

MORNING FILE

Sandpiper Ventures is backing a firm that purports to teach children to read by playing a game on their smart phones

And: golf will make us all rich forever, amen.

BY TIM BOUSQUET DECEMBER 23, 2022



Photo: audubon.org

NEWS

1. Emergency health care



Halifax infirmary emergency department in July, 2021. Photo: Yvette d'Entremont

"The holidays are upon us, and with a surge in respiratory illnesses and overburdened emergency departments — not to mention a storm bearing down on the province — residents are being reminded to 'make the right call to access the right care,'" [reports Yvette d'Entremont](#):

This includes knowing when to call 9-1-1. The messaging was shared Thursday by Emergency Health Services (EHS) Operations, Nova Scotia Health (NSH), and the IWK Health Centre.

[Click here to read the specific instructions](#), but the gist of it is, call 911 and go to the emergency room if it looks like it might be life-threatening (stroke, heart attack, etc.) but if it's non-urgent, try virtual care or a clinic.

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2. COVID



Photo by Georg Eiermann on Unsplash

Yesterday, Nova Scotia reported two new deaths from COVID, recorded during the most recent reporting period, Dec. 13-19. The recording of deaths lags, so neither of these deaths occurred during the reporting period — that is, they occurred before Dec. 13.

In total through the pandemic, 675 people in Nova Scotia have died from COVID, 563 of whom are considered Omicron deaths (since Dec. 8, 2021).

The age and vaccination status of the most recent deaths won't be reported until Jan. 15, but in general, 90%+ of COVID deaths are people 70 years old or older, and unvaccinated people are about three times more likely to die from COVID than are vaccinated people.

Also during the Dec. 13-19 reporting period, 35 people were hospitalized because of COVID.

Nova Scotia Health reports the status of COVID hospitalizations as of yesterday (these figures do not include any, if any, children hospitalized at the IWK):

- in hospital for COVID: 25 (3 of whom are in ICU)
- in hospital for something else but have COVID: 86
- in hospital who contracted COVID-19 after admission: 53

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3. Sandpiper



Photo: audubon.org

Way back in February 2021, one of the political parties filed a Freedom of Information request with the province, asking for "All correspondence with or regarding Sandpiper Ventures (including Cathy Bennett, Rhiannon Davies, Sarah Young, Chere Chapman, Karen Hutt, Nicole Leblanc, Shannon MacDonald, Amy Risley, Ozge Yeloglu). (Date Range for Record Search: From 12/31/2019 To 02/11/2021)."

You'll recall that seemingly out of the blue, then-Premier Stephen McNeil announced that the government was handing \$5 million to a completely unaccountable (to the public, anyway) group of women investors known as Sandpiper Ventures. Here's how I characterized it [at the time](#):

Access to capital is an issue. But venture capital firms are one of the most inefficient mechanisms for distributing capital possible. For one, the venture capitalist enterprise itself takes a huge cut off the top. Then, its aim is *financial* success for the "entrepreneur" — not hiring the most people, not opening up opportunity for employees, not providing a living wage.

In terms of access to capital for starting businesses, the single best action the province could take would be to start a provincial bank, or if that's too radical, running all provincial accounts through credit unions dedicated to helping regular people take on small business loans.

But really, the biggest banking problem facing people in this province, including women, is the payday loan system, with its usurious lending practices that mostly affect poor and working people. The McNeil government had — still has — the authority under the state of emergency to limit interest rates on such loans, and through the years it's been in power, the Liberal government has taken no meaningful legislative action to significantly reel in the industry. So there's that, too.

And let's remember that McNeil's legacy includes very ugly public attacks against the women-dominated teaching and nursing unions, in which McNeil successfully slashed inflation-adjusted wages for tens of thousands of women.

But a more immediate question came to mind, so I asked McNeil about it. We had this exchange:

Bousquet: Premier, on your venture capital announcement. You know, we live in a capitalist economy, in a patriarchy, and access to capital is a real issue. So I don't want to downplay that. But you framed it in terms of helping people get back to work after the pandemic or through the pandemic.

And it's been suggested that the biggest obstacle for women in particular getting back into the workforce is affordable child care. So why not direct that money immediately to child care to do the most help right now, and not down the road?

McNeil: So we've actually been applauded for the way we dealt with child care through the pandemic. We were the only government in in this country to keep child care whole. We treated our child care workers with the respect they deserve. We made sure those spaces were there and we'll continue to do so.

But the reality of it is we need to create economic opportunity for our daughters or wives or sisters in this province. And whether we like it or not, capital is not available the same way to our daughters as it is to our sons. And I think women in this province, in this region have waited long enough.

And I'm proud of the fact that not only did our government, the first to invest in this, I'm hoping other governments do the same thing. But in no way should you think that by investing in the future of our wives and our sisters and our daughters, that we haven't that we forgot about our children.

Quite frankly, we just finished up our preprimary program, the largest social program in my lifetime in this province, to ensure that every child gets an opportunity to grow and build. But I'm really proud of the fact that I can support my daughter, your daughter and other daughters in this province who have an idea on innovation to get to take that to the marketplace and create jobs right here at home.

This is, well, horse shit. In the real world, child care is the primary obstacle for women entering the workforce, and successfully advancing their careers. There are other issues, but Issue #1 is child care. Period.

Five million dollars would do a lot on the child care front — it could open up more than 1,500 new child care spaces. It could reduce the cost of existing child care. Providing more — and less expensive — child care is a far, far better generator of economic success for women than venture capitalism can provide.

I've continued to follow the \$5 million investment hand-out, noting that almost all of Sandpiper's investments went to companies [not based in Nova Scotia](#).

Well, I don't know if it had anything to do with my criticism, but last month Sandpiper was the lead investor among seven venture capital firms dropping a total of \$3 million into Shoelace Learning. Shoelace is a local firm run by former Olympic canoeer Julia Rivard Dexter that purports to teach kids to read by having them play a game called Dreamscape on their smart phones.

I didn't have time to read and assess the [research claims](#) Shoelace makes about Dreamscape this morning, nor to drill down into the business model. I did create an account.

This is ringing all sorts of alarm bells — What controls do schools or parents have on the data collected by the private company? Is the game ad supported? Can the schools independently verify the pedagogical claims made by Shoelace? Perhaps most important: How does increasing reliance on smart phones as a teaching tool impact the social development of children?

Maybe there are answers to those questions, but then... well, if the game actually works, shouldn't it be made freely available to everyone? Why insert a profit motive?

In any event, 19 months after the unnamed political party filed its request for records, it got a response. The response, [which you can read here](#), is 325 pages of almost entirely redacted pages.

There are no details related in the response, but we can glean from it that Innovacorp was in discussions with Sandpiper for many months before McNeil made his announcement, and that there was a lot of message control both before and after the announcement, with the comms team seemingly working overtime.

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4. Golf will make us all rich forever, amen

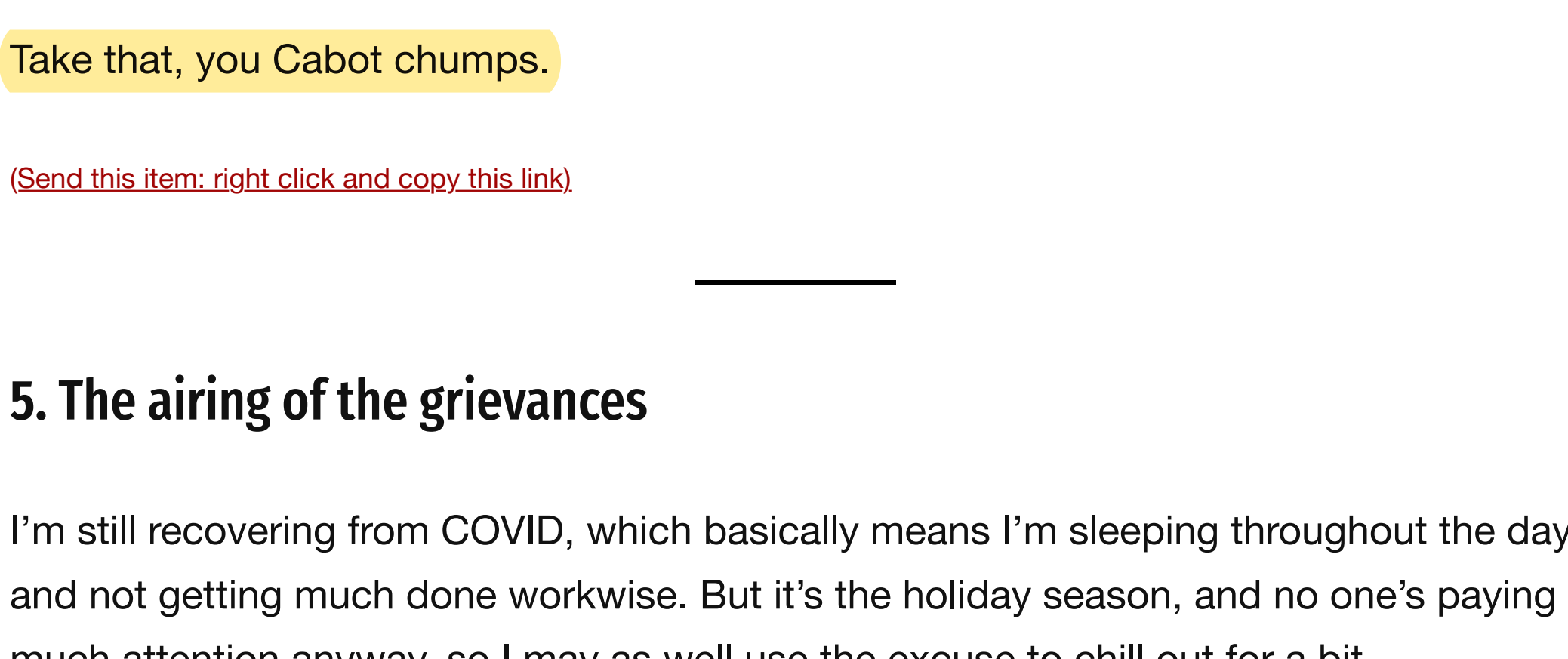


Photo by Emre Can Acar on Pexels.com Credit: from the film Caddyshack

"Construction is in progress on nine new holes at Fox Harb'r Resort in Nova Scotia, part of a plan by Doug Carrick and Tom McBroom to create two distinct 18-hole courses at the resort," [writes Alice Chambers for Golf Course Architecture](#):

Carrick says: "Working together we decided that rather than just building a new course, we would instead reimagine nine of the existing holes and combine them with nine new holes, all in a links style, to create a true ocean course. Construction began in September 2022, and we hope to have it completed by fall 2023."

"Our goal is to expand on our existing course to create the finest golf destination in Canada," said Steven Joyce, CEO and chairman of Fox Harb'r. "We have the land, the ocean and the passion."

The finest golf destination in Canada, people: *the finest.*

Take that, you Cabot chumps.

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5. The airing of the grievances

I'm still recovering from COVID, which basically means I'm sleeping throughout the day and not getting much done workwise. But it's the holiday season, and no one's paying much attention anyway, so I may as well use the excuse to chill out for a bit.

I'm heading to Ontario to visit relatives sometime soon, but what with the shitty weather and a desire to make sure I'm completely not contagious, have decided to put the trip off for a few days. It doesn't matter if I'm there exactly on Christmas Day. It's not like the Baby Jesus won't come down the chimney if I'm not there to witness it, and the family will be glad to see me whenever I arrive, and vice-versa. I'll travel whenever I feel up to it and it seems safe.

Anyway, whatever dog you worship, have a good holiday. Remember the lonely.

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