

St. Albert Gazette

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Fibre frazzle

Some residents say they're frustrated over torn-up lawns following fibre internet installation. **6**

► At the helm of Viking history

Denmark museum exhibit on display at the Royal Alberta Museum **24**



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DAN RIEDLHUBER/ST. Albert Gazette

REUNITED – Velvet Martin of St. Albert, right, gazes into her long-lost sister's eyes for the first time Tuesday morning at the Edmonton International Airport. Bonnie Williamson-Powell arrived from Ontario for a week-long visit with her newfound sibling. See page 3.

Committee supports annual tax increases

BY JEFF LABINE
Staff Writer

St. Albert could be looking at a minimum 1.5-per-cent increase to property taxes each year starting in 2020 as city council works to address a major funding gap.

The increase, which still needs to be finalized at city council proper, received majority support during Monday's governance, priorities and finance meeting as a starting point to address a yearly capital funding shortfall of approximately \$17 million. The deficit is primarily in the area of repairing, maintaining and replacing (RMR), which covers everything the city owns from facilities and vehicles to sidewalk repair and potholes.

If it receives official approval at council, the decision would set a base property tax increase of 1.5 per cent for three years – a number that could be higher depending on what councillors decide at budget time each year.

The committee voted 6-1 in favour, with only Coun. Sheena Hughes opposing, although many acknowledged this was a tough decision to make.

Councillors heard a 1.5-per-cent property tax increase would be required for 20 years to completely close the city's funding gap. Mayor Cathy Heron said she limited this plan to three years because she hoped the city could come up with something different in the meantime.

"We will have a little bit better of an idea of what our asset management plan looks like and we'll have a much better idea, I think, on what this current provincial government is willing to assist us and the federal government," she said. "It's tough but we can't continue to kick (the can) down the road. This is just a provisional solution that will not get us anywhere near the \$17-million gap that we're currently facing."

See "Fees," page 15

Feds plan ban on single-use plastics

BY KEVIN MA
Staff Writer

St. Albert's mayor says this week's proposed national ban on single-use plastics could mean less waste at the curb and more money in your pocket.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Environment and Climate Change Minister Catherine McKenna announced Monday that Canada would ban single-use plastic items as early as 2021 and create national standards for extended

producer responsibility plans for plastic products.

Canadians recycle just nine per cent of the plastic they buy each year, McKenna said, speaking in Toronto. The rest ends up in lakes, rivers and oceans, where it's killing birds and whales and creating microplastic particles that could harm human health. There's so much plastic waste piling up as a result that studies suggest there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish by 2050.

"Our kids and grandkids deserve to stand on our beaches and alongside rushing rivers and be filled with wonder instead of wondering where all the garbage came from," McKenna said.

The federal government estimates that about a third of all plastic used in Canada is for single-use or short-term products such as straws and packaging, and that Canadians use some 15 billion plastic bags a year and 57 million plastic straws a day.

See "National," page 13

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CONTENTIOUS FESTIVAL DAYS

Morinville and the Festival Society are at odds over annual event. See Page 19.

50 years to find a sister

Mother's complicated life made searching for family challenging

BY SCOTT HAYES
Staff Writer

There were balloons, hugs, smiles and tears when two long-lost sisters were reunited at the Edmonton International Airport on Tuesday morning. St. Albert's Velvet Martin finally looked straight into the eyes of Bonnie Williamson-Powell, arriving from Ontario.

It was a moment Martin thought would never come – that is, until her genealogical detective work solved some riddles last November. A lot of those riddles started because of their mother's complicated life.

"I thought I was an only child growing up. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned that my mom had had another life before myself and my dad," she began. "I promised her when she disclosed this to me that I would not search for the past because she was ... afraid of the past. I wouldn't search until she passed."

Losing her mother in 2015 meant that she could now start asking questions about who else might be out there. She wrote to children's aid societies, posted messages to Facebook groups and made requests of online genealogy sites, and more.

"I wasn't sure where to write because my mom was born in Nova Scotia and lived in Ontario. To complicate matters, my mom was a foster child so she had many names growing up."

She contacted her mother's orphanage and even took one of those DNA kits. Through all of her research, she determined that her mother had a sibling that she never knew about.

"I was actually on a Facebook group for Nova Scotia and met a woman online who lives in Alberta, coincidentally. Her father was my mother's brother. She'd been doing a lot of DNA digging for quite a while. Her brother already did the DNA test so she convinced me to go do it. I did it and sure enough, we were first cousins."

The two ended up working together to help Martin in her search. They developed a list of possible surnames for her sibling and photos that went with them. Near the end of 2018, there was one picture that had potential, though the face in it was off in the distance. There was no way of knowing what she should be looking for to recognize the face anyway. Martin contacted



DAN RIEDLHUBER/St. Albert Gazette

WELCOMING ARMS – Velvet Martin of St. Albert, right, hugs her sister for the first time at the Edmonton International Airport on Tuesday. Bonnie Williamson-Powell arrived from Ontario for a week-long visit with her newfound sister. That's Velvet's husband John Martin waiting in the background.

the person in the photo who ended up being her sister's sibling.

"She's like, 'Oh, yeah, I know who Bonnie is. That's my sister,'" Martin said.

A phone number was passed along and last November she received the call from Ontario. The puzzle hadn't been solved just yet. Skepticism in such circumstances is understandable. The difference in their ages is nearly 20 years. Williamson-Powell didn't exactly know all of the details of her mother's life either.

When the two spoke on the phone, they figured that sending photographs by email might help solve the mystery once and for all. Williamson-Powell sent along a portrait photo of herself as a young child with her father and her mother right there, wearing an outfit that Martin immediately recognized.

"Throughout my whole childhood growing up, mom had this portrait hanging in the house, which now that

she's passed it hangs up in my house. It's identical... it's got to be from the same photoshoot because she's wearing the same outfit. It's just a portrait of her. I sent that back to Bonnie and said, 'Oh, yes, this is definitely the same woman.'

They were indeed sisters and, in true sisterly form, they've spent hours talking on the phone, sharing details and asking questions to catch up on all of the years as fast as possible.

"It's nice to be able to find your past," Martin said, starting to choke up with emotion. "My mom and dad both passed. My daughter passed. We've had so many losses. For the first time, it's like we're gaining family. It's incredible."

Williamson-Powell, too, is relieved to have a new sister and to have been able to put some of the sad stories of her family's past to rest, though there is much more to discover.

"I really don't know how to describe it. I have had a pretty complicated life

so this didn't come as a huge surprise to me. At first, I think I was just happy and sad at the same time, I guess, because I had been looking for my birth mother for most of my life. When Velvet found me and I spoke to her, and I found out that my mother had passed on was really, really sad. There's a lot of mixed emotions," she said, later writing in an email, "In the end, we are left with family and friends and nothing else matters as much."

The two suggested that there would probably be a lot of photo albums looked at during this week-long visit. They still have much to talk about. It turns out that their mother had another relationship, and there are three other sisters from that as well, though one has already passed away. There is another that lives somewhere in Canada and another in the United States. The search for them continues.

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