

Reporter earns prestigious award

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Reporter Jennifer Brown has been named the best suburban journalist in North America.

The Suburban Newspapers Association, which represents 2,000 publications in Canada and the United States, named Brown Journalist of the Year Monday.

"This is the Pulitzer Prize of suburban newspapers," editor Doug Devine said. "It's the highest honour available to suburban journalists."



JENNIFER BROWN

Editor-in-chief Brenda Larson was thrilled with the announcement.

"We're delighted and extremely proud of Jennifer," she said. "She's a hard-working and talented reporter who always has the best interests of our readers and the community at heart."

Brown won the award based on a broad range of stories.

"Her work is all-encompassing — from criminal courts to street corners, from hospital emergency rooms to kindergarten classrooms, Jennifer's stories have chronicled the challenges and triumphs of York Region residents," Larson wrote in a letter to the association nominating Brown.

Highlights of her work last year included:

- Coverage of an inquest into the death of eight-year-old Courtney Trempe, mauled by a bull mastiff while playing with friends in a neighbour's back yard. The stories prompted the towns of Stouffville and Georgina to enact vicious dog bylaws.
- York's ongoing health care crisis.
- The education system.
- Jonathan Wambach, the Newmarket teen who fell into a three-month coma after he was beaten last summer. Brown's coverage, including interviews with Jonathan's mother and father, helped mobilize the community to show its concern for the family and get involved in a campaign to change the Young Offenders Act.

Brown joined Metroland in July 1995, after four years as a reporter with the weekly Huntsville Forester in her home town.

Stouffville a stop on the wine tour maps

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

Stouffville is about to be part of the Ontario wine tour. On Tuesday, Whitchurch-Stouffville council backed an application allowing a full-scale winery in town.

Winemaker Mario Testa will now build Willow Springs at 5572 Bethesda Rd.

Grapes will be grown on at least 10 acres, while another 10 acres will grow other fruit trees. All will be used to make wine.

As well, Testa will sell grapes and fruit wines along with related merchandise.

Willow Springs winery will measure 2,800 square feet. Of that 1,200 will be a retail store, a total of 1,200 will be used for manufacturing and there will be a 400-square-foot office.

The land is presently zoned rural and will remain so. The amendment, agreed on by council, will permit an on-site wine store for the sale of wines produced on the property.

Stouffville will now be included in an established southern Ontario wine tour held every summer.

Lack of competition inflates prices: MPP

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depending on who's selling.

It's the rapid price increases that hurt most, added Michael Anderson, vice-president of Don Anderson Haulage in Stouffville, where fuel is the company's second-biggest cost after wages. "A week ago, we had a five cents a litre increase on one day's notice."

Both men said their companies are now passing fuel surcharges on to their customers, but there is only so much the customers can absorb.

And, according to the association, since 90 per cent of Ontario consumer products and foodstuffs are shipped by truck, those extra costs could mean inflation. You may soon pay more for that loaf of bread.

TRUCK REPOSSESSIONS COMMON

Companies have been putting deals to purchase trucks on hold, said Gary Crudge, Ontario sales director at area truck retailer Kenworth Toronto. Truck repossessions, unheard of until recently, are common, he added.

The OTA and the Canadian Automobile Association, meanwhile, have asked the province to lower its share of taxes on gasoline and diesel sales.

David Leonhardt, the CAA's public and government affairs director, also wants to see the oil companies forced to post notices at stations stating how long their prices are "good until." That way, he said, drivers won't be ambushed by price hikes.

"That's what really seems to be irking people, that sense that they've been tricked," Leonhardt said.

Joe Tascona, an MPP co-chairing a gas prices review task force touring the province, said the high price of gas has more to do with a lack of competition in the oil industry than taxes.

If you were stuck driving an empty guzzler yesterday — a Chevy Suburban, a GMC Sierra or what have you — then Stouffville was a good place to be. Gas sold there at the relative bargain price of 63.9 cents a litre.

Will the high prices of the last two months turn the bigger sport-utility vehicles into dinosaurs?

"Jury's still out, but I do think it's certainly going to have people thinking twice," said Craig Riley, owner of Markville Ford Lincoln Mercury in Markham.

Families with minivans may gravitate to smaller SUVs in the future, but people who want Ford Excursions or Lincoln Navigators don't seem to mind the price of gas, Riley said.

In 1973, higher gas prices drove many families to get rid of their second car and very big cars began to disappear from dealers' lots, recalled Harry Gow, president of the consumer group Transport 2000. Lower gas prices, he added, tend to promote suburban-style development and a shift away from public transit.

Premier Mike Harris didn't rule out a cut in provincial gas tax this week. But that's a decision for Finance Minister Ernie Eves, according to Terry Simzer, spokesperson for Consumer Minister Bob Runciman.

School boards feel pain at the pumps

The high price of diesel could cost York Region's school boards an extra \$500,000 by June, says David Martin, transportation service manager for the public and separate boards.

That's because school bus operators here signed a "fuel escalator clause", protecting them against fuel-cost fluctuations, in their contracts with Student Transportation Services, the joint entity that fields 800 buses for the boards every school day.

Last June, STS and the bus operators locked in for the 1999-2000 school year around a base rate of 42.6 cents a litre for diesel. Every two-cent increase above the base costs the boards one cent more per kilometre to run a bus.

Today, diesel is selling for 61 cents or more, said Martin, who added the cost overrun had reached about \$350,000 in December and noted that was before prices jumped again to record levels.

"It's the taxpayers that are on the hook for the increased cost here," he said.

Operators say such clauses are common in agreements and work both ways. If diesel prices go two pennies below the base, operators have to hand money back.

"This year I'm ahead, last year I'm behind," said Garry Gosling, general manager of Laidlaw Transit Ltd. in Markham.

Many Ontario boards are already overbudget on transportation costs, said Gary Kennedy, who negotiated the agreement for several bus operators in York and is vice-president of one company, Langdon's Coach Lines in King City.

"January and February are going to be the real crunchers."

— Mike Adler



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