just one or two people. I could feel it in the hallway when they looked at me like I was invisible or worse, like I was a joke. There's this moment when you re-

alize you don't belong. You walk into a room, and there's this weight on your chest because you know people are talking about you. And they probably are.

It messes with your head. I used to be confident. I used to think I mattered. But with all the people who tell you you don't, it starts to make you question it. I'd lay awake at night, wondering if things would ever change. Wondering if maybe I just wasn't worth it. I didn't want to be weak. I didn't want to let anyone see how badly they were hurting me. But it gets tiring. So tiring.

It's not just the words. It's the feeling of being left out. It's the group chats you're not invited to, the parties you're never told about, the inside jokes you never understand. It's the constant reminder that you're not wanted.

Some people don't even realize how damaging their words can be. They think it's all just "harmless fun," but it's not. I don't think they get that when they say something mean, it's like a slap to the face. And it doesn't stop when they walk

away. It stays with you. It runs through your head all day, all week, until it feels like it's the only thing you can hear.

The thing is, most people don't even know I'm hurting. I'm good at hiding it. I've learned how to pretend I'm okay when I'm not. But every time they make fun of me, I feel a little more like I'm disappearing. Like my worth is tied up in their opinions, and it'll never be enough.

I guess I'm writing this to let people know that bullying isn't just something you get over. It doesn't end when the bell rings or when you get home. It stays with you. And sometimes, you just need someone to listen.

If you're out there, reading this, and you've been hurt like I have, know you're not alone. And if you're the one who's been doing the bullying please stop. You don't know what

someone else is going through, and those jokes or comments might be the thing that breaks them.

To anyone who's ever felt like I do, keep going. It gets hard, but it doesn't have to stay this way. We all deserve to feel like we belong. We all deserve to be respected.

And for anyone who's watching this happen to someone else, speak up. You don't have to be the one getting bullied to make a difference. Sometimes, it's just about being there for someone who needs it.

We need to start treating each other better. It's not just about standing up for ourselves, but standing up for each other.

Bullying isn't something we should ignore. It's something we need to change, together.

Sincerely, a 17-year-old Whitecourt student



Money Matters

One Canadian Dollar = 0.73 US Dollar
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Dollar Values as of February 4, 2026

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Whitecourt Town Council update

Whitecourt Transit will launch a new Express Route starting this summer. The new Express Route will provide direct connections to public transit's most popular destinations, and will result in shorter wait times at stops, less time on the bus, and faster trips to select destinations for transit riders. Further details on the new service will be advertised in the summer.

The Whitecourt Trailblazers Snowmobile

Club is hosting its Annual Family Snowmobile Rally on Saturday, February 14. Whitecourt will be hosting Checkpoint #2 at the Westward Community Centre. Join the rally and see why Whitecourt is the Snowmobile Capital of Alberta! Details on the event can be found at www.whitecourtrailblazers.ca.

Whitecourt Town Council has approved the following purchases:

- A topdresser (used

to support parks maintenance by applying sand and materials to turf surfaces) for \$27,841 plus GST.

- A snow blower (loader mounted to support winter road and snow removal operations) for \$275,790 plus GST.

- A haul-all hook lift and garbage body (to replace existing body and hook lift currently on a unit) for \$173,293.76 plus GST.

The Town of White-

court will be participating in the 2026 Whitecourt Trade Fair. Hosted by the Whitecourt & District Chamber of Commerce, the event will be held May 23 and 24, 2026 at JDA Place. Watch for details on the event on www.whitecourtchamber.com.

As part of the orientation process, members of Council have been authorized to attend professional development courses offered by the Elected Officials Education Program.

Is it time for your mammogram? Screen Test is coming to Whitecourt February 20 to March 4, 2026

Screen Test is a free service provided by Primary Care Alberta that offers screening mammograms. Our mobile screening units travel to 120 communities throughout Alberta to provide convenient access to breast cancer screening. Having regular screening mammograms is the best way to find breast cancer early, before symptoms appear and when treatment may work better.

Who should have a screening mammogram?

If you're 45 to 74, you don't need a referral to have a mammogram. Make screening part of your regular health routine. Plan to have a mammogram every 2 years or as decided by you and your healthcare provider.

If you're 40 to 44 or over 75, discuss the risks and benefits of screening with your healthcare provider. You will need a referral if you're 40 to 44 and it's your first mammogram, or if you're over 75.

**Call toll-free to book an appointment:
1-800-667-0604**

Breast density scores are now included in your Screen Test result letter

Breast density is the amount of dense tissue compared to the amount of fat in a person's breasts. It can be harder to find cancer in dense breasts because this tissue appears white on a mammogram, the same colour as many kinds of breast cancer. It's common to have dense

breast tissue.

Dense breasts are only one of many risk factors for breast cancer. Other factors, such as age and genetics, have a bigger impact on your overall risk. You can't tell how dense your breasts are by size, look or feel. The only way to find out is

by having a mammogram.

Talk to your healthcare provider about your breast density score and your personal risk of breast cancer.

For more information on Screen Test and breast cancer screening, visit screeningforlife.ca/breast



Two moose were spotted taking a leisurely stroll through downtown Whitecourt earlier this week, much to the surprise of local residents. The unexpected visitors seemed to enjoy their brief walk through the area before wandering back into the surrounding woods.

A look at the local weather

P.O.P.
High
Low
Wind
24-Hr Rain / Snow

Wed., Feb. 4
Cloudy
30%
10°C
4°C
W 10 km/h

Thu., Feb. 5
Mainly sunny
20%
5°C
-4°C
W 19 km/h

Fri., Feb. 6
Cloudy with sunny breaks
30%
4°C
-2°C
E 5 km/h

Sat., Feb. 7
Cloudy with sunny breaks
30%
3°C
-1°C
NW 14 km/h

Sun., Feb. 8
Mix of sun and clouds
30%
1°C
-3°C
NW 9 km/h

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Meet Hunt

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Hunt is a charming and intelligent dog with a personality that shines bright. This playful and affectionate pup has a "big sister" energy, especially towards her brother, Teddy. Hunt loves being outside and enjoys rubbing her face up and down your leg as a sign of affection. She thrives on attention and adores being pampered with pets and love.



If you would like to meet Hunt, please contact the Whitecourt Pound at: **780-778-5767**



Candace Zemp photo

Whitecourt U13-2 players gather together during the Ronald McDonald House Charities tournament in Bonnyville on Jan. 17-18. The team brought home silver in the tournament and also led all teams in fundraising, raising \$3,400 in support of RMHC.

HELP WANTED

Tim Hortons in Whitecourt is looking to fill the following positions:

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Full Time / Shift Work

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Whitecourt, AB



Grade 1 students from Pat Hardy Elementary School enjoy an afternoon of skating at the local arena, with parents joining in to support the fun-filled outing.

Pat Hardy School photo

Whitecourt Trailblazers complete new facility installation at Groat Creek Canyon Look-Out



Whitecourt Trailblazers photos



How many can you see?



A large group of young deer were munching on something delicious under a tree in front of a home on 53 Avenue, just down from the Seniors Circle. The gang of fluffy hooligans, who are often seen in the downtown area, really enjoyed their snack. Speaking of snacks, what's a deer's favourite ice cream? Cookie-doe. Hah!

| By Haylee Winger

A new outhouse and woodshed combination was installed last week at the Groat Creek Canyon Look-Out, enhancing the amenities available at the popular site.

The project was designed and built by association president and resident carpenter Jeff Brooks, with assistance from Facilities Coordinator Andy Sierens. Their efforts, along with the support of several lo-

cal partners and volunteers, ensured the installation was completed smoothly and efficiently.

The organization extends its appreciation to Tri-Steel for donating the rig mat, Paul Sirens Contracting/Andy Sirens for the rig mat hitch fabrication and coordination, and JBS Mechanical for donating trucking services. Additional thanks go to the crew



members who contributed their time and effort to the project: Jeff Brooks, Andy Sierens, Richard

Picard, Don Price, Denis Blain, Sean Schulte, David MacLeod, Gord Schlaugh, and Michelle Sierens. The successful completion of this project reflects the strong community support and collaboration that continue to enhance local recreational facilities.



Whitecourt Legion

Notice To all Members:

Annual General Meeting and Installation of Officers
Thursday March 12, 2026 at 1900 hrs (7:00 p.m.)

In the Legion Hall. It is a special evening!

All members are welcome!

WOMBANIA™

by PETER MARINACCI

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Wellspring
Family Resource & Crisis Centre
www.whitecourtshester.ca

Recover Out Loud

- Mondays are in person, at the Family Worship Center upstairs, and online (hybrid) at 7:30pm
- Fridays 7:30pm at the Whitecourt Baptist Church in person only.

ZOOM ID: 818 413 483 PASSWORD: gratitude

Whitecourt Alcoholics Anonymous Group

Meetings are three times each week

- Monday 8:00 pm - 9:00 pm
- Wednesday 8:00 pm - 9:00 pm
- Friday 8:00 pm - 9:00 pm

Located at the United Church Basement on Legion Street (formerly 5201 - 50 Street), Please Leave a Message for Our AA member or Contact Addictions Helpline @1(866)332-2322

GRIEF SHARE CALL Ruth 780-674-7182

Support group on Tuesdays, February 17 to May 5.
Crossroads Community Church, 4719 44 Avenue Mayerthorpe, Pre-registration is required

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- Addiction Helpline 1-866-332-2322
- Health Link 811

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Population powerhouse: Alberta projected to lead all provinces in population growth

By Rob Roach, ATB ECONOMICS

Population powerhouse: Alberta projected to lead all provinces in population growth

New population projections released by Statistics Canada show that Alberta's population will grow by between 1.4 and 3.1 million people over the next 25 years and will eventually surpass British Columbia as the third largest province in Canada.*

Alberta's population growth in all 10 growth scenarios considered by Statistics Canada is at least double the national average.

Zeroing in on Statistics Canada's "M2" medium-growth scenario,** Alberta's population grows from about 5 million residents today to over 7.3 million in 2050. At 46%, Alberta's popu-

lation growth over the projection period is the highest of any province with the national population growing by a more modest 17%.

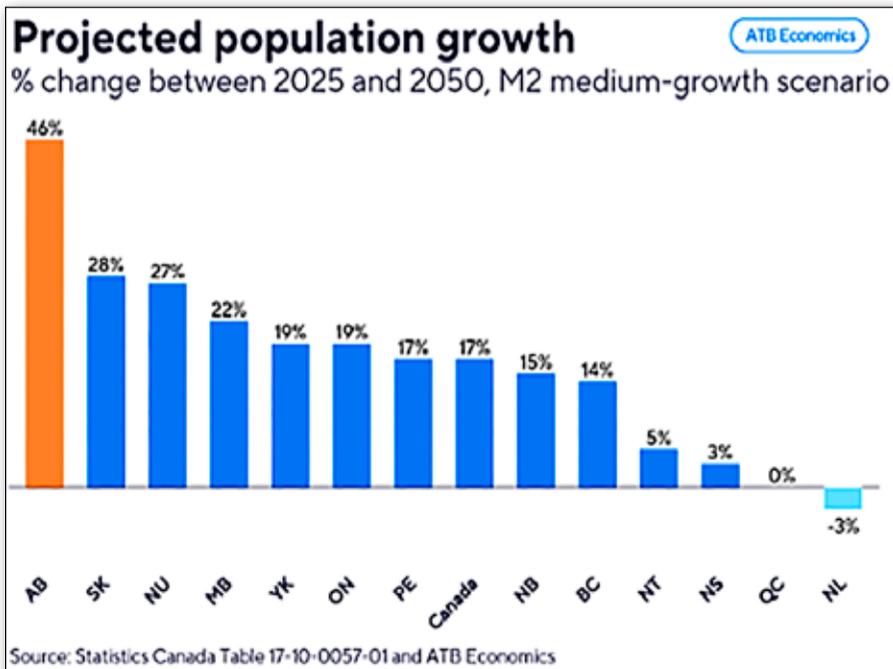
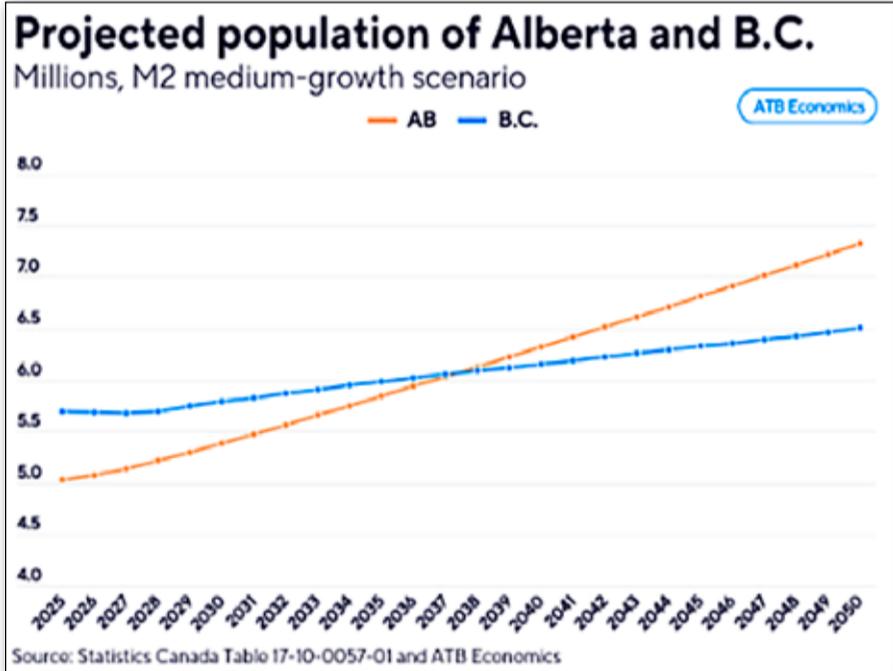
Annual growth in Alberta will average 1.5% over the projection period compared to 0.6% nationally. As such, the M2 scenario assumes a return to a more typical growth pattern in Alberta rather than the spikes seen in 2023 (+3.9%) and 2024 (+4.7%) when the number of non-permanent residents spiked and the net gains from interprovincial migration were particularly strong.

The net gain from international migration is projected to account for half (52.1%) of Alberta's population growth out to 2050 with net interprovincial migration accounting for 29.4% and natural increase

(birth less deaths) accounting for the remaining 18.5%.

Alberta's stronger growth between now and 2050 is due to ongoing gains from natural increase (the only other provinces that see positive natural increase over the projection period are Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and net interprovincial migration (B.C. and Alberta are the only two provinces that see a gain from interprovincial migration).

*In 9 out of the 10 growth scenarios considered by Statistics Canada, Alberta's population surpasses B.C.'s by 2044 or earlier. In the M2 medium-growth scenario, it happens in 2038. In the M5 medium-growth scenario, the gap gets smaller, but Alberta does not catch up to B.C.



The Press

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Savory stir-fry makes shrimp shine

Various dietary guidelines, including the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, recommend eating seafood as part of a healthy diet. Many recommend adults eat around eight ounces of seafood per week.

There are plenty of delicious seafood options to choose from, and shrimp tops the list of many people's favorites. It's versatile in many dishes, as shrimp can be boiled, baked, broiled and fried depending on the recipe. In this recipe for "Thai Shrimp with Roasted Chili Paste" from "300 Best Stir-Fry Recipes" (Robert Rose) by Nancie McDermott, shrimp is enhanced by the flavors of Asian cuisine in a zesty stir-fry.

Thai Shrimp with Roasted Chili Paste

Serves 4

- 3 tablespoons roasted chili paste
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce
- 1/2 cup water or chicken stock
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic
- 1 pound medium shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 1/4 cup long thin strips red bell pepper (optional)
- 1 cup fresh basil or mint leaves (optional)

1. In a small bowl, combine chili paste, fish sauce, water, sugar, and salt and stir well. Set aside.
2. Heat a wok or a large, deep skillet over medium-high heat. Add oil and swirl to coat pan. Add garlic and toss well, until fragrant, about 30 seconds.
3. Add shrimp and spread into a single layer. Cook, until most of the edges turn pink, about 1 minute. Toss well.
4. Add chili paste mixture and toss well. Cook, tossing occasionally, until shrimp are cooked through and coated with a thin dark sauce, 1 to 2 minutes more.
5. Add red pepper and basil leaves, if using, and toss well. Transfer to a serving plate. Serve hot or warm.



Homemade chicken soup is ideal for cold and flu season

Cold and flu season arrives each year. Though there might be little people can do to avoid catching a cold or coming down with the flu, certain approaches can make it easier to get through a bout with either illness. Flu vaccinations have been found to lessen the severity of infection with the influenza virus, while rest and plenty of fluids can help reduce the length of time a cold puts people out of commission.

Knowing what to eat when combatting a cold and the flu also can help people treat each virus. Chicken soup has long been a go-to when fighting a cold, and this recipe for "Homemade Chicken Noodle Soup" from Lines+Angles makes a worthy addition to anyone's cold- and flu-fighting culinary repertoire.

Homemade Chicken Noodle Soup

Makes 8 servings

- 1 3 1/2-pound whole chicken
- 10 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 8 carrots, peeled and sliced
- 6 stalks celery, trimmed and sliced
- 3 onions, peeled and sliced
- 2 cloves of garlic, peeled and minced
- 8 sprigs fresh parsley
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 tablespoons butter
- Salt, to taste
- Freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
- 12 ounces wide egg noodles

For the chicken stock:

1. Rinse the chicken inside and out under cold running water. Place the chicken in a large pot, set over medium heat and add the chicken broth. Add 1/4 of the carrots, 1/3 of the celery and 1/3 of the onions. Add the garlic, 2 sprigs parsley, thyme, bay leaf and enough water to just cover the chicken. Bring broth to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for about 1 1/4 hours, or until chicken is very tender, skimming any foam from the surface of the broth.
2. Remove chicken from broth and place in a colander to drain and cool. Strain the broth through a very fine mesh strainer into a large, clean soup

pot. Discard the vegetables used to flavor the stock.

For the soup:

1. Skim any fat off the top of the strained broth.
2. Remove and discard the skin and bones from the chicken and cut the meat into bite-sized pieces; set aside.
3. Melt the butter in a large Dutch oven set over medium heat. Add the remaining carrots, celery and onions and cook for about 7 minutes or until the onions are translucent. Add the chicken pieces and chicken stock, season with salt and pepper. Bring soup to a simmer and cook for about 30 minutes or until the vegetables are tender.
4. Chop the remaining parsley; add the parsley and egg noodles, stirring frequently. Cook for 8 to 10 additional minutes or until the noodles are tender.
5. Ladle into soup bowls and serve hot.



Create your own portable energy booster right at home



Homemade Protein Bars With Peanut Butter and Hemp Protein

Makes 8 bars

- 13 ounces peanut butter, no added sugar, divided
 - 2 1/2 ounces pure maple syrup
 - 3 ounces almond flour
 - 3 ounces coconut oil
 - 6 ounces chopped dark chocolate, at least 70 percent cocoa, divided
 - 3 ounces hemp seeds
 - 1 pinch salt
1. Grease and line the base and sides of an 8-inch baking dish with parchment paper.
 2. In a large mixing bowl, thoroughly stir together 1 cup with the maple syrup and almond flour until well combined. Transfer to the baking dish, evenly pressing it across the base. Cover and chill until needed.
 3. Meanwhile, combine the remaining 1/2 cup peanut butter, coconut oil, half the chocolate, hemp seeds, and salt in a heatproof bowl. Set the bowl over a half-filled saucepan of simmering water, stirring until smooth.
 4. Remove from the heat and pour the mixture over the chilled base. (Keep the water simmering.)
 5. Place the remaining chocolate in a clean bowl. Set it over the simmering water, stirring until melted.
 6. Drizzle the melted chocolate over the topping in the tin. Cover and chill until set, about 4 hours.
 7. When ready to serve, cut into slices and turn out.

Protein bars are a convenient energy booster that's easy to carry. That portability makes protein bars a go-to for outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy activities like hiking that burn lots of calories. Though it's easy to pick up a protein bar at the store, it's also possible to make your own at home. Anyone interested in doing so can try their hands at this recipe for "Homemade Protein Bars With Peanut Butter and Hemp Protein" courtesy of Lines+Angles.

Baked brie is a cheese-centric crowd pleaser

Cheese is beloved all over the world. While cheese features more prominently in some cultures than others, its popularity still knows no bounds.

That popularity is something hosts can keep in mind as they plan to welcome loved ones into their homes during the holiday season. Couple the popularity of cheese with a little spice, as this recipe for "Baked Brie With Blackberry Compote and Spicy Candied Pecans" from Lines+Angles does, and hosts are sure to have a crowd pleaser on their hands.

Baked Brie With Blackberry Compote and Spicy Candied Pecans

Makes 4 to 6 servings

For the compote:

- 3 cups blackberries
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

For the pecans:

- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 pinch chilli powder
- 1 small egg white
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 cups pecans

For the cheese:

- 2 Brie wheels
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 pomegranate, seeded
- Fresh thyme sprigs
- Multigrain crackers

1. **For the compote:** Combine blackberries, sugar, water, and vanilla extract in a heavy-based saucepan.
2. Cover and cook over a medium heat, stirring

from time to time, until the blackberries are soft and jammy, about 12 to 15 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool to one side.

3. For the spicy candied pecans: Preheat the oven to 250 F. Stir together sugar and spices in a large mixing bowl.
4. Whisk egg white with water in a separate bowl until frothy. Toss pecans in egg white mixture before removing and tossing in the spiced sugar to coat.
5. Spread out on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Bake for 1 hour, turning over every 15 minutes, until dry and crisp.
6. Remove from the oven and let cool to one side. Increase oven to 350 F.
7. For the cheese: Remove the tops of the rinds from the Brie wheels. Place the Brie on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.
8. Drizzle with olive oil before baking for 25 to 30 minutes until melted and bubbling.
9. Remove from the oven and let cool briefly before topping with the blackberry compote, spiced pecans, pomegranate seeds, and thyme sprigs.
10. Serve with the multigrain crackers and any remaining compote and pecans on the side.



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Job#: 26-001 – Infrastructure Summer Labourers – Summer Positions
Job#: 26-002 – Parks Summer Labourers – Summer Positions
Job#: 26-003 – Festival Park Attendants – Summer Positions
Job#: 26-004 – Festival Park Team Lead – Summer Position
Job#: 26-005 – Utilities Summer Labourer – Summer Position
Job#: 26-006 – Landfill Summer Labourer – Summer Position
Job#: 26-007 – Visitor Information Counsellor – Summer Position
Job#: 26-008 – Summer Program Leader – Summer Position
Job#: 26-009 – Outdoor Adventures Leader – Summer Position

All jobs with the exception of the Festival Park Attendants and the Visitor Information Counsellor must be available to begin their duties May 1, 2026.

Please visit www.whitecourt.ca for all employment opportunities and details on how to apply.




Frozen in time

The splash park at Festival Park might be a frozen planet right now, as captured in this silhouette with the late afternoon sun, but soon enough, this extremely popular spot in the community will be overflowing with the laughter and squeals of children, living their best lives under the hot summer sunshine.



Town of Whitecourt photo

Councillor McAree (right) will take on the role of Deputy Mayor for Whitecourt from February 1 through May 31, 2026.



This stunning sunset, captured last week, marked the end of a beautiful, warm day. The vibrant colors in the sky offered a peaceful conclusion to an afternoon of clear skies and mild temperatures, reminding us that spring is just around the corner – officially starting on Friday, March 20.

PUBLIC NOTICE
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NOTICE OF DECISION

The following decisions were made by the Municipal Planning Commission:

Application No. 25-152 – Side Yard Setback and Site Coverage Variance Request at 52 Pritchard Drive – Approved with conditions.

Application No. 26-002 - Discretionary Use, Home Occupation – Taxi Service at Unit 403, 4502 52 Avenue – Not approved.

Date of Decision: January 22, 2026 **Appeal Closes at 4:00pm:** February 12, 2026

An Appeal of the above decision(s) may be made by submitting a written appeal and appeal fee (\$315) to the Office of the Secretary of the Subdivision and Development Appeal Board, Town of Whitecourt Administration Building, Box 509, Whitecourt, Alberta, T7S 1N6 prior to 4:00pm on the above noted date. Any person(s) affected by the said proposal(s), has the right to appeal prior to the above date.

A faster way to ride the transit in Whitecourt is coming

| By Serena Lapointe

Last year, the Town's public transit system was reviewed to see where it could be enhanced to increase effectiveness for users. WATT Consulting Group Ltd was retained by the Town of Whitecourt to do the review and provide potential changes that fit within the existing budget and available resources.

The Town's ask for WATT was to review the network, learn about community travel patterns and key destinations, engage with front-line staff about challenges and user feedback, develop route options that meet the community's needs, review bus stop infrastructure and provide recommendations for either new locations or design changes of existing infrastructure, and review the information provide to the public about the system to see if it needs improvement.

In mid-January, the Community Services Advisory Board reviewed the information from WATT and provided its recommendations to Whitecourt Town Council. One of the key takeaways from WATT was the opportunity to enhance service during peak hours by introducing an express option. With this option, one bus would follow the regular route while a second bus would run along a condensed route, connecting the most used destinations during the busiest times of the day, enabling riders to get where they are going faster.

The express option would include most schools, including St. Joseph School, Percy Baxter, and Hilltop High School. Other stops that are less used would be removed from the ride, resulting in a significantly shortened round trip. The current route with all stops in-

cluded runs on a one-hour cycle, but the express option would cut that in half, down to 30 minutes.

Chelsea Grande, Director of Community Services, explained that it would move people quicker.

"This will allow people to move quickly and more frequently up and down the hill and vice versa." She said that having a long route was something that kept people from using transit more frequently, based on feedback from staff and riders during the review.

For students and those using the bus to get to work, an express route would also mean less time on the bus. Accessing an express route bus stop might mean residents need to walk a bit further, but it would result in less waiting at the bus stop once they arrive and a shorter ride to their destination. "This would also offer

the opportunity to transfer between the two services (buses), if they didn't want to walk a little further," explained Grande.

Council asked if there was an option to provide peak service a bit differently in the summer months, linking in Festival Park and perhaps Graham Acres, still keeping the route quick but opening up access to areas that are used significantly more in the summer than in the winter.

Festival Park and Graham Acres are not otherwise part of the express route changes, although there are stops within walking distance of both. Grande said they would look into it.

Since the express bus would be cycling quicker, Grande said users waiting for a bus at a stop that sees both buses would only wait for about 15 minutes before one arrived, giving them a quicker option to

get onto a bus. She also noted that a rider going from one side of the community to the other would experience the full 30-minute express ride, but someone could have a much shorter ride than that, depending on where they are going, making the express route even more convenient.

Councillor Braden Lanctot asked how Whitecourt's transit system can get onto Google Maps. "If I'm riding transit in Edmonton, I can go on Google Maps, and I click the transit button, and it shows me (where I can go). It overlays all the different routes and my transfers. It's super accessible, and I don't have to have a separate app."

He wondered if it were possible to have Whitecourt's system accessible in a similar way, rather than needing another app, reading a pamphlet or looking

at the maps located at the community bus stops. Grande said it's something they can investigate. Currently, the community uses the

TransLoc app to see real-time bus tracking and pinpoint stops.

Data will be collected on user feedback over the next year and presented at a later date.

Grande said they also monitor feedback on a regular basis. "The Community Services Advisory Board monitors it monthly, and we do make small adjustments throughout the year." Peak service operates from 6:30 am to 9 am and 3:30 pm to 5:30 pm, Monday to Friday. In 2024, Whitecourt's transit program provided over thirty-seven thousand rides, helping better connect residents to all corners of the community. The express route is anticipated to see implementation this summer.

Shelterbelt supports in Woodlands County could see a change

| By Serena Lapointe

Shelterbelts are strategically placed trees or shrubs planted in rows, helping to provide refuge from environmental conditions, such as strong winds and snow. They are most often used in wide open spaces, like farmland, where the wind tends to be mighty, as well as along roadways to help mitigate the buildup of snow drifts.

For those living on acreages in Woodlands County, a shelterbelt can significantly help, not only with protecting crops or property from damage, but also by improving soil moisture retention and enhancing biodiversity, depending on what they've planted.

Creating a shelterbelt isn't as easy as one might think. Several components come into play, including the distance between trees or shrubs when first planted, the species planted, their height at full maturity, and the distance

between the shelterbelt and the field/crop or infrastructure it is being created to protect.

Given that trees grow slowly, creating a shelterbelt requires strategic planning. To help, Woodlands County provides support through its Shelterbelt Program, which at one point even provided trees. "Currently, we don't provide trees or order trees for people. We provide resources for them, such as places where they can order trees, information on tree selection, site preparation, weed control, and we have several workshops regarding different aspects of trees in terms of diseases, insects and other issues that can affect your tree shelterbelt," explained Dawn Fortin, Woodlands County's Agricultural Services Manager.

In the early 2000s and into the early 2010s, thousands of trees were planted in Woodlands County

thanks to a now-defunct program called the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA), a branch of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada through the federal government. PFRA focused on Western Canada and began as a direct response to the prairie drought crisis, which saw over two hundred thousand residents leave the Prairies between the 1930s and 1940s.

PFRA was created in 1935 to encourage residents to return to the Prairies and reignite the nearly three million acres of abandoned farms that resulted from the drought, and it succeeded.

From then to the early 2010s, PFRA evolved to help farmers in numerous ways, including erosion prevention, soil conservation, the development of water resources and the management of pasture lands, which

continued on page 11



Credit: Prairie Shelterbelt Program

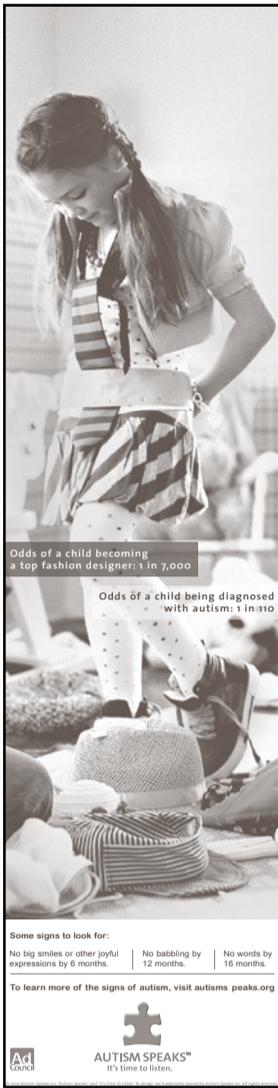
The County's Shelterbelt Program used to offer trees through a long-running federal program, resulting in tens of thousands of trees planted in the municipality. An upgrade to the current program may see discounted trees added as an option for residents. Pictured is a shelterbelt in its infancy with several rows and species.



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continued from page 10

included the distribution of trees.

There were 22 district offices throughout the Prairie provinces, including one in Indian Head, Saskatchewan, which was where Woodlands County got its trees. "Through that program, you could get free trees. So, we administered it. From about 2003 to 2013, we had an average of about 4,500 trees ordered annually. Some years it was about 1,900, and others we had about 10,000 ordered. So, it varied quite a bit," explained Fortin.

When the program ended in 2012, municipalities altered their programs to suit different needs, with some still providing free trees, some providing trees at a cost-recovery fee and others switching to providing resources and support instead.

At Woodlands County Council's regular

meeting on January 29, Fortin said information about the Shelterbelt Program had been requested, along with information on the potential costs of providing trees again. Fortin said she contacted some neighbouring municipalities to see how many trees they sell each year, and said it was between three and four thousand units.

She said four neighbouring municipalities, Barrhead, Westlock, Athabasca and Thorhild, order together through their conservation group. Fortin said that although Woodlands County cannot purchase with them, the municipality could purchase trees from a nursery for the same savings.

"They turn around and sell the trees at a markup to cover their material costs," she explained.

The cost of equipment and labour to pick up and sort the trees, however, is not some-

thing those municipalities include in their pricing, as they offset that with the Agricultural Service Board Grant, but Woodlands County can't review its use of those funds until the end of the current grant cycle in 2029, which would mean finding a way to cover the cost.

If Woodlands County wanted to run its program at full cost recovery, including the costs of labour and equipment, and not worry about finding dollars in the budget, the program wouldn't even be worth it, said Fortin. She said at that point, it would be cheaper for residents to buy the trees from a nursery themselves.

At Council's request, Woodlands County will research potentially offering trees through its Shelterbelt Program for 2027. Council also requested that the Agricultural Services Board look over the

idea. Since the trees need to be ordered in June 2026 to be delivered in 2027, the conversation will need to happen over the next few months.

Councillor Benny Whitten, Fort Assiniboine/Timeau, said if they decide to move ahead with the plan, they should get the information to residents sooner rather than later. "Maybe we put it out there that the trees should be preordered so that we know exactly what we should or should not bring in so that we don't have a deficit."

Residents interested in the County's Shelterbelt Program offering trees are encouraged to speak to their elected officials. Details on the current program and the services offered, including consultations, on-site diagnostic visits, and post-planting care, can be found on the County's website under Agriculture Supports.



Letter to the Editor policy

The Press welcomes readers to write letters to the Editor. A maximum of 300 words is preferred but not necessary. Letters must carry a first name or two initials with surname and include an address and daytime telephone number. All letters are subject to editing. Please email letters to wctpress@gmail.com.



Students enjoy action-packed gym riot



Pat Hardy School photos

Grade four and five students enjoyed another fun-filled Gym Riot, thanks to the efforts of Pat Hardy School's PE teacher, Mrs. Chamberland.

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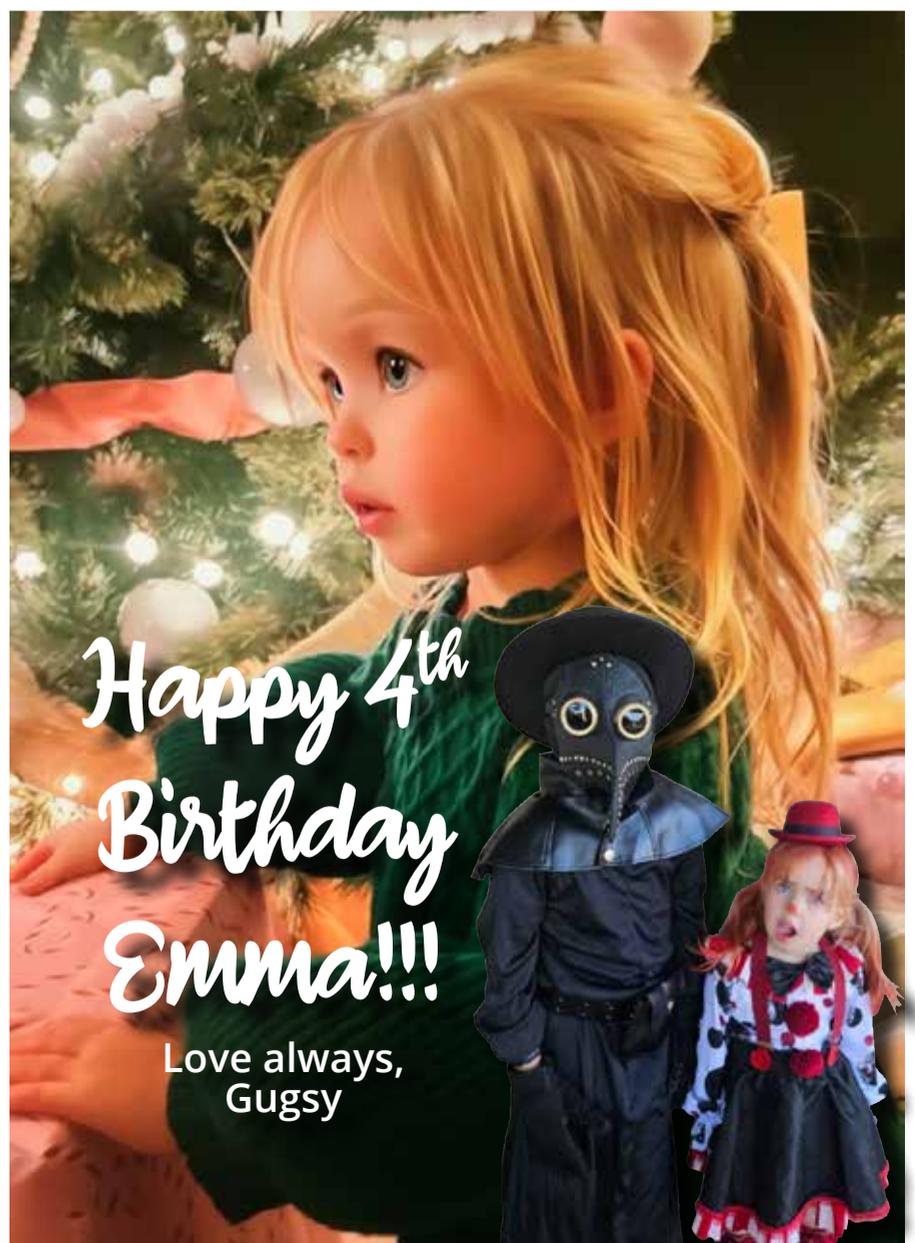
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Happy 4th Birthday Emma!!!

Love always,
Gugsy

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