

Benny Marotta.

Town asks OPP to investigate after developer gives councillor \$10,000

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake council has asked the Ontario Provincial Police and the town's integrity commissioner to launch investigations after prominent developer Benny Marotta

gave \$10,000 in cash to Coun. Gary Burroughs.

The Lake Report learned late last week that Marotta handed Burroughs an envelope containing \$10,000 during a meeting at the developer's winery, Two Sisters Vineyards, on Saturday, March 11.

In interviews, Burroughs and Marotta independently confirmed the exchange happened, but both said it was not politically motivated.

Marotta said the money was not a bribe and he didn't ask Burroughs for anything in return.

It was a personal donation to Burroughs, mainly to help with re-election campaign expenditures, he said.

Burroughs said, "That isn't what happened. But I can't go further into it."

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Gary Burroughs.

Special Report: Rental costs are high, supply is scarce in NOTL

Somer Slobodian
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

First in a series
Debbie Delesky couch surfed for more than a year before finally finding a place to live in Niagara-on-the-Lake.
A NOTL native, she has been living with a couple in Virgil since November, after spending about five months at a friend's house in St. Catharines.
Since about 2021 she's hopped among a half-dozen places — sometimes in different cities — seeking a place to call home while trying to make ends meet.
Delesky says she was paying her hosts rent but it was a temporary solution to her personal housing crisis.
She's not alone, though.
Across Niagara, throughout Ontario and nationwide, the inability to find

Continued on Page 11

NOTL swimmer sets sights on Olympics



NOTL swimmer Peyton Leigh, 15, will compete in the Olympic qualifiers in the 200-metre butterfly and 400-metre freestyle. SOMER SLOBODIAN

Julia Sacco
The Lake Report

Standing just five-foot-five, with a shoe size of eight and a half, Peyton Leigh says she is "short for a swimmer," but the 15-year-old has never let that slow her down.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake teen has just qualified to compete in the Canadian Olympic trials in two events — the 200-metre butterfly and the 400-metre freestyle.

A strong performance could mean a chance to represent Canada at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris.
Her mother Christi notes the journey toward the Olympics

began when Peyton was just four months old, with swimming lessons under coach Margaret Park.

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Niagara wineries unite to pressure province for changes

Jill Troyer
The Lake Report

Niagara wineries travelled to Queen's Park with an important message, as well as some delicious VQA wine in an effort to lobby

the government for changes to help the industry grow.
Leaders from more than a dozen wineries were on hand to underscore the economic importance of their industry and to pour some of their best wines at

a reception following the official presentations.
"We hosted a launch of the Vision 2030 document at Queen's Park, where we met with all levels of government, both political officials and bureaucrats,

to celebrate the launch of the vision and to share with government the role that they need to play to help us achieve our ambition," said Del Rollo, chair of Wine Growers Ontario.
Vision 2030 is a report

created by the wine industry. It outlines a forecast for ambitious growth with big benefits to the economy — and it calls for more support from the government,

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Marotta and Burroughs say no political favours asked

Continued from Front Page

Speaking in an interview Monday after town council held a special private meeting to discuss the matter, Burroughs said at first he wasn't directly told why he was given the money.

He was emphatic that he wasn't asked for anything in return.

Burroughs, a former lord mayor of NOTL who has been in politics for 25 years, said he was handed an envelope and just told to "read it later."

He said Marotta only told him afterward that it was intended as a campaign contribution. He said the developer also emailed him on Monday to reiterate that the money was for his election campaign.

"That's his story. But my campaign's been closed for a long time," Burroughs said.

"And in fact, this year, my campaign I have to pay money back to the town because I have excess left over. So it can't be about (the) campaign."

Maximum donation is \$1,200

Any municipal council candidate could accept up to \$1,200 from a single party as a donation during the campaign period. Under Ontario law, any cash donation cannot exceed \$25.

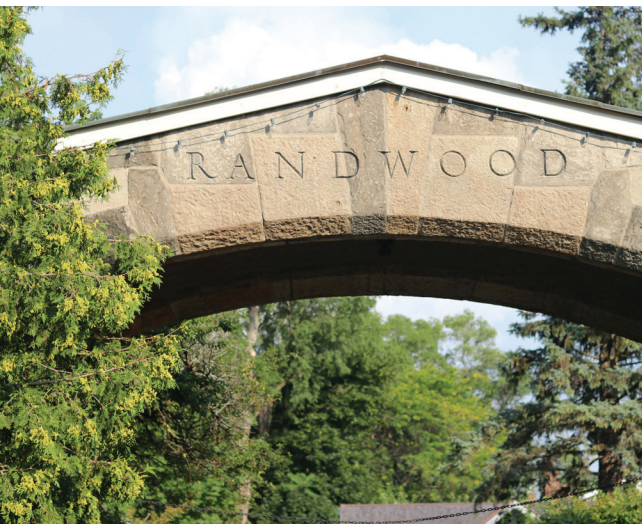
Election law limits meant NOTL council candidates could spend up to \$18,596.60 in last fall's municipal election, according to information from the town's website.

The deadline for closing most campaigns was Jan. 3, 2023, though exceptions can apply if there is a campaign deficit.

Burroughs said that the day after the envelope exchange, Sunday, March 12, he called Marotta to say he couldn't accept the money, at which point Marotta said to give to his church whatever he couldn't use for his campaign.

"He did say that. But I can't accept it for the church either," Burroughs said.

"If he had said, 'I'll go to the church and give (them) whatever,' then that would be different, but that's not what happened. And I can't



Benny Marotta's company owns the historic Rand Estate, where he plans to build a subdivision. FILE PHOTO

Town issues statement but no details about case

On Wednesday afternoon, about 90 minutes after The Lake Report's website published an extensive story detailing the cash exchange between developer Benny Marotta and Coun. Gary Burroughs, the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake issued a brief statement about the affair.

The statement contains no details, names or specific information and is obliquely signed by "the corporation of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake."

News advisories from the town are usually signed by a member of the communications department. This is the text of the town's statement:

"On March 20, Niagara-on-the-Lake town council was informed of a matter involving a third party's interaction with a member of council that warranted investigation.

Town council directed the chief administrative officer (CAO) to bring the matter to the attention of the integrity commissioner and to notify police. Both steps were taken immediately.

The work of the integrity commissioner and the police are important investigative processes that need to be carried out in a professional and confidential manner.

The town will respect the investigative processes, assisting and supporting any reviews and investigations to the best of its ability."

really go into it because I don't know what the town has been told."

The following day, on Monday, March 13, Burroughs met with the town's chief administrator, Marnie Cluckie, and gave her the money.

"It was Monday at 12:30 p.m. two weeks ago. And I explained everything. And from there, I don't know what she's told council."

Marotta told The Lake Report he and Burroughs have been friends for years, since Burroughs was lord mayor of NOTL and that the money was a personal gift to a friend, whom he thought was in need.

Marotta said he received a call from Cluckie in which she asked him to come and retrieve the money. He said he sent a staff member to pick it up.

Marotta said he and Burroughs frequently spoke before Betty Disero was lord mayor, but said that communications stopped during her time leading the town.

He said after talking to Burroughs, he thought he was in a bad financial situation and Marotta wanted to "help."

Burroughs confirmed the two have been friends for years and corroborated that Marotta didn't ask him for anything in return when he

handed him the money.

But as an experienced politician for many years — having sat on regional council, been lord mayor and a town councillor — he knew something wasn't right.

Marotta said he wasn't aware of the campaign donation limitations and that's why he told Burroughs to give the remainder to his church if he couldn't accept it.

Both deny favours were sought

Both of them said no political favours were requested.

Now Burroughs said he is waiting for answers on what the whole thing means for him and he wishes it never happened.

"My problem is I really like Benny, but this whole thing is a nightmare," Burroughs said.

"I don't know how long it takes for the integrity commissioner and/or the OPP to do their investigation, but hopefully, it won't be too long."

Asked multiple times if he got the sense Marotta was trying to bribe him, Burroughs was emphatic that he was not.

"I've met with Benny before and we never talk business. We've never had this issue happen either," Burroughs said.

"But we've both been married 50 years this summer, we both have two daughters, we both love chickens. I mean, it's non-business stuff. And I've always kept it that way."

"So he wouldn't have brought that up, because it just wasn't what we ever talked about," Burroughs said.

"I don't know in his mind what he was doing."

Marotta said he was trying to help out a friend.

Burroughs said he couldn't discuss all the details but that he'd be saying more to the OPP.

"I'm hoping they're gonna ask me some questions but I haven't done that either."

Council discussed the exchange Monday during a special council meeting, which wasn't available for the public to view.

Burroughs was not a part of the meeting, having de-

clared a conflict of interest on the matter.

But when he joined the public session later, he said, "It's like I had the plague afterward."

"When I walked in, nobody talked to me. Nothing."

He is eager to find out about his next steps, but right now he said he's treading carefully.

He wishes fellow councillors could tell him more — or talk to him.

"I won't get into why I didn't open it. I was told to put it in my pocket and read it later. And so I did. And that's about all I've got."

GARY BURROUGHS
NOTL TOWN COUNCILLOR

"They never asked me a question," he said.

Burroughs said the whole situation is new territory for him after all his years as a politician.

Panicked when he opened the envelope, he said the first thing he did was check the definitions of donations and bribes.

"I went and looked up the definition of donations to politicians. And I don't know whether it has to include a request for something back or not. I don't know that. But that's where I started looking after it all fell apart," he said.

Didn't open envelope until he got home

He said he was unaware of what was in the envelope until he got home on the Saturday when he received it.

"I won't get into why I didn't open it. I was told to put it in my pocket and read it later. And so I did. And that's about all I've got."

He said he is still unaware of what exactly constitutes a bribe.

"I actually don't know. And I've never wanted to know. I've never wanted it to happen either. So they'll decide, whatever they decide."

Burroughs said for the

time being, until the matter is resolved, he won't be attending or voting on any matters related to Marotta's companies.

While he wasn't asked for anything specific from the developer, he said the whole situation complicates his role as a councillor.

"For example, this week now, there's all sorts of heritage committee (meetings), which I'm on, which I won't go to. There's Randwood tours that I won't go to. You know, already it seems to be involved," Burroughs said.

"I don't know if I have a conflict — Well, I have a conflict because it had to do with Benny, but what my conflict is, I don't know. And until I know I'm not going anywhere."

He's hoping the issue is dealt with swiftly.

"I hope it happens fairly soon. It's driving my family crazy."

Marotta also said he wants it resolved sooner than later.

Major landowner in NOTL

All told, Marotta's companies Solmar Niagara 2 Inc. (Solmar Development) and Two Sisters Resorts Corp. are the largest developers in NOTL and quite possibly the biggest landowners in town.

Over the past several years, his companies have built subdivisions in St. Davids and Old Town and have acquired land for many other projects.

Marotta owns the four remaining properties of the Rand Estate and has been in battles with the town about the property's future.

He has built the award-winning Two Sisters Winery and is in the early stages of building a new winery called Stone Eagle on Niagara Stone Road.

Marotta also has acquired businesses like the Old Winery and owns several buildings on Queen Street, including a newly built retail project near the post office.

He bought the former Parliament Oak school property last October and plans to build a hotel on the land.

As well, he owns the former Mori Gardens property in Virgil.



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