

SPECIAL REPORT:

The Year in Review: A look back at the top stories of 2006

A month by month synopsis of the people and events that made the headlines

January

Overpass takes its annual hit

The Innisfail north overpass took yet another hit on Wednesday, Jan. 4.

For the second time in as many years a truck driver failed to follow the height restrictions and took out a chunk of the overpass.

"An oil rig truck tore down part of the south side of the south bound lane overpass," said Constable Jennifer Derksen, Innisfail RCMP. "He hit it with the back of his load, the pavement comes up a little so the height difference is a little different."

The hit caused cement pieces to litter the highway. Local RCMP blocked off sections of the road due to safety concerns.

Alberta Transportation representatives were soon on scene analyzing the structure of the overpass, as well as the damage.

"It certainly is not quite as high as the modern ones," said Trent Bancarz, Alberta Transportation. "This overpass is close to 40 years old, when it was built the vehicles were not as high."

Bob Mills wins by a landslide

Conservative MP Bob Mills celebrated yet another victory during the Jan. 23 election. Mills was elected to the House of Commons for the fifth consecutive time as the Member of Parliament for the Red Deer riding, with a staggering 34,045 votes.

Canadians awarded Conservative Leader Stephen Harper with a minority government putting an end to more than 12 years of Liberal rule.

February

Fire at local restaurant

Long time restaurant owners Peter Lau and his family watched helplessly as firefighters put out a fire in the early morning of Saturday, Feb. 4.

Innisfail Volunteer Fire Department with the aide of Bowden Volunteer Fire Department responded to the 7:15 a.m. call. The fire was quickly contained but not before causing tremendous damage to the family owned Lau's Family Dining on Main Street.

Adjoining businesses also suffered some smoke damage.

March

Purina opens distribution plant

Innisfail became the western Canadian distribution centre for Nestle Purina PetCare.

The market leader in pet food officially opened a \$3.1 million distribution centre adjacent to the existing production plant in town.

The first orders to retail stores and other customers will be shipped through the new warehouse April 5.

For the first time in Canada, Nestle Purina's complete portfolio of pet care products will be available at one point for customers in Western Canada, say company officials. Currently, a plant in Mississauga, Ontario serves as the region's distribution centre along with leased space in Calgary.

No injuries in Innisfail shooting

Several people escaped injury after a distraught Innisfail man began shooting off shotgun rounds in the town's downtown residential area Sunday.

Innisfail RCMP say officers responded around 6:30 p.m. to a complaint of an intoxicated suicidal male leaving his residence in the 4800 block of 47 Ave. with a long barreled firearm.

The caller said she heard the sound of a gunshot from the garage area of the yard. While still on the phone with the police dispatcher, another gun shot was heard.

Over the course of the next 40 minutes, police say several gunshots were heard from the backyard area of the residence.

Police were able to persuade the suspect to throw down the weapon in the street.

He was taken into custody without further incident, police said.

Fifty-four year old Russel Edward Gascon received a conditional discharge and one year's probation for the incident.

He admitted to the court, through his lawyer Roger Surkan, that at the time of the incident he was suffering from severe health problems and under an incredible amount of stress - stress that had caused him to suffer both a heart attack and panic attacks.

April

Three years of undelivered mail found in town

A criminal investigation was launched after numerous pieces of mail sent to Innisfail area residents as far back as three years were found undelivered.

An Innisfail business notified Canada Post Mar. 25 of the mail cache found at an undisclosed location in the town. The undelivered mail was destined for customers on two Innisfail routes - one urban and one rural.

Brenda Meszaros, 51, and daughter Chaylene Meszaros, 26, were charged with mail theft and later pleaded guilty. They were each given a 12 month suspended sentence, received probation and were each fined \$100. The women turned themselves in after the undelivered mail was discovered.

Lawyers for the women had argued for conditional sentences, which would leave them with no criminal record, but the judge disagreed.

Judge Thomas Schollie said in provincial court Dec. 8 that 20 years ago mail was sacred and people who stole it would often go to jail. He said the people who were waiting for their mail must have been upset and angry.

"This is not a minor offence. This is a significant breach of trust," he said.

Court heard the women had trouble delivering the mail because of a conflict with a supervisor. Defence lawyer David Bourdon said they started to feel overwhelmed and ended up stockpiling the undelivered mail.

Eventually they needed to rent a storage facility. Officials with Canada Post said that upon investigation, it didn't appear the mail had been tampered with.

May

Black bear shot in town

A black bear who wandered into Innisfail had to be put down by Alberta Fish and Wildlife officers. RCMP were called at 9 p.m. May 18 after the bear was spotted by the skateboard park on the west side of town.

"It is very unusual for a bear to come into Innisfail," said Alberta Fish and Wildlife Superintendent for Red Deer, Clark Merriman. "It's too early to tell whether the bear was hungry - although from the size it doesn't appear so - or if it was sick."

He said the 150 pound bear appears to have been about two or three years old and didn't seem afraid of coming into the community. Officers tried to scare the bear into an open green space in the hopes that they could tranquilize it and relocate it into more natural habitat. Unfortunately, said Merriman, the bear kept coming back towards the residential community.

June

Innisfail land mark may be in jeopardy

This month it came to light that the fate of Innisfail's historical water tower was hanging in the balance. Town council had budgeted \$60,000 for its demolition, but after a public meeting showed residents were interested in preserving it, a temporary reprieve was given. Town council gave interested parties time to form a committee and come up with a plan to save the tower.

The town's Economic Development Board submitted a proposal asking for more time to save the tower, but council has not officially responded to their request.

The fact that the tower stands empty has some concerned. Tim Ainscough, town engineer, explained the tower was built to hold 50,000 gallons of water and "not having that weight is a bad thing."

A study was done in 2002 that said the tower had a five year lifespan.

One councillor was hoping there would be enough interest in saving the tower. Jason Heistad said the tower is important to the town - and many agree with him.

"It's historical for Innisfail and historical for the community in general," said Doug Bos, a member of the Economic Development Board.

"Towns don't use water towers anymore."

July

County and town agree to IDP

Innisfail and Red Deer County have come to agreement regarding a joint intermunicipal development plan. In a joint statement released to the media, the two councils stated "(it) allows both municipalities to make land use planning decisions in a manner that reflects the mutual and individual interests of both municipalities. This plan serves to build positive and mutually beneficial relationships between the municipalities."

The agreement, which Innisfail's Mayor Ken Graham calls "the single most important piece of legislation that this council will be involved with," plans for growth that would see Innisfail reach a population of 50,000 - 55,000 within 25 years.

Both town and county officially adopted the plan in December. As part of the IDP, any disagreements will be resolved through a five-stage process agreed to by the county and the town.

"It's a win for both the town and the County. This way the town can plan their growth," said Penny Archibald, County Councilor, Division 3, and Innisfail resident. "It's just co-operation - what should happen in every community. It would be nice if it was always like that."

August

Hailstorm devastates Springbrook area

Residents in central Alberta spent weeks cleaning up after a hailstorm blew through the area the evening of Aug. 10. Wind estimated at 100-130 km/h blew down trees and golf ball sized hail broke windows and dented siding.

After touring the worst-hit areas after the storm, Rick Henderson, director of community and protective services for Red Deer County, said damage will reach into the millions very quickly.

"The hail track was three, maybe four miles wide and at least 30 miles long," he said. "It seems that the biggest damage occurred in the Markerville and Springbrook areas."

In some areas of the 400 home community the homes looked like Swiss cheese - the vinyl siding being so completely pulverized that a passerby can study how the house was framed.

Penhold resident Doug Dixon was home preparing for a night shift when the storm began. He said that it came up very suddenly, and due to where their house sits in town, it suffered a lot of damage.

"I was cleaning up after the storm, it blew out the windows in my garage. My wife came home, looked at everything and just burst into tears. It looks like someone took a machine gun to my home," he said.

September

Man robs Innisfail bank

A lone man robbed the Scotiabank in Innisfail Sept. 6, making off with an undisclosed amount of cash.

According to Innisfail RCMP, around 1:45 p.m. a white male came into the bank, waited his turn in line and then presented the teller with a note demanding money. After receiving the money he left the bank on foot. No weapon was produced and no one was hurt during the robbery.

Cpl. Mike Babcock of Innisfail RCMP said the thief was not seen getting into any vehicle. Police

Dog Services from Red Deer were called in but were unable to track the suspect. The Red Deer Forensic Identification Unit was also on scene at the bank dusting for fingerprints on the door.

This is the first bank robbery in Innisfail since 2003.

FCSS loses \$70,000 in funding

Local support service agencies will be left scrambling for money after a drastic drop in government funding.

For the past six years, Family and Community Support Services in the area have received a bonus-type payment of about \$100,000 but this year they only got \$28,580.

"We always want to see increases go to the agencies and more support for the non-profit sector," said Linda Boyd, a project supervisor in Red Deer who focuses on FCSS programs. "So when we can't do that, that's concerning. It creates some challenges, no question."

Boyd explained that each year they get a base amount of funding from the province, and that base amount is always there. For 2006, the amount was \$1.9 million and included funding for Penhold, Bowden, Elnora, Delburne, and the City and County of Red Deer.

But Boyd said when the government announces the provincial budget, they usually see an extra increase in funding from Alberta Children's Services.

This increase is not guaranteed, but for the past six years it has been about \$100,000.

Local agencies were counting on the extra money to be there, and Boyd said she was a bit "surprised" when she saw the funding figures.

October

New fire hall opened in Springbrook

Red Deer County has opened its newest fire station in Springbrook. The \$1.1 million facility officially opened Saturday, Oct. 14.

Red Deer County's new Fire Station #4 replaces an aging structure that has been in use since Springbrook was a military base in the 1940s.

According to Ric Henderson, the county's director of Community and Protective Services, the new facility will bring much needed modernity and room for expansion in fast growing Springbrook.

Like its predecessor the station will remain unmanned until the need for full-time fire fighters is felt.

Gun amnesty wraps up

A provincial wide gun amnesty ended Oct. 31. According to the RCMP the program was a tremendous success, and here in Innisfail, more than a dozen weapons were turned over to the police.

"All the weapons we had turned over to us have been long-barreled, non restricted firearms," said Sgt. Lyle Marianchuck, commander of the Innisfail detachment. "A lot appear to be older firearms, likely not used in quite a while."

Under the program, all it took was a call to the RCMP and they would come to the home and remove the firearm, plus any unused ammunition, free of charge.

November

Airport adds second carrier

Central Albertans going to Saskatoon can now get there faster and easier than ever thanks to a agreement reached by the Red Deer Regional Airport and Northwestern Airlines.

The Fort Smith, N.W.T based airline announced they will commence passenger service from the airport on Friday, Dec. 1.

"We have a hanger, a great office and crew ready. We are setting up Red Deer Regional as a base of operations," said Northwestern Airlines General Manager Gordon Bush.

Beginning with the first flight, Northwestern will offer direct flights three times a week to Saskatoon. Monday and Friday flights will continue on to Meadow Lake, Fort McMurray, Fort Smith and Yellowknife and return to Red Deer each evening.

They will keep a 19-passenger Jetstream 31 plane in Red Deer; a plane that Bush said "is ridiculously fast" and can make what is a six-hour drive, just over an hour.

December

Stelmach becomes Alberta's new premier

Ed Stelmach was elected after a second ballot victory for the Alberta Progressive Conservative leadership on Dec. 2-3.

The Andrew-area farmer and long-time PC MLA surged forward on the second ballot on the strength of northern and rural supporters, coming away with a final total of 77,577 votes after second choices on the preferential ballot were figured in for the victory.

When making up his new cabinet, Stelmach gave Innisfail-Sylvan Lake MLA Luke Ouellette the Department of Infrastructure and Transportation portfolio. Ouellette said he is very excited about the make-up of this cabinet. He believes that the new faces will ensure that new ideas come to the surface.

There are a number of issues that Ouellette said he hopes to tackle.

"I would like to expand the capacity of our highway system to address the growth pressures in Alberta. I would like to see a traffic safety plan to reduce collisions on Alberta roads. And here's a new one, I'd like to develop a new provincial aviation strategy to ensure the viability of all the small airports in Alberta."