

Church hall sale sparked by buyer interest

By Amy Ward

A church hall that serves as a community hub is up for sale, though the minister says she hopes the purchaser will continue to make space for gatherings and events.

St. James United Church Dartmouth, on the edge of Downtown Dartmouth on Portland Street, is “right-sizing” its property with the sale of the hall, said the Rev. Catherine MacDonald, intentional interim minister.

“They’re making a faith-filled decision to do what is best to achieve their long-term presence in this community,” MacDonald said, adding that the sale does not indicate the church is disappearing.



MacDonald

MacDonald was hired in January 2023 to help the congregation re-evaluate their needs. Around that time, someone approached the church to ask if they were willing to let go of some of their property.

“As the conversation took place with the congregation, it became evident that we really didn’t need all this space,” said MacDonald.

To decide on a plan to divide the property, the St. James leadership team and congregation met over the course of about nine months. The hall shares several amenities with the church, including washrooms and electricity. Part of the sale process therefore involves renovating the church building to have its own washrooms.

St. James sent notice to tenants of the intent to sell after receiving approval from the Bermuda-Nova Scotia Regional Council of the United Church in the spring.

Since February, the 2 Denarii Society has run an addiction recovery program Tuesday through Friday at the hall. 2 Denarii sold its live-in home in Halifax and moved to St. James to continue offering recovery programs for people with addictions earlier in 2025.

Executive Director Phil Bissett

knew the church was thinking of selling the hall when 2 Denarii moved into the space.

“We were aware and came in with eyes wide open,” said Bissett.

Bissett said he sees the need for a community space in downtown Dartmouth. “I hate to see that stripped away from communities,” he said. “I’m a little torn on that.”

At the same time, Bissett said he understands that the congregation at St. James does not want to hurt the community.

Accents Music has operated out of the church hall for three years.

Co-owner Elizabeth Humphries said the hall is a community hub and feels like home.

“It’s been a really wonderful location for us and suited our needs,” said Humphries. “I think it’s been a good, a positive partnership for the church as well, having families and people from the community coming in here.”

While Humphries understands why the church has decided to sell, she doesn’t want the space to change.

“I’m glad that the church is going to be able to use this sale to keep thriving and keep their church growing. But I think it’s going to be felt in the community,” said Humphries.

In addition to 2 Denarii and Accents, the hall currently hosts regular Scouts programs, soccer, volleyball, A.A. meetings, a Japanese school, and theatrical events.

MacDonald acknowledged concerns around loss of community space. “We believe strongly in community connections, and there are fewer and fewer spaces that are available for communities,” she said.

Whether space remains available for the community will depend on the purchaser and the sale process itself. The congregation needs approval from the regional council to sell the property and choose a buyer.

Offers are being accepted until December 18, 2025. MacDonald said she expects the sale to take place after the church reviews the offers in January. □

PLEASANT-WOODSIDE HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

O Christmas tree, thy leaves are so unchanging

Not to mention thy unchanging tree salesman, South Dartmouth’s supplier for 42 years

By Karen Foster

John Van’t Hof has been selling his Christmas trees in the parking lot next to the Woodside Tavern for 42 years; he started when he was just 23 years old with trees he grew on a piece of land he got from his parents. But his history with Christmas trees goes back even further, to the dairy farm he grew up on.

“We always did a little bit of Christmas trees, and I always loved doing it when I was younger,” he recalls. When John decided to start selling trees in the city, he found himself in the Woodside lot where South Dartmouth residents now see him every year. In the beginning, the tree lot was on the other side of the tavern, in front of the Sobeys. “We had more people travelling [by]” when the Sobeys was still open, John said, “but [its closure] hasn’t affected our business because people knew we were here.”

Indeed, the Van’t Hof tree lot has become a tradition for many in the neighbourhood. “I had people last week say they’ve been buying a tree [from me] for 40 years,” John remarked.

Growing Christmas trees is a year-round operation. A grower needs to have about 30,000 trees growing at one time in order to have 3,000 at the right size each year. Each tree is groomed into the right shape, and the whole lot needs to be frequently thinned out to ensure those trees have enough room to grow. “You gotta shear a lot



The Van’t Hof tree lot, next to the Woodside Tavern (Photo: Karen Foster)

more trees than you’re actually cutting,” John explained. “People don’t realize how much work’s involved.”

There are other challenges; for example, growers “only get paid in December,” and it is difficult to find workers if they have more trees than they can process on their own. The Van’t Hof operation is mostly run now by John and his wife, with a worker or two hired for the December sales. As retirees, the couple will keep working at the tree farm as long as they can and

want to. But the tradition will live on regardless.

“My sons are into it too,” John explained. “I had more land than what I wanted to look after... getting older too. So my two sons are looking after pieces now.” One sells in Forest Hills and the other exports to the United States. For now, this South Dartmouth institution will keep selling a range of trees—from second grade to premium—right where they’ve been for over four decades. □

Dartmouth offers holiday shopping, special events for all

By Christian Ensslin

December is holiday season, and right here on our doorstep there are Christmas events for everybody. Take a look.

All through December, **Evergreen House** (Dartmouth Heritage Museum) on Newcastle Street offers free Christmas Ornament Decorating and Gift Tag Making for all ages, using recycled materials where possible. At the same time, the museum offers a 10% gift shop sale of their unique, local gifts and stocking stuffers. Both of these events are available whenever the museum is open, up to December 23.

Evergreen House also hosts a special Christmas themed musical event, the **Evergreen House Trad Night**. There will be live music presented by the Helen Creighton Folklore Society, comprising balladry and songs of old. There will also be an open mic, with participants asked to choose songs from the Helen Creighton collection or similar collections. The event takes place on Friday, December 12, at 7 p.m.

The **Dartmouth Players** community theatre at 44 Hester St. is currently performing “O Boston Tree,” a wacky, fun-filled, laugh-a-minute holiday adventure that’s sure to leave your belly sore and

your hearth warmed. This show is filled with festive spirit and outrageous surprises, and is performed live on stage until December 13.

Downtown Dartmouth is cheering on local shoppers with a free holiday shopping party on December 13 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., with carolers along the street and free cocoa at participating locations. Sidewalks are sure to be busy, and full of holiday cheer.



Illustration by Anna Ramsay

Some of our local churches are also putting special Christmas events (other than their traditional Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services). For example, the **New Hope Baptist Church** on Everett St. offers a Candle Light Service on December 14 at 6 p.m., while **St. James United Church** on Portland St. has a special choir concert featuring the St. James Choir and the Carillon Choir on December 14 at 2 p.m., with classic carols, festive favourites and a warm community spirit.

Recognizing that the holiday sea-

son can be a challenging time filled with mixed emotions, memories, and moments of quiet longing, **Mattatal Funeral Home** on 217 Portland St. is opening its doors for a Blue Christmas Service on December 17 at 7 p.m. This will be a reflective, inclusive service that offers solace, understanding, and a sense of connection for those feeling blue, overwhelmed, grieving, or simply seeking a calm space amid the busyness.

At **Alderney Landing Theatre** on December 19 at 7:30 p.m., a special queer choral production for the holiday season, *Winter Dream Snowglobe*, is offered by “Quoir,” a 2SLGBTQIA+ community choir organized by the Chelsi Madonna School of Music. Quoir director Chelsi Madonna is the ECMA Innovator of the year 2025, and this is sure to be a fun-filled musical holiday season event.

And finally, between Christmas and New Year, the **Woodside Tavern** is organizing a Christmas Dance Party on December 27. And even if dancing is not your thing, I fondly remember tasting one of the Tavern’s very delicious curries on Boxing Day last year (just in case you are in need of some food while many other places are closed for the holidays). □

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Harry, the skeleton and sometimes-sentry on Clyde Street. (Illustration: Kate Crane)

Why we started the *Post*

By Matthew Townsend

My family and I were having dinner with friends in Hammonds Plains when the subject of the *Post* came up. We shared the October issue, and our hosts’ attention fell on the map of the Pleasant-Woodside neighbourhood.

“Wait, why is there a skeleton on the map?”

Their question caught me un-awares. We all know Harry, right? “It’s our neighbourhood skeleton,” I answered naturally. As more bemused questions followed, I quietly wondered: Have these suburban folks never heard of a year-round neighbourhood meme skeleton?

Location matters. What happens here helps define our lives. From development projects bringing hundreds of new residents, to a punk show at the tavern, to the people who help our kids get to school safely, the events and people (and skeletons) around us make our community. However long you’ve been here, whatever your politics and passions, you live here. Like me.

The Pleasant-Woodside Neighbourhood Association started the *Post* to push back on a long, slow trend: the collapse of local journalism across Canada, including in our area. When local news disappears, we’re left in the dark about our own streets. But where it survives, communities feel more like, well, communities. Births are celebrated, deaths are mourned, new businesses get a crowd, and elected officials are praised or critiqued as needed. Local journalism doesn’t make everyone happy (if it does, you’re doing it wrong), but it keeps people informed about their backyards.

Most places, though, have lost that anchor, and life has grown less neighbourly. Social media’s promise of building community hasn’t materialized. Instead, big tech has reduced many community conversations to the abstract, ideological fights that seem to thrive in these spaces. None of this helps us to get

to know our neighbours. And despite efforts to curate our feeds to catch local news (if it’s even allowed on the platform), we’re still fighting algorithms and business models where outrage keeps our attention and our attention (and personal information) is the commodity, the product.

At the same time, most of our old local news has disappeared, or been reduced to a husk now owned by distant corporate interests that are more concerned with shareholder profits than our communities’ public good. Of course, there are still good journalists doing good work, but with so few staff, major outlets can only chase stories with big, bleak impact; crime, crisis, controversy, and catastrophe. You’re not alone if you feel like the news that makes it to us is rarely local and often just a cynical flood of upsetting events making everything feel worse.

The *Post* exists to strain out this cynicism and embrace the small. We’re all volunteers with families and jobs and businesses, but we love our area. We want to help the neighbourhood understand itself, to connect people around community events and shared interests, and to equip us to talk about life here with our own words, art, and ideas. This is our mission, and anyone who lives, works, or studies here can join in. The pay ain’t great, but the payoff feels pretty good.

That payoff is the chance to reclaim these eroding rights: to understand the things that are happening to us and to our neighbourhood; to enjoy our lives as much as we can; and to speak up when it matters. The *Post* aims to help with these. And we’re glad you’re on this journey with us. □

The Post will hold its next editorial meeting on Thursday, Jan. 8, at 6:00 p.m. at the Woodside Tavern. All are welcome to join in and participate.

NEIGHBOURHOOD CHIT-CHAT

Catching up with our community centre

Many associate the North Woodside Community Centre with the child-care program that operates there — but the centre is so much more. Kate Crane recently sat down with Debbie Meier, NWCC manager, to learn about the centre.



Hundreds of people flocked to NWCC’s Nov. 15 Kris Kringle Market for shopping and breakfast. (Photo: NWCC/Facebook)

How did the Nov. 15 Kris Kringle Market go?

The holiday market this year was amazing. People were lined up all the way down the sidewalk, down the driveway. A lot of the crafters said they tripled their sales this year. Because our tables are only \$15, this event is more about the community. We always want to promote a healthy community. It’s about getting people out. And the people just kept coming. We sold out our breakfast. All together, I think we sold 265 breakfasts. We had between 500 and 600 people come through the door. There were 85 vendors; we filled the whole building. Santa Claus was here; Becky Kent came as Mrs. Claus. Sam Austin and Claudia Chender were here, serving food.

Let’s talk about the history a bit. Tell me about this place.

Originally, it was a high school, just four rooms [started in 1934].

And then the population started to decrease, and they decided that the school was no longer needed. We fought to save it. We would come down and clean; we’d bring our kids. We’d clean the floors. We’d paint. We started the gardens out front. It became a project of love. And then from there we just kept growing and growing. And then we were able to get proper tenants. A lot of people over the years just kept coming and putting their heart and time into it.

So how many programs do you have now?

We have quite a few. We keep at least 40% of our space open for the community so people can come and run a birthday party, have meetings. We have external groups that run their own classes, and then we have our own programs, like

yoga, Tai Chi, seniors’ fitness, music classes, and Pickleball. In summer, we run our summer camp.

What’s coming up in the next few months?

Our trivia night on March 27, which is a yearly event that people just love. A team of six is \$30. And then summer comes along and we start all over again, and go into our spring flea market.

What should community residents know about the NWCC?

This is their community centre and that we’re here for them, and so if there’s any type of event they want run — if there are programs that they’d like to have, whether it be recreational educational — they should feel free to come in anytime and drop in to suggest them (or leave a message in the “NWCC Poll” box on the website). We’re always looking for helping hands, so if you have a free minute and you like to garden, come out and garden. We’re always looking for volunteers for our events to help with programs. Many hands make light work. □

See the NWCC’s website for info on programs, classes and rentals: northwoodsidecc.com

A step towards beautifying the Esson Road paths

By Colin North

Residents on Esson Road are looking to tidy up a well-trodden pathway.

Cleaning up the often-used footpaths, which connect the top of Esson Road to Dartmouth South Academy and Research Drive, is the latest project for locals. The patch of land is used frequently by students, dog walkers and other residents walking between these locations.

Christian Ensslin lives near the area and is spearheading the effort to tidy up the paths which are overgrown and often muddy.

“I use the land. My kids use this land,” he says. “I want to live in a nice neighborhood, and I don’t mind getting my hands dirty.”

Ensslin says he has secured

\$1,500 through Halifax’s Neighbourhood Placemaking Program, which will go towards purchasing materials for the beautification process. The clean-up effort will be led by community volunteers.

Councillor Becky Kent met with Ensslin on location at Esson Road to get a view of the pathways and what work needs to be done.

She says she’s happy to get behind the opportunity, but says there’s a few steps that need to be taken to get the ball rolling; steps which include costs beyond what the \$1,500 will cover.

“We have to have some conversations with [HRM Parks & Recreation] and the staff there,” says Kent. “Because it is a municipal property, that leads to if we’re going to create a park.”

Kent also intends to plan a meeting with locals in the area in the new year.

“I’m looking to make sure we do have a little further community engagement, so we have a sense of what the needs are,” she says.

Ensslin says he’s pleased with his meeting with the councillor, and looks forward to getting the community together to discuss what needs to be done next.

“The city hasn’t looked after [the area] very well, and I’m glad to see that hopefully that’s going to change,” he says.

Those who are interested in attending the community meeting about the Esson Road project should stay tuned for more information, with a meetup to take place as early as the end of January. □

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Online Exclusive:

Update on Dartmouth Cove, featuring several interviews and reporting by Amy Ward

southdartmouth.ca/dc1225

Happy Holidays

from the Pleasant-Woodside Neighbourhood Association

Publisher of *The South Dartmouth Post*

Illustration by Anna Ramsay

Public Notices & Invitations

New food pantry open: Our Lady’s Pantry is open to those in need of food (non-perishables) every Monday from 10 a.m. to noon at St. Peter Church on Maple St., Dartmouth. See side door where sign is posted. No delivery.

Becky Kent’s Holiday Tea & Social: You’re invited! Saturday, Dec. 13, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Shearwater Aviation Museum.

Community Survey on Policing: The Board of Police Commissioners has engaged Narrative Research to conduct a Community Survey on Policing. The goal of this survey is to gather insights and feedback from community members 18 years of age or older about their perceptions, experiences, and suggestions on policing in the Halifax region.

As part of the process to solicit

public input on important policing-related topics, the Board of Police Commissioners is inviting community members to complete the survey at this link - <https://www.narrativeresearchsurveys.ca/S2/87/2556709/>

Results of the survey will be reported quarterly, in addition to a report and final presentation to be delivered to the Board of Police Commissioners in Fall 2026.

MERRY CHRISTMAS & HAPPY HOLIDAYS

FROM YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD PUB