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55th annual Olcott Lions Polar Bear Swim to RAISE THOUSANDS for WNY communities

BY TERRY DUFFY Editor-in-Chief

Well, the 2023-24 winter season – or what we remember as winter – is slowly slipping into spring.

Face it: Beyond a few nuisance storms in the south towns during the Bills' brief playoff run, Western New York simply has not seen much of a winter this time around. Thanks to those El Nino influences, our region has experienced far-greater rain events in some areas, but little snow and warmer temperatures in others (for the most part).

As of last week, Niagara County weather-reporting stations logged a mere nine snow days and all of 30.6 inches of snow for the season. Our biggest snowfall came on Jan. 13, with 13 inches.

NYPA crews already begun the removal of the Lake Erie ice boom, and planning is underway for an early opening of the Welland Canal and the Great Lakes shipping season.

Best then to get going with those fun lake activities. And why not?

Sunday, March 3, marks the return of what has long been known as a cold-weather event – the 55th annual Olcott Polar Bear Swim at Olcott Beach.

This event, with hardy souls venturing into chilly waters for a worthy cause, joins the 20th annual Polar Bear Plunge in Sliver Creek,



55th annual Olcott Lions Polar Bear Swim logo courtesy of the Olcott Lions Club.

and the annual New Year's Polar Bear Dip at Sunnyside Beach in Toronto, as cold-weather fundraisers.

However, "This polar plunge is a little different than most," the Olcott Lions noted. "We plunge for causes that need help serving our local Western New York communities. Especially kids, and those with special needs. Oh, at 55 years young, it's the oldest continually run charity swim in New York state."

"Since 1969, we are very thankful to what has been 1,000s of swimmers and their tens of thousands of friends and fans, as well as spectators to see the festivities."

The Olcott Lions are among the more than 45 clubs that serve local communities. Their signature fun-

draiser, the Polar Bear Swim, sees participation from a wide range of groups and organizations throughout Western New York: including fire companies, bars and social organizations, youth groups, law enforcement, and local residents who have a drive for the daring and unusual.

The pre-swim atmosphere in Olcott best resembles a Bills pre-game experience in Orchard Park.

"One remarkable group that joins us every year is (the Niagara County Sheriff's Office) and Sheriff Michael Filicetti who, along with his team, take the plunge to inspire giving and raise funds for the Niagara County Law Enforcement Foundation – a cause close to our hearts," the Lions stated. "We're rallying support for their foundation this year, and you can be a part of it too! Even if you can't make it to the swim, your support means the world."

The group added, "This event is to support multiple organizations across Western New York through our Polar Bear 80/20 fundraiser. Here's how it works: Approved organizations get the chance to fundraise online and have a presence at the swim. They keep 80% of the funds they raise, while 20% goes to support the Lions Clubs' mission to serve WNY."

"Interested in getting your or-

ganization involved in our Polar Bear 80/20 fundraiser? Shoot us an email at olcottlions@gmail.com for more details. Let's make a splash for a good cause!"

Among the many beneficiaries the swim supports: the Newfane Food Pantry; Lions Club International Foundation; American Diabetes Association; Niagara Frontier Reading; the Olcott Beach Community Association; Niagara Hospice; the Olcott Volunteer Fire Co.; Guiding Eyes for the Blind; Lions Camp Badger; the Ray Wheeler Foundation; Olcott Beach Carousel Park; Vision Beyond Sight Foundation Inc.; Guiding Dog Foundation for the Blind; Rainbow of Help Inc.; Newfane Circuit Stompers robotics team; Camp Abilities; Olcott Beach Jazz Trail; and Olcott Lions programs, including high school scholarships and capital improvement projects.

The Olcott Lions invite readers to be a part of this fun this year – the tailgating, the pre-event costume contests, the camaraderie – and, oh yes, the swim.

For more information or to register for the 55th Polar Bear Swim, visit the Olcott Lions on Facebook or thepolarbearswim.org.

See you in Olcott!

Niagara County launches rebranded 'Connect Niagara' bus service

Replaces Rural Transportation with new routes, better integration

Submitted by the Public Information Office

Niagara County on Wednesday announced the launch of the Connect Niagara bus service, which replaces the former Niagara Rural Transportation service. Connect Niagara offers new routes and better connectivity, including free transfers to connecting routes and NFTA Metro buses. The new routes go into effect Monday, March 4.

"This is more than a cosmetic change, although people will see new buses with the Connect Niagara name in coming weeks," said Legislator Shawn Foti, chairman of the county's infrastructure committee. "The significant improvements are tweaking the routes to reach more areas of the county, providing more frequent reliable routes, and creating a schedule that better integrates with NFTA Metro bus service. We very much appreciate the help of the NFTA planning experts in developing the new routes."

Connect Niagara service is available weekdays, except for legal holidays. The system is comprised of four buses that cover five routes:

- √ Blue Route – Niagara Falls/Lockport
√ Gold Route – Lockport/Middleport/Gasport



- √ Green Route – Lockport/Newfane/Barker
√ Purple Route – Lewiston/Porter/Wilson/Cambria
√ Red Route – North Tonawanda/Wheatfield/Niagara/Niagara Falls/Lewiston

A full schedule for all bus routes and stops

can be found at https://www.niagaracounty.com/government/county_information/public_transportation_schedule.php.

"One of the best things about Connect Niagara is that we literally go out of our way to accommodate our riders," said Garret Meal, Niagara County Public Works commissioner. "You can board at one of several new posted bus stops, simply wave a bus down on route to hop on, or you can call the day before to schedule a pick up within three quarters of a mile of an existing route."

Meal said the fare for Connect Niagara is \$2 on route and \$4 off route; transfers to connecting routes and the NFTA Metro are free. Connect Niagara is operated through a partnership between Niagara County and Niagara Falls Coach Lines. To schedule a pickup, call 716-282-8544.

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