



SPRINGFIELD **Business** JOURNAL

February 2026

Q&A with Sara Vanhala, Growth Corp.

Demand for skilled trade workers

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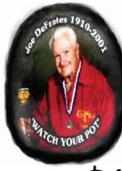


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In this issue:

SBJ articles



Roundabout slated for West White Oaks Drive
By Adrian Dater



Audrey Wilton: Ironworker, mother and leader
By Kathleen Alcorn



Vondra Social House
By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr.

12 Commercial Real Estate List • 10 Commercial Builders List • 20 Trade Unions List • 24 Electrical Contractors List • 27 Mechanical Contractors List



Cover

Q&A with Sara Vanhala
By David Blanchette

Columns

29 Medical news

30 Ask an attorney

By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr.

32 Philanthropy

By Janet Seitz

34 Restaurant review

By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr.

36 Professional development

By Kelly Gust

The importance of the trades

A college degree used to be considered a golden ticket to a middle-class lifestyle, but with higher education costs skyrocketing and declining demand for white-collar jobs, that is no longer the case. Since I graduated from high school in 1996, average tuition for both public and private four-year colleges has doubled (adjusting for inflation). Meanwhile, dramatic advances in artificial intelligence over the last few years have led to predictions that AI will have the same effect on office workers as the Industrial Revolution had on manufacturing.

A survey from the American Staffing Association, conducted last year by The Harris Poll, showed that a greater percentage of adults in the U.S. would recommend that graduating high school seniors attend a trade school (33%) than would recommend college (28%), while another 13% advised entering the workforce immediately or finding an apprenticeship (11%).

Lincoln Land Community College offers short-term training for high-demand occupations through its Workforce Institute. Instead of working toward an associate's degree, students only take classes related to their chosen occupation. Many of the certificate courses are construction-focused, such as commercial electrical maintenance, HVAC, welding and construction technologies. Midwest Technical Institute, a private trade school, has recently expanded its offerings, holding a ribbon cutting last month for a new nine-month electrical training program (p. 26). And while the trades have historically been male-dominated, a single mother in Springfield found that becoming an ironworker was a great way to support her family (p. 22).

The growing interest in trade schools is a good reminder that education doesn't have to be a one-size-fits-all approach. Growing our local economy will require workers who are proficient in a wide variety of skills, some of which are better obtained through experience than degrees.



Michelle Ownbey, publisher

Editor: Fletcher Farrar
fletcher@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Publisher: Michelle Ownbey
michelle@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Associate Publisher: James Bengfort
jbengfort@illinoistimes.com

Copy Editor: Daron Walker
daron@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Production Design: Devin Larson
dlarson@illinoistimes.com

digital media coordinator: Zach Adams
zadams@illinoistimes.com

Advertising:
Yolanda Bell
yolanda@springfieldbusinessjournal.com
217-679-7802

Beth Parkes-Irwin
beth@springfieldbusinessjournal.com
217-679-7803

Ron Young
ron@springfieldbusinessjournal.com
217-679-7807

Subscriptions:
springfieldbusinessjournal.com/subscribe
subs@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

February Contributors:
Kathleen Alcorn
Adrian Dater
David Blanchette
Kelly Gust
James Krohe Jr.
Thomas C. Pavlik
Janet Seitz

Address: P.O. Box 398, Springfield, IL 62705

Phone: 217-726-6600

Email: info@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Facebook: facebook.com/SBJillinois

Twitter: twitter.com/sbjmonthly

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Q & A

with

Sara Vanhala

By David Blanchette

Sara Vanhala has worked for Growth Corp for nearly 20 years and assumed the role of president Jan. 1, succeeding Doug Kinley after his 35-year tenure. She currently chairs the board of the National Association of Development Companies and leads Growth Corp's annual delegation to Washington, D.C., to collaborate with policymakers and SBA officials.

Vanhala has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Southern Illinois University and a freelance graphic design business that started after helping a friend led to more referrals and requests.

She has three adult children, Daniel (27), Marisa (25) and Malea (23), and two grandchildren, Giovanna (18 months) and Dwayne III (4 months). In her free time, Vanhala enjoys reading, libraries and walking outside.



Where were you born and raised, and what was your first job?

I was born in Springfield and raised in Marion, Illinois, where my grandparents had a farm. My first job was at a dry cleaner. My dad went to high school with the owner and thought it would be the perfect first job for me. I learned how to work with people, count out change and deal with a job that was brutally hot on hot days and cold on cold days. So it was the perfect first job to throw me into the world.

How did you become involved with your current organization?

I moved to Springfield at the end of 2006 and was invited through mutual friends to a Super Bowl party at Doug Kinley's house. As I was leaving at halftime to take my kids home and put them to bed, I ran into his mailbox. I went back to the party to apologize and tell him I would pay for the damages, and he kind of made fun of me. As we bantered back and forth, I said, "If you want payment quickly, you'll have to hire me; otherwise, I'll need to make payments." He gave me his business card, and when I contacted him to apologize one last time, he asked me to interview and that's how it happened.

Why are financing options such as SBA 504 loans so important for commercial developers?

It's a great way to ensure the deal gets done in a way that's beneficial to the business owner and their bank. The program typically offers low down payment options and low fixed rates that are currently below prime. The SBA 504 loans benefit banks by reducing credit risk and making it possible to finance projects that would have otherwise been declined.

Does demand for these loans ebb and flow, or is it pretty constant?

It's pretty constant. We saw the highest demand during COVID-19 when businesses were refinancing loans to capitalize on low interest rates. Manufacturing and trucking were two industries taking advantage of the benefits of the program since both were in high demand at that time.



Vanhala chairs the board of the National Association of Development Companies, which is the trade association for Growth Corp. PHOTO COURTESY SARA VANHALA

What trends have you noticed recently in the loan requests that cross your desk?

People are looking for predictability in an ever-changing economy. Creating predictability can be accomplished by looking at options that contribute to long-term stability. For example, if a business owner pays rent for their office space, purchasing the building is one example of building long-term benefits. It also shows the community that you're establishing roots and that you intend to live where you work. That's what we are doing, and that's what we are seeing.

Is government support for programs like SBA 504 stable, or is the continuation of these types of assistance programs at risk?

Small business is a bipartisan issue. Fortunately, it's one that both Republicans and Democrats stand behind consistently.

What sorts of risks do you advise clients to mitigate during the loan application process?

We host the Small Business Development Center for Central Illinois and that's always a great place to discuss your business plans. If you're a new business, talk about your projections. If you're an existing business, look at the financials to get loan ready. Determine what the SBA looks for in terms of telling a good story in both the plans and financials.

What personal qualities have you noticed about people who succeed in their development or expansion projects?

I'm amazed by business owners. They are some of the most creative, motivated and dedicated people who truly put their employees and team ahead of themselves. They care about the strength of their business, community involvement, creating jobs and the lengths they'll go to in order to protect those jobs. It's very impressive and one of my favorite parts of this job.

Do you often feel that you have an emotional attachment to your clients' projects and find yourself rooting for their success?

Every time. We care deeply; therefore, it's important to be honest up front. If a project isn't necessarily a good fit for our program, we'll point that person in the direction that will expedite their progress. On the other hand, when we have a project that is a good fit, we listen carefully to the details of the story and then do whatever is necessary to get the project funded on time and in the manner anticipated.

How important is integrity in today's business climate?

It's everything. Being trustworthy and having integrity are absolutely necessary. People have pretty good intuition and can tell when someone is not telling the whole story and being deceitful. When you have integrity and good intentions people will fight for you; they will come out of the woodwork to support you.

What advice would you give to first-timers who are entering the job market?

Say yes to opportunities. You may initially be asked to do minor tasks at a job, and if you can be trusted with those tasks, you will be trusted with even greater tasks. Over time, the many minor tasks turn into a trajectory that you could have never predicted.

What may people be surprised to learn about you?

How much I love all animals. My mom told me that I'm most likely to die by a random animal bite because I'll approach any animal, anywhere, even if they're known to be dangerous.

Roundabout slated for West White Oaks Drive

City has others in planning stages for high-traffic intersections

By Adrian Dater

If you've ever tried to make a left-hand turn out of the parking lot of the West White Oaks shopping center that includes Harvest Market, then onto Wabash Avenue, you know the pulse-pounding, head-swiveling moments of trepidation as the turn begins.

With often heavy traffic moving in both directions on West White Oaks Avenue and no traffic light at the intersection, the location is one of the most perilous in the city.

"It's an absolute disaster. It's so dangerous," said Jane Hay, a broker with The Real Estate Group who owns the retail center on the west side of West White Oaks Drive across from White Oaks Plaza. Tenants include Little Lincoln's Toy Shop, Wilson Haberdashery and The Gold Center.

"People are trying to turn left, or trying to go straight, and they can't. So they turn right, then they turn left on Cascade, and they turn around in our parking lot, and go back right," Hay said. "That happens all day long, and that's dangerous, too. They're coming in and they don't care, and they're whipping around our parking lot."

If all goes according to the city's plans, such traffic chaos will soon have a solution in the form of a new roundabout involving Hedley Avenue, Cascade Drive and West White Oaks Drive. The Springfield City Council considered ordinances at its Jan. 20 meeting to set the wheels in motion for the purchase of three parcels of land near the intersection. The total cost to the city for the three parcels would be close to \$130,000, with five other smaller parcels of adjacent property needed to finish construction currently in the negotiation stage.

"We're looking at doing a three-quarter axis at Hedley and West White Oaks Drive, then there would be a roundabout at Cascade Drive and West White Oaks Drive



The city plans to construct a roundabout involving Hedley Avenue, Cascade Drive and West White Oaks Drive to alleviate issues with vehicles trying to access Wabash Avenue. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

as part of that project," said Nathan Bottom, the city's chief engineer. "As part of the three-quarter axis, you basically won't be able to turn left off of Hedley or coming out of the shopping center. You'll have to turn right. But, if you're coming out of the shopping center, you can turn right and take the roundabout to get back out to Wabash."

The city hasn't seen construction of a roundabout since 2017, when one was built at Archer Elevator Road and West Iles Avenue across from the Kerasotes YMCA. The city's only other roundabout was built in 2010 as part of Capitol Avenue renovations.

The reason the city hasn't installed a traffic light to make left-hand turns out of White Oaks Plaza at either Hedley Avenue or Cascade Drive is that Wabash Avenue is too close, Bottom said. Traffic already backs up with people attempting to make a left-hand break for it out of the shopping center. A light would make for orderly left-hand turns, but would clog the considerable traffic of those who made a right onto West White Oaks Drive or are trying to turn left on Hedley or Cascade.

Bottom said the city is "shooting for June" to put the parcels out to bid for construction.

"That obviously is land-act dependent and getting our IDOT agreement and everything along those lines to get it out for construction. Work wouldn't start until the fall," Bottom said. "We have language in there to shoot for (completion) by the holidays to minimize disruption."

Bottom said the city also plans to build a sidewalk and right of way across the street on Wabash Avenue, next to Panera Bread.

Bottom also disclosed other city traffic roundabout projects in the planning stages.

"We're beginning de-

signs at 11th Street and Lincolnshire and 11th Street and Hazel Dell, near the South Sixth Street Wal-Mart," Bottom said. "We're evaluating safety improvements at those two intersections and looking potentially at roundabouts at those two locations."

For now, though, the roundabout to solve the chaos along West White Oak Drive is at the top of Bottom's list. Hay agreed it can't come too soon.

"It'll solve that problem, and it's become more and more of a problem as the traffic's gotten heavier. There are accidents multiple times per week. We can hear them," Hay said. "It'll keep people moving. There's no stopping or waiting for a light. Most people are going to be turning around anyway, and this allows them to do that. Construction won't be great in the short term, but for my businesses, I think, it'll be good long-term, because everyone will have to go right in front of my buildings on the roundabout." **SBJ**

Adrian Dater, a longtime former sportswriter in Denver and author of seven books, moved to Springfield in 2023 to get his first taste of life in the Midwest.

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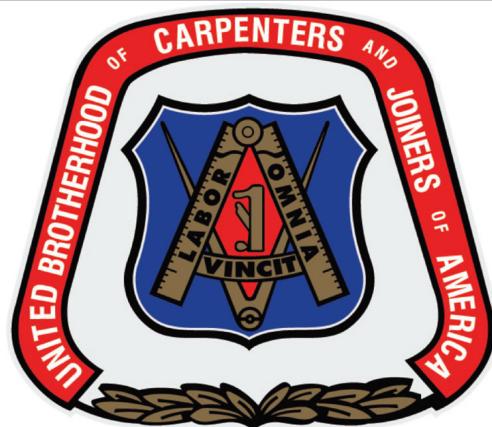


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1 O'Shea Builders 3401 Constitution Drive Springfield, IL 62711	217-522-2826 osheabuilders.com info@osheabuilders.com	250	Michael E. O'Shea Tyler Cormeny	Design-Build, Construction Management, General Contracting Civil Construction	70	Springfield High School, Owen Marsh School, Springfield Clinic Pediatrics Building, Springfield Sangamon County Transportation Hub, Memorial Child Care, HSHS St. John's Hospital Intensive Care Unit renovation, First Presbyterian Church renovation, 3 New Firehouses for City of Springfield.	1900
2 United Contractors Midwest, Inc. 3151 Robbins Road Springfield, IL 62704	217-546-6192 ucm.biz contact@ucm.biz	140	Robert Bruner Mike Cullinan Alan Cullinan	Asphalt Paving, Concrete Paving, Bridge Building, Earthwork	15	Construction of an underpass to carry the Norfolk Southern Railway Company over Laurel Street between Eighth Street and 11th Street and the construction of an underpass to carry the Norfolk Southern Railway Company over Ash Street between 6th Street and 10th Street. Resurfacing of Woodside Road from west of IL 4 to east of Old Chatham Road.	2001
3 Sangamo Construction 2100 E. Moffat Ave. Springfield, IL 62702	217-544-9871 sangamo.net office@sangamo.net	75	Allan Reyhan Jr. Matthew P. Reyhan	Bridge/Highway Construction	20	I-70/Clarl City Dual Structure Replacements, IL 1/Lawrence City Dual Structure Replacement, Coles City Slab Bridge, I-55 Lincoln Tri-Level Deck Replacements, I-70/Clark Bridge Deck Overlays, Iron Bridge Overpass, Oak Crest Bridge Replacement	1990
4 CAD Construction, Inc. 3900 N. Peoria Road Springfield, IL 62702 150 S. Baer Road Tremont, IL 61568	309-925-2092 www.cadconstructioninc.com admin@cadconstructioninc.com	41	Kerry Martin	General Contracting, Post Frame Construction, Metal Panels, Historic Preservation/ Restoration, Construc- tion Management	37	Lincoln Tomb State Historic Site, Dana-Thomas House, Lincoln Land Community College, Springfield Airport Authority, McDonough County Courthouse, Logan County Courthouse, Mount Pulaski Courthouse, Floyd's Thirst Parlor, Illinois Fire Fighter Museum Springfield, Little Flower School, Waverly High School, Western Illinois University, Southern Illinois University, Abingdon Avon Middle School, St. Joseph Church-Pekin, Illinois departments of Transportation, Corrections, Military Affairs and Natural Resources.	2004
5 Evans Construction 1900 E. Washington St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-525-1456 evansconst.com info@evansconst.com	20	Donald Evans	General Contracting, Construction Management, Design/Build, Commercial/Industrial Construction	60	Horace Mann/UIS tenant buildout, Dubois School renovations, Tri-City School renovations (Buffalo), Association of Firefighters remodel, AFSCOE buildout.	1913
6 R. D. Lawrence Construction Company, Ltd. 603 N. Amos Ave. Springfield, IL 62702	217-787-1384 rdlawrence.com info@rdlawrence.com	15	John Goetz	General Contract- ing, Design-Build, Commercial, Industrial, Restorations, Remodels, Additions	60	Springfield/Sangamon County Transportation Center, Sangamon County Coroner's Office remodel, Sangamon County Sheriff's Office remodel ph. 2., Sangamon County Complex, Illinois State Fairgrounds Coliseum and Arena and renovation of HVAC Chatham Elementary School.	1984
6 Siciliano, Inc. 3601 Winchester Road Springfield, IL 62707	217-585-1200 sicilianoinc.com rick@sicilianoinc.com	15	Richard E. Lawrence Kim Lawrence	General Contractor, Historical Restoration, Design-Build, Commercial/Indus- trial Construction, Civil Construction	15	Historical Renovation-Booth-Bateman/Kennedy Ferguson Building, downtown Springfield; Ameren services - throughout the state.	1968
7 Mid-Illinois Companies 601 N. Amos St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-685-5486 309-222-0510 mic123.com	12	Robert Taylor Debra Young	Interior Systems, Specialty Contractor, General Trades Contractor, UL Firestop Contractor, Fireproofing, Painting, Epoxy Floors	1	Old Springfield Journal-Register renovation, Dominican Monastery of Mary the Queen, Horace Mann, Black Hawk Elementary, HSHS St. John's, Decatur Memorial Hospital, Johns Hill Magnet School.	1970



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AGENT	BUSINESS NAME	ADDRESS	EMAIL	PHONE	MOBILE
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Kevin Graham	Century 21 Real Estate Assoc	2030 Timberbrook, Springfield, IL 62702	KGraham367@aol.com	217-789-7200	217-638-5100
Sandra Hamilton	Re/Max Professionals	2475 W. Monroe St., Springfield, IL 62704	sandyhamilton@gmail.com	217-787-7215	217-778-1010
Richard Hohmann	Hohmann Agency	1850 W. Morton Ave., Jacksonville, IL 62650	Rich@HohmannAgency.com	217-245-6166	
Kirk Jefferis	Cityscape Real Estate, Inc.	2160 S. Sixth St., Springfield, IL 62703	capitalideas@sbcglobal.net	217-522-8800	217-971-2258
Lindsey Leonard	The Real Estate Group	907 Clocktower Drive, Springfield, IL 62704	lindsey@curtistillett.com	217-787-7000	217-899-4888
Bill Marriott, Jr.	The Real Estate Group	3701 Wabash Ave., Springfield, IL 62711	marriottjr@comcast.net	217-787-7000	217-741-0198
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AGENT	BUSINESS NAME	ADDRESS	EMAIL	PHONE	MOBILE
Terri Myers	Myers Commercial Real Estate	1 W. Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, IL 62701	terri@myerscommercialre.com	217-747-0019	217-306-4137
Samuel Nichols	True Commercial Real Estate	2815 Old Jacksonville Rd., Suite 105, Springfield, IL 62704	sam@truecres.com	217-787-2800	217-494-0800
D.C. Plake	Garrison Group, Inc. Keller Williams Capital	739 S. Fifth St., Springfield, IL 62703	dcplake40@garrisongroupinc.com	217-303-8445	217-494-5010
David Plake	Garrison Group, Inc. Keller Williams Capital	739 S. Fifth St., Springfield, IL 62703	david@garrisongroupinc.com	217-241-0202	217-494-0907
Blake Pryor	Coldwell Banker Commercial Devonshire Realty	Springfield, IL	bpryor@cbcdr.com	217-547-6650	217-725-9518
James Skeeters	Keller Williams Capital	3171 Robbins Road, Springfield, IL 62704	skeetersrealtors@yahoo.com	217-303-8445	217-971-6775
Todd Smith	Todd P. Smith Commercial Real Estate	3000 Professional Drive, Springfield, IL 62703	todd@tpsmithre.com	217-441-8000	217-553-5439
Dan Sperry	The Real Estate Group	3701 Wabash Ave., Springfield, IL 62711	sperryonline@gmail.com	217-787-7000	217-725-2467
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Springfield's city plan at 100

by James Krohe Jr.

Rampant and haphazard growth after the Civil War left Springfield dirty, dangerous, unhealthy and inconvenient. The race riots in 1908 left the city's worthy citizens with what we might call a reputational problem, so progressive-minded locals undertook a municipal housecleaning. The 1911 commission reform promised to fix politics. The election that same year of Willis J. Spaulding began a campaign that led in the 1930s to a water supply lake and municipal power plant. The 1914 Springfield Survey promised to fix schools, housing and public health.

Another of the sputtering candles lit against the darkness was the "City Plan of the City of Springfield Illinois," adopted in 1924 as the city's first attempt to rationalize the process of urban growth through land use zoning. More familiarly known by the name of its principal author, Chicago parks consultant Myron Howard West, the West plan was offered to an incredulous public in a

handsome book published in 1925.

Like every plan for the future, West's ended up being a bit behind the times. Springfield was then a classic 19th century streetcar city; within 13 years the Springfield streetcar system was dead and autos had completely taken over city streets. Pollution controls and structural changes in the local economy would soon obliterate distinctions between land uses that were the premise of West's new zoning scheme.

West's plan to turn the whole city into a monument to Lincoln was grandiose and impractical and (maybe more disqualifying) impolitic, although even more modest versions of them would have been rendered moot by the Depression. Nonetheless, much of what he recommended was built – sort of, eventually. Springfield does have a municipal water reservoir of the kind he proposed even if it was not built where he thought it ought to be and its shores were not set aside for

public recreation as he urged. Fifty years later the blocks around Lincoln house would be acquired as part of a larger park. And while consolidating rail lines as West urged will have taken more than a century it is happening.

Contained in its 90-plus pages are two separate plans. The zoning scheme set up a bureaucratic process to control property development to make growth rational, efficient and cost-effective. The zoning map only tells city officials what may be built. West argued that the most diligent observance of even a good land use plan will not build a great city, only avoid building a really bad one. He thus presumed to tell them what ought to be built. This "City Beautiful" plan prescribed for the public realm, a grand scheme to secure a new water supply, untangle the city from its rail tracks and make the public realm not just greener and cleaner but inspiring. "The right thing should be done at the right time," he

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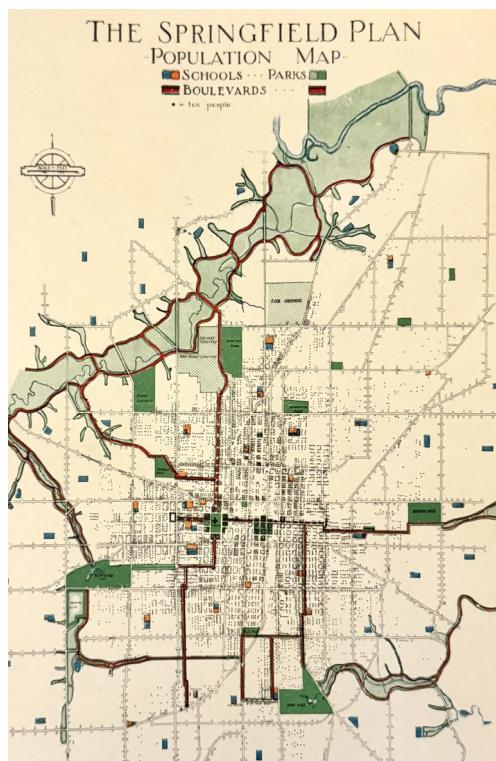
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explained, "and the greater perspective afforded by the plan will make this possible."

Since 1925 Springfield has made project plans but no wholesale reimagining of the city. The city's urban planning philosophy these days is expressible in only two words – "new" and "more." The city makes certain that every new strip mall has the correct number of parking spaces, but seldom asks whether Springfield needs another new strip mall. Shiny it might be for the moment, but the resulting new Springfield west of Chatham Road is as failed an urban environment as the old Springfield that West knew – massively wasteful of land and the time and energy it takes to move around within it, a drive-through city, a placeless place that has no form, no aesthetic, no idea of itself.

This sort of plan-less development on the fringes of Springfield also was being done 100 years ago as city hall relinquished decision-makings about development to individual property owners. "The lack of perspective, the inability of city authorities to control the development of the city as a whole, and the leaving of this development to individuals with a myriad of ideas," West wrote, "have led to a



The West plan shows the city's schools and parks linked by boulevards. The Sugar Creek valley, northwest of the city, was envisioned as a municipal nature and recreation preserve.

complexity of structure which is hampering more and more the functioning of [Springfield.]"

Certainly there are Westian things that remain undone. The Sugar Creek valley northwest of the city might still be purchased and maintained as a municipal nature and recreation preserve, as West proposed. His system of landscaped boulevards connecting parks and monuments was probably not buildable, while today's Veterans Parkway isn't actually a parkway but it could still be turned into a passable imitation of one. Too bad then that the notion that planning has a public purpose beyond providing minimally for public health and safety, and that a city was a place of citizens, not just property owners, died out with the progressive era. **SBJ**

*This column originally appeared in the Nov. 20 edition of Illinois Times. James Krohe Jr. recently moved back to Springfield and resume writing a regular column for IT. He is also the author of *Corn Kings & One-horse Thieves, a Plain-Spoken History of Mid-Illinois*.*



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WOMEN'S EVENT CALENDAR

Illinois Women in Leadership's February luncheon is Thursday, Feb. 19, 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., at Mariah's Steakhouse & Pasta, 331 Robbins Rd. The featured speaker is Raven DeVaughn, director of Illinois Department of Central Management Services, who will present, "Finding your flow: Navigating progress, peace and power."

DeVaughn oversees CMS's \$8 billion annual budget and 800 dedicated public servants responsible for managing the state's administrative functions including: human resources, facilities management, procurement, benefits for employees and retirees, labor relations, state hiring, fleet management, administrative hearings and other operational functions.

DeVaughn holds a bachelor's degree in English from Howard University and a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Law.

Luncheons are open to all IWIL members and their guests. Registration is \$25 for members and guests through February 13; \$30 on or after February 14. Registration will close on February 16. For more information or to register, go to registration@iwilbiz.com.

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TRADE UNIONS

Sources: The trade unions.
Ranked by number of local members.

	UNION NAME	PHONE WEBSITE / EMAIL	LOCAL MEMBERSHIP	CONTACTS	NUMBER OF IL COUNTIES REPRESENTED	YEAR EST'D
1	International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local Union 916 3361 Teamster Way Springfield, IL 62707	217-522-7932 teamsters916.org info@teamsters916.org	4,100	JP Fyans president	14	1943
2	Local 477 LIUNA Laborers 1615 N. Dirksen Parkway Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-0014 liuna.org	1,615	George Alexander business manager & secretary/treasurer	7	1903
3	United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Local No. 270 211 W. Lawrence Ave. Springfield, IL 62704	217-528-7571 carpenters270.com local270@carpentersunion.org	1,400	RJ Finneran business representative	19	1887
4	International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 965 3520 E. Cook St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-528-9659 operators@iuoe965.net	1,298	Chris Arnold business manager	15	1931
5	Plumbers & Steamfitters, Local 137 2880 E. Cook St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-2724 ua137.org	950	Aaron Gurnsey business manager	16	1895
6	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local No. 193 3150 Wide Track Drive Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-3479 ibew193.com office@ibew193.com	812	David Wells business manager	9	1901
7	Plasterers and Cement Masons, Local 18 40 Adloff Lane, Suite 6A Springfield, IL 62703	217-585-4221 opcmia18.org localunion18@att.net	750	Mark Winkler business manager	22	1864
8	Sheet Metal Workers, Local 218 2855 Via Verde Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-0161 smart218.org	640	Richard Manka business manager	21	1903
9	Iron Workers, Local 46 2888 E. Cook St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-528-4041 ironworkers46.org bbaskett@ironworkers46.org	402	Brian Baskett business manager	20	1908
10	International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, District Council 58, Locals 90 & 2007 3223 Lake Plaza Drive Springfield, IL 62703	618-781-9543 217-529-6976 dc58iupat.net jwilliamson@dc58.org	273	James Williamson business representative	9	1899
11	United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers, Local 112 301 E. Spruce St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-2229 rooferslocal112.com john@rooferslocal112.com	135	John Nicks business manager	15	1930



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Audrey Wilton: Ironworker, mother and leader

by Kathleen Alcorn

The trades are mostly a male-dominated field, but Audrey Wilton has found ironworking to be the right fit for her as a single mother raising a daughter. As a member of Ironworkers Local 46, and a foreman, Wilton has worked with a variety of local employers on various job sites.

"What I love most is the diversity of new jobs, new sites and working with other trades," Wilton said.

Ironworkers, she explains, are able to hone many different skills in construction such as shaping architectural, ornamental and structural elements and rigging projects.

The variety of job sites has allowed Wilton to leave her mark on Springfield. She assisted with preserving the Old State Capitol, the current Capitol, the CIPS building downtown – which is the historic Marine Bank – and countless other federal buildings. A high point for Wilton, so to speak, and one of her proudest professional moments was setting the flagpole atop the Old State Capitol dome, which required a helicopter delivery.

Wilton began her career as a general foreman with R.D. Lawrence Construction Company and today works with O'Shea Builders alongside her entire apprentice class, which she describes as rare and cherished. As a woman in the trades, she said she has gratitude for the respect, support and kindness she's found with both companies.

Wilton's time as an apprentice included the most solemn honor of her career, which was working on the 9/11 Memorial in Decatur.

Wilton has an affinity for historic projects and speaks passionately about the care required when doing preservation work. "A single spark can destroy centuries-old materials," she warns. To honor the past, she sometimes takes rubbings of historic buildings, immortalizing names that may soon be



Audrey Wilton placing the flagpole on top of the Old State Capitol dome.
PHOTO COURTESY AUDREY WILTON

lost to renovation.

Some say you cannot do it all, but with the support of the union and the families of other union members whom Wilton has grown to call her extended family, she said it is possible. Her advice to all working parents is both pragmatic and empowering: "Don't sacrifice one for the other. The job and the benefits offer families incredible health and welfare packages. You can retire sooner with good insurance. The total pay and benefits package, which is what you get versus what you take home, is unmatched."

Wilton has many good things to say about Ironworkers Local 46 and the respect

is mutual, according to union president Dennis Sheedy. "Audrey has been an incredible asset to our local. It's easy to support a person who is not only a great ironworker, but also a genuinely outstanding human being. She truly embodies the values we aim to instill through our apprenticeship program – work ethic, intelligence and humanity."

Wilton's commitment extends beyond her work. She volunteers with the Union Sisters of Central Illinois, constructing garden beds for Garden of Hope and repairing the homes of retired union members.

Looking to the future and the next generation of ironworkers, Wilton is an example of the career that can be created when you take advantage of your apprenticeship by showing up eager to learn and lead. Ironworker apprenticeships are approximately three years of classes and four years of on-the-job hours. With parental consent, teenagers can begin coursework as early as age 17 and can then work on job sites at the age of 18.

Experience is not necessary, but you need to have a high school diploma or GED and the courage to begin. Wilton said it's even possible to break into the trades as a second career. She's witnessed apprentices launch new careers in their 30s and 40s, proof that reinvention knows no age.

She believes anyone can be welcomed into the family, just as she was. "There is a reason why it is called a brotherhood and sisterhood," Wilton said. **SBJ**

Kathleen Alcorn is a lobbyist and consultant for ATOLletc LLC. She previously served as the past deputy mayor for the city of Springfield and past city clerk for Leland Grove.



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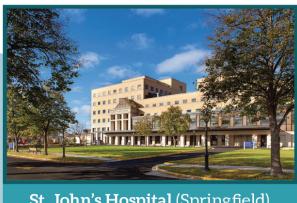
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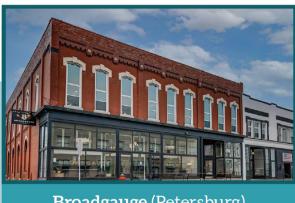
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Sources: The electrical contractors.
Ranked by number of full-time employees.

	Name / Address	Phone Website / Email	# of Full-time Employees	Partners/ Principals	Union Affiliated	Notable Projects	Year Est'd
1	Anderson Electric, Inc. 3501 Sixth St. Frontage Road W. Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-5471 anderson-electric.com colinb@anderson-electric.com rodneyF@anderson-electric.com	175	Employee-owned	Yes	Lanphier High School additions and renovations, Memorial Child Care Center, White Oaks Mall Sears Building Renovation, J.P. Morgan Chase solar, New Berlin Junior/Senior High School, Illinois State Museum, Westermeyer Industries, Central Illinois Foodbank, ATS & Generator, Hillsboro High School additions, Sullivan WTP, Decatur Public School Athletic Facility, ISU Watterson Towers Dining, Rivian Automotive Plant, Heartland Community College CTE, Carle at The Riverfront, Danville Area Community College Healthcare Professions Center, Springfield High School additions and renovations IDOT Construction Materials Lab.	1918
2	B & B Electric, Inc. 3000 Reilly Drive Springfield, IL 62703	217-528-9666 bnbelectric.net todd@bnbelectric.net	105	Todd M. Brinkman Tim Brinkman Kristin Miller	Yes	Scheels Sports Park, State Capitol North Wing Renovation, Isringhausen Porsche, Springfield Memorial Hospital 1E Renovation, Springfield Clinic Pediatric Building, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum Stage Lighting, St. John's Cath Labs, SIU School of Medicine IDPH Lab, Madison Park Place, Nelson Center Ice Rinks, Evergreen Wealth, Blessed Sacrament Lighting Upgrades, Springfield Fire Houses, Cubertson Medical Surgery Renovation, SIU Fiber Optic Relocation, Lawrence Education Center, CMT, The Outlet, Legacy Pointe Market Building.	1962
3	Capitol Construction Group LLC, DBA Egizii Electric 3009 Singer Ave. Springfield, IL 62703	217-528-4001 ckeating@egiziielectric.com egiziielectric.com	68	Carole Keating	Yes	Downtown Springfield Traffic Modernization; Ash and Laurel Underpass; New Berlin and Mason City Water Treatment Plant Upgrades; Pleasant Plains New Gymnasium; UIS Fire Alarm Upgrade; Camp Lincoln Building 2 Renovation; Illinois Capital North Wing Renovation; SSCTC New Transportation Center; Bloomington Arena LED lighting; Lincoln's Challenge Emergency Generator Installation.	1967
4	Senergy Electric, Inc. 509 N. Elm St. Williamsville, IL 62693	217-566-2826 senergy.io mgiacomini@senergy.io bkfeafer@senergy.io	48	Matthew J. Giacomini Brandon M. Keafer	Yes	Illinois School for the Deaf security; Springfield School District 186 school security; Dominican Monastery of Mary the Queen; Illinois College Crispin Hall; JSD 117 Washington Elementary; Springfield Capitol Airport solar array; Litchfield Elementary School; OSF Healthcare Global S2 Security; Williamsville School District and Village Unified Security; West Side Christian Church addition, renovation and new Worship Center; Lanphier High School addition and renovation; Champaign County Jail consolidation; LLC Access Control; Champaign County Plaza renovation; Chatham Goodwill; JSD Eisenhower; Illinois College Access Control.	2014
5	Ryan Electrical Solutions 4151 W. Jefferson St. Springfield, IL 62707	217-698-4877 ryanelectricalsolutions.com dennis@ryanelectricalsolutions.com	40	Dennis Ryan	No	Various commercial, residential and audio-visual projects, agriculture projects, backup and portable generator sales, installation and service and ground-mounted solar installation.	1995
6	Prairie State Plumbing & Heating 3900 N. Peoria Road Springfield, IL 62702	217-636-9000	25	Jerry Judd	Yes	Generac generators installation and various commercial and residential upgrades, repairs and remodels.	2005

ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS

Sources: The electrical contractors.
Ranked by number of full-time employees.

NAME / ADDRESS	PHONE WEBSITE / EMAIL	# OF FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES	PARTNERS/ PRINCIPALS	UNION AFFILIATED	NOTABLE PROJECTS	YEAR ESTD
7 Ruby Electric, Inc. 341 S. Meadowbrook Road Springfield, IL 62711	217-787-4949 rubyelectric.com johnruby@rubyelectric.com	24	John Ruby	No	Various commercial, residential, agricultural, automatic standby generator, generator maintenance and repair.	1978
8 Lindsey Electric 3260 Terminal Ave. Springfield, IL 62707	217-544-6789 lindsey-electric.com lori@lindsey-electric.com	12	Catherine A. Lindsey, J. Michael Lindsey, Lori A. Lindsey Von Behren	Yes	Various commercial and residential projects.	1972
9 Mansfield Electric Co. 4425 N. Peoria Road Springfield, IL 62702	217-523-0811 ed@mansfield-electric.com	10	H. Edward Midden III	Yes	Sangamon County Complex, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, UIS University Hall, The Bridge Short Stay Nursing Home, Enos Elementary School, Hy-Vee.	1949
10 R. Watts Electric 2801 E. Sangamon Ave. Springfield, IL 62702	217-652-9950 rwattselectric.com wattselectric1@yahoo.com	9	Robin Watts	No	Various residential and commercial projects. New wiring, rewiring, room additions, underground issues located and repaired. Generac certified dealer, certified technician, parts orders and maintenance.	2011



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Demand for skilled trades workers is greater than ever

By Adrian Dater

Brian Huff, founder and CEO of Midwest Technical Institute, speaks with zeal regarding the present and future economic opportunities for tradespeople in Springfield and the rest of the country.

"There are 80,000 job openings in the country for electricians and only 7,000 to 8,000 are being trained right now. [The investment manager] BlackRock says there will be a need for 500,000 new electricians in the next few years," Huff said.

Midwest Technical Institute recently began offering nine-month electrician and welding programs at the Springfield campus. "Of about 12 million skilled workers in the country, 4.8 million are 45 or older. Half are 55 or older," he said. "For every five that are retiring, only two are replacing them. So, there's this massive hole."

In April, the Wall Street Journal published a story titled, "How Gen Z Is Becoming the Toolbelt Generation." With costs at four-year colleges skyrocketing and worries about AI potentially making obsolete the kinds of jobs a college graduate can get, the WSJ pointed out that more and more young people are saying no to college and yes to schools such as MTI that teach skilled trades. Two key reasons cited are money and job security.

A 2024 survey by payroll-services provider ADP revealed statistics that would probably surprise those who consider a college degree the golden ticket to a financially secure professional life, as compared to a career in the trades. According to ADP's research, in 2024 the median pay for licensed electricians was \$62,350 and \$62,970 for plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters. The median salary of those in traditional professional services, including accounting, was \$39,520.

"I don't think people have any idea of what's coming in the next five to 10 years



MTI held a ribbon cutting Dec. 9 at its Springfield campus for a new nine-month electrical training program.
PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

when it comes to construction," said Huff, the proprietor of five other trade schools with another opening soon in Little Rock, Arkansas. "The AI-arms race is on, and the Trump administration said we'll need to double our output of electricity to win the race. Massive data centers are being built everywhere – including one in Springfield – and there is just a massive need for electricians, welders, millwrights, pipefitters, steamfitters and HVAC technicians."

Huff said he often tells people, "Take a look around. It all starts with the trades. Doctors, nurses and other health care professionals have no place to work until somebody builds them a hospital."

Huff continued, "AI will become a tool for the tradesperson, but it won't replace the tradesperson. Today's college grad is not only worried about AI or somebody else replacing them; they're worried the job won't even be there. They're turning to the trades."

According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, enrollment at trade schools is up about 20% in the past five years, while enrollment at public four-year institutions has increased just 2.1% during that same time frame.

"Trades were presented as a downward movement. Today, it's an upward movement,"

Huff said. "They pay really well; they are replacement-resistant and recession-resistant, for the most part. They can be affected by recessions, but the trades are usually the last to go."

Billy Serbousek, executive vice president of the Illinois Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association, echoed Huff. He agreed that while more young people are going into the trades, more are still needed.

"This is an enormous issue all across the country. It is unfortunate so many people do not

know the importance of these critically skilled workers that everyone depends on for life's necessities," Serbousek said. "Electricians are essential workers, but more importantly, highly trained electricians save more lives preventing electrocutions and fires than anyone realizes. They are also provided with a very good wage and benefit package because of their importance, and with no college debt."

Other trades taught at MTI include trucking and several medical industry courses such as dental assistant, nursing assistant, medical coding and more. The Workforce Institute at Lincoln Land Community College also offers a variety of short-term training classes for high demand occupations, ranging from electrical, HVAC and welding to truck driver training, aviation maintenance and more.

When a student graduates from the nine-month course, Huff said MTI is vigilant about helping them find jobs in the field immediately.

"We know probably every business in town. When we first started this in 1995, we had five welding students. We've since graduated 35,000 students," Huff said. "Once you get that skill, you've got it the rest of your life. You can take it anywhere in the world."

MECHANICAL CONTRACTORS

Sources: Mechanical Contractors Association of Central Illinois, the contractors. Ranked by number of full-time employees - peak season.

NAME / ADDRESS	PHONE WEBSITE / EMAIL	# OF FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES	PARTNERS/ PRINCIPALS	TYPES OF SERVICE	NOTABLE PROJECTS	YEAR EST'D
1 Henson Robinson Company Petersburg Plumbing and Excavating Reliable Mechanical, LLC 3550 Great Northern Ave. Springfield, IL 62711	217-544-8451 hensonrobinson.com hrc@henson-robinson.com	410	Joe Kulek Brian Vogt	Commercial HVAC, roofing, plumbing, piping, refrigeration, architectural sheet metal, HVAC/plumbing service, sewer and water mains, excavation, residential heating and cooling installation and service, residential plumbing service, directional boring, sewer cleaning/TV inspection.	Rivian, Williamsville schools, UIS, LLCC, City of Springfield, Ball/Chatham, SHG, Illinois School for the Deaf, Hope School, St. John's, Memorial Medical Center, Blessings Hospital, Springfield Clinic, Prairie Eye Clinic, BCBS, Passavant Hospital, Governor's Mansion, IDOT, IDOC, Illinois State Police, IEMA, Camp Lincoln, CMS, Secretary of State, CWLP, Springfield, Chatham, Taylorville, Jacksonville. Caterpillar, State Farm, Bridgestone Firestone, White Oaks Mall, NAPA, Bunn, Walmart, Villas Senior Care, Pleasant Plains School, Champaign School District, Carle Hospital, ISU, Millikin University, Kraft Foods, Mt. Pulaski School SCWRD, West Side Christian Church, Decatur School District, YMCA, Quincy Veterans Home, Illinois State Capitol, City of Assumption, Carle Foundation Hospital, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, Danville VA Medical Center, OSF Healthcare.	1861
2 E.L. Pruitt 3090 Colt Road Springfield, IL 62707	217-789-0966 elpruitt.com	364	John Pruitt	Commercial HVAC/plumbing/architectural sheet metal installation, plumbing/piping/sheet metal fabrication, HVAC and plumbing service and maintenance, sewer structure rehabilitation, site utilities and civil.	-ADM, Caterpillar, CWLP, Decatur Park District, District 186, Lincoln Land Community College, Memorial Health Systems (multiple locations), University of Illinois Springfield, Rivian Automotive, Springfield Clinic, Millikin University, NB Goddard School, Village of Kincaid, Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport, Nestle, Mel-O-Cream, Horrace Mann Amazon, Green Family Stores, HSHS, Illinois Air National Guard, St. John's Hospital, West Side Christian Church, YMCA, Springfield Fire Houses, New Berlin Schools, Edwardsville Lincoln School, Cahokia Mounds, Isringhausen Porsche, SIU School of Medicine	1971
3 ENTEC Services, Inc. 681 E. Linton Ave. Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-3333 entecservicesinc.com ap@entec-solutions.com	80	Tom Weed	Commercial HVAC service, commercial generator service, building automation, door access and energy services.	First United Methodist Church, Lincoln Memorial Hospital, Illinois Secretary of State, First Christian Church, Springfield Clinic, Cherry Hills Baptist Church, BUNN, Springfield Memorial Hospital, Illinois State Police.	1981
4 Tiger Plumbing, Heating, Air Conditioning & Electrical Services 775 E. Linton Ave., Suite D Springfield, IL 62703	217-697-4044 217-280-4091 trusttiger.com servicenow@trusttiger.com	66	Todd Kiefer	Plumbing, heating and air conditioning repair and replacement, drain clearing and sewer repair, crawlspace and basement waterproofing, water heater repair and replacement, shower/bathtub modification and installation, indoor air quality and duct cleaning, water softeners and filtration, toilet repair and replacement, sump pump repair and replacement, faucet repair and replacement, frozen pipe repair.	HVAC and plumbing repair and replacement services for residential and commercial properties.	1993
5 MB Heating & Cooling, Plumbing & Electric, Inc. 1555 W. Jefferson St. Springfield IL 62702	217-544-4328 (HEAT) mb-heating.com information@mb-heating.com	50	Curtis Tomlin Ashley Tomlin	Residential and commercial heating and cooling, plumbing and electrical. HVAC, generator, water heater installation/service/service/maintenance. Solar, boiler and geothermal installation/service/maintenance. Indoor air quality, 24/7 Emergency Services.	Federal Bureau of Investigations, Dickenson Apartments, The Candles Apartments, Huntington Ridge Apartments, Hickox Apartments, Cardinal Ridge Apartments, Capital City Property Management, Fifth Street Renaissance, Friendly Chevrolet (solar), Kanoski Bresney, Riverton JFL, U-Haul, Radian Church, Real Life Church, Zion Baptist Church, Solomon Colors, Club Car Wash, Hicks Gas, Capitol Group (solar), Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Logan County Health Department, Elkhart Public Library, Mount Pulaski Library and City Hall, Rochester Estates Senior Living, The Villas of Hollybrook, The Muni, Watts Copy Systems, Sparc, White Oaks West Animal Hospital, Roberts Seafood, Tim Wikerson (solar), Chatham Vet Clinic, Central Illinois Access Service, Youth Service Bureau, Massage Luxe, Illinois Association of School Administrators, RL Carriers, HR Partners, Illinois Environmental Council, Parkway Christian Church, Prairie Archives, Negwer Materials, Village of Jerome, Precision, Oral and Facial Surgeons of Illinois, BI Petro, BNight Star, Sangamon Antique Mall, Dunkin.	1986
6 AIRmasters - Commercial Mechanical Contractor 1330 North Grand Ave. W. Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-9793 theairmasters.com dispatch@theairmasters.com	43	Robert Mathews, Mike Duval	Commercial mechanical contractor, HVAC, controls, refrigeration, plumbing, piping, sheet metal and restaurant equipment/hot side.	St. John's Hospital Life Safety Projects, St. Mary's Hospital upgrades, White Oaks Mall replacements/upgrades, Casey's General Store upgrades, DCFS Chiller, Vonderlieth Senior Living piping/boilers, Beatty Television upgrades, JC Penney's boilers, Best Buy replacements and upgrades, HSHS, Chatham Schools controls, IDOT freeze thaw equipment, WalMart and Sam's Club, Kohl's and many more.	1993

MECHANICAL CONTRACTORS

Sources: Mechanical Contractors Association of Central Illinois, the contractors.
Ranked by number of full-time employees - peak season.

	NAME / ADDRESS	PHONE WEBSITE / EMAIL	# OF FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES	PARTNERS/ PRINCIPALS	TYPES OF SERVICE	NOTABLE PROJECTS	
7	Mike Williams Plumbing and Heating 3225 E. Clear Lake Ave. Springfield, IL 62702	217-753-4545 mikewilliams.net csm@mikewilliams.net	35	Lewis Williams	HVAC, heating, plumbing and air conditioning.	Heating, air conditioning and plumbing, residential service and repair and pre-season maintenance tune-up.	1976
8	F. J. Murphy & Son, Inc. 1800 Factory Ave. Springfield, IL 62702	217-528-4081 fjmurphy.com	30	Chad Fricke	Plumbing, heating, cooling, fire sprinklers, refrigeration, restaurant equipment, ice machines, residential, commercial, institutional, installation and repair.	Harvest Market, UIS, Bunn, White Oaks Mall, Packard Mental Health Center, Brother James Court, Willard Ice Building, IL State Historic Sites, Lincoln's Home, Mel-O-Cream, Schnucks, Family Guidance Center, Land of Lincoln Goodwill, Ace Hardware, Lewis Memorial Christian Village, Hoogland Center for the Arts, HSHS, Illinois Capitol, District 186, Illinois State Capitol and hundreds of small residential and commercial repair and remodel projects.	1947
8	Allied Plumbing & Heating 1315 Wabash Ave. Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-5500 alliedphn.com mark@alliedphn.com	30	Jean Miller Mark Miller Susan Gum-Miller	Residential, light commercial, plumbing, heating and air conditioning service. Residential and light commercial HVAC installation.	Residential and light commercial HVAC installation.	1977
9	Prairie State Plumbing & Heating 3900 Peoria Road Springfield, IL 62702	217-636-9000 www.prairiestateinc.com jjudd@prairiestateinc.com	25	Jerry Judd	Plumbing, heating, cooling, electrical, mechanical, ventilation, and sitework services to residential, commercial, and industrial clients throughout central Illinois. Vactor truck and jetting services.		2005
10	Aire Serv HRI Plumbing 1209 N. Eighth St. Springfield, IL 62704 800 N. Church St. Jacksonville, IL 62650	217-523-8594 217-243-6531 aireserv.com/cil aireserv@as-hri.com	19	Chris Williams, Jennifer Williams	Residential, and industrial service for HVAC equipment and ductwork. Indoor air quality, including duct cleaning. Chillers, boilers, and geothermal. Residential plumbing.	Jacksonville High School - building automation, Ill. Coalition Against Domestic Violence - rooftop units, Ill. Dept. of Human Services, Casey's General Stores, multiple local banks and restaurants, multiple residential projects.	1985

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MEDICAL NEWS

Springfield Clinic appoints new CEO



Rebecca Birenbaum. PHOTO COURTESY SPRINGFIELD CLINIC

After a national search over the past six months, the Springfield Clinic board of directors has announced Rebecca Birenbaum as its new CEO, starting March 16.

Birenbaum becomes the eighth CEO in the Clinic's 86-year history.

Birenbaum takes over for Jen Boyer, who was appointed acting CEO in December 2024 following Ray Williams' retirement. Boyer will transition to chief operating officer.

"Jen's exceptional operational expertise, financial insight and unwavering dedication have been pivotal in guiding the Clinic through a period of transition. The board extends its sincere appreciation for her impactful contributions, which have established a strong foundation for continued excellence and future growth," said Chris Wottowa, chairman of the board.

Over the past seven years, Birenbaum has served as chief operating officer at Vancouver Clinic, the largest independent, physician-owned multispecialty medical practice group in the northwest. With more than 580 clinicians, 2,000 employees and 20 locations, it has many similarities to Springfield Clinic.

"Rebecca is a collaborative and strategic leader dedicated to high-quality, community-based health care," Wottowa said. "She brings a proven record in strategic planning, physician engagement and team building, with a leadership style that is both patient-focused and accountable."

Birenbaum has more than 25 years of experience in operations and human resources management. She received her juris doctorate from Lewis & Clark Law School, her master of business administration from American University and a bachelor's degree from Earlham College.

"I look forward to serving as Springfield Clinic's next CEO and partnering to lead a physician-owned organization dedicated to clinical excellence, remaining independent and caring for its employees, clinicians and the community," Birenbaum said. "Springfield Clinic is poised to navigate the challenging health care arena and continue its commitment to improving health outcomes and providing exceptional value to those we care for."

Carolyn Oldenburg joins Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach



Carolyn Oldenburg

PHOTO COURTESY HOSPITAL SISTERS MISSION OUTREACH

Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, a global health medical supply and equipment recovery organization in Springfield and affiliate of Hospital Sisters Health System (HSHS), has named Carolyn Oldenburg as the foundation director. She will begin her new role Jan. 20.

As foundation director, Oldenburg will lead the strategy and implementation of all fundraising efforts for Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach.

"We are delighted for Carolyn to join our team," said Erica Smith, executive director of Mission Outreach. "Carolyn's skills and expertise in fund development will be critical as we strengthen our sustainability to serve health care partners globally."

Smith noted that charitable donations – both financially and materially – to Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach sustain efforts to improve the health and wellness of people across the globe through the responsible donation of medical supplies, equipment and support services. The support of individuals, businesses and health systems is critical for the organization's success. All HSHS entities contribute supplies and equip-

ment to Mission Outreach, and these donations support access to high-quality clinical health care for more than 28,000,000 people globally.

Oldenburg will also supervise the foundation managers who lead philanthropic efforts at HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital in Effingham, HSHS St. Mary's Hospital in Decatur, HSHS St. Francis Hospital in Litchfield and HSHS Good Shepherd Hospital in Shelbyville.

Oldenburg has more than 20 years of fundraising experience. She joins HSHS after leading major giving at Cross Catholic Outreach, a ministry that partners with religious leaders and lay workers to provide material and spiritual blessings to those in need around the world. Prior to that, she served as director of principal gifts at Illinois College in Jacksonville.

She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas. Oldenburg is involved in the community, including as a member of Illinois Women in Leadership. She also previously served multiple years as co-chair of the "Tour de Routh" annual cycling event held by Routh Catholic High School in Jacksonville.

New laws for 2026

By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr.

It's that time of year again when we explore what our legislature has been up to this past year.

In a case of the state actually trying to be helpful, cocktails to go (first introduced during COVID-19 restrictions) are now permanent, which should be a boon to the restaurant industry. The state created a new license category that allows craft distillers to "self-distribute" without the need to engage a distributor. The new law goes into effect on July 1.

Another helpful law gives the state more power to remove squatters from property that they have no rights in. They will now be treated as trespassers, which will allow the police to remove them right away after a complaint is made.

Perhaps one of the more controversial laws now allows physician-assisted suicide, which goes into effect on Sept. 12. Among other requirements:

- Two doctors must examine the candidate in person and conclude that his or her illness will result in death in the next six months.
- The candidate must have mental capacity, which must be confirmed by a physician.
- A written or oral request, witnessed by two people, must be made.
- The fatal dose must be self-administered.
- The request can be withdrawn at any point.

In a feat of mental gymnastics, the law requires the death certificate to list the cause of death as the underlying terminal disease. Finally, health care providers are not required to participate and can decline to be involved.

A handful of new laws should be of interest to employers who may wish to update their employee handbooks accordingly:

Employees are now allowed a reasonable break to express breast milk each time there is a need. Employers cannot require the use of paid leave or reduce the employee's compensation.

Companies with more than 16 employees must allow employees to take unpaid leave if they have a child in a neonatal intensive care facility. For those with less than 50 employees it's 10 days of unpaid leave and 20 days for those with more than 50 employees.

The state may now levy civil penalties under the Illinois Human Rights Act that are in addition to any monetary remedies available to claimants who have been subject to discrimination. The fines are \$16,000 for first-time violators, \$42,500 for those with



one prior violation within the last five years and \$70,000 for employers with two or more violations in the last seven years.

Part-time employees are now eligible for paid leave in connection with organ donation, which previously was only available to full-time employees.

The Military Leave Act now requires employers with more than 51 employees to provide paid leave for anyone performing funeral honors, up to eight hours a month and up to 50 hours per calendar year. The employee must be trained to participate in an honor detail and either retired or active duty military, or a member of an organization authorized to provide an honor detail.

The Human Rights Act now regulates employer use of artificial intelligence. It will be a civil rights violation to use AI tools that result in discrimination based on any of the protected categories in connection with hiring, promotion, discipline, termination or other employment terms.

The Illinois Victims' Economic Security and Safety Act has been amended to provide that an employer cannot discriminate against an employee because the employee used employer-issued equipment to record a crime of violence, including domestic violence and sexual violence, committed against the employee or his or her family.

The Workplace Transparency Act has been expanded to prohibit employment contracts from prohibiting employees from "engaging in concerted activity to address work-related issues."

In terms of education, several new laws are of interest. First, colleges must now publish the costs of attendance for the last 10 years which is the state's attempt to give

students a better understanding of the costs of attending college. Second, a new law requires the State Board of Education to develop guidelines for the use of AI in elementary and secondary education. Third, seventh and eighth-graders may now enroll in high school courses if offered by the high school they will attend. Fourth, higher education institutions are now required to adopt a policy to provide for credits to be given to those who have engaged in fire-fighting training. Finally, Illinois schools are now prohibited from denying enrollment or educational services to students or staff due to actual or perceived immigration status. Schools may not collect or share immigration information and must develop guidelines for law enforcement visits, including requiring a judicial warrant for immigration-related entries.

One of the more common-sense laws will prohibit law enforcement agencies from requiring a waiting period before acting on a missing person report. Another common-sense law aims to protect victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking by allowing them to end leases early without penalty when staying at the property could expose them to dangerous circumstances.

Finally, good news for outdoor enthusiasts – free deer tags must be granted to landowners with at least 20 acres in counties where the Department of Natural Resources has identified chronic wasting disease, and the requirements for nuisance permits have been loosened.

In a related development, the Safe Gun Storage Act prohibits gun owners from storing weapons in an unsecured way in any location where they know it could be accessed by a minor, a person at risk of harming themselves or others or by a person prohibited from possessing a firearm. Gun owners must keep their weapons in a locked container that makes them inaccessible or unusable by anyone other than the owner. Violators are subject to a fine of as much as \$10,000. Lost or stolen guns must also be reported to the police within 48 hours. **SBJ**



Thomas C. Pavlik is an attorney with Delano Law Offices in Springfield.

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The Foundation Academy

Job training program for soft skills expands to Springfield

by Janet Seitz

While some jobs may be replaced by machinery or artificial intelligence, jobs that require people to collaborate and use soft skills are irreplaceable. Soft skills are those personal attributes and interpersonal skills that shape how people work together. Communication, teamwork, adaptability and emotional intelligence are examples and transfer across roles and industries. These skills set workers apart just as much as technical qualifications, and employers value these traits for the success of the employee, their team and the overall success of the organization.

This is where The Foundation Academy LLC is building footing. Founder and president Cynthia Jenkins said, "The incentive and inspiration for creating The Foundation Academy came from a clear gap in today's labor market. People are technically trained but often unprepared to work effectively with others, adapt to change or lead. This gap affects individuals, employers and communities."

The Foundation Academy is headquartered in Belleville and has recently expanded to serving the Springfield community. Jenkins said the youth and adult programs offered are "designed to strengthen both personal and professional communicative relationships resulting in happier relationships, job success, safer communities and a thriving workforce."

In 2025, a partnership with Kumler United Methodist Church was established to offer the R3 soft skills and workforce development, along with a career education and readiness job training program in Springfield. Revenue from adult-use and recreational cannabis sales is used to fund R3 (Restore. Reinvest. Renew.) grants which are for the purpose of empowering nonprofits, small businesses and faith-based organizations in communities that have been harmed by violence, excessive incarceration and economic disinvestment in order to build safer communities. Since this program is funded by grants, services are provided free of charge.

The Foundation Academy is offering two programs in Springfield: the R3 youth program and R3 adult program. Jenkins projects her team will serve more than 100 youth and adults this year.

According to the TFA website, the youth

a popular competency for success in any industry as well as its impact on attracting businesses and increasing labor force participation and how they lead to better jobs, higher salaries and home ownership.

Career education and job training readiness lessons will teach effective job search strategies including how to compose a resume, cover letter and conduct a mock interview. Program participants will create an account in the Illinois Department of Employment Security job portal, complete an online job application and computer literacy activities as well as learn appropriate telephone etiquette.

Jenkins recalled a program participant who was seeking a promotion in management.

"She possessed the technical skills but often avoided speaking up, became defensive when corrected and struggled with conflict. She took our 18-hour communication, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution program. In the program, she learned how to listen without interrupting, ask clarifying questions instead of reacting emotionally and learned how to express concerns calmly and professionally," Jenkins said. "Three months or so later, in our follow-up process, we learned that she was promoted and has better relationships with colleagues and family because she learned how to communicate her needs without anger or withdrawal."

Last year, at TFA's south central location, 30 out of 48 enrollees, or 63%, completed the two-month R3 soft skills job training program, which Jenkins said was memorable.

As for Springfield, Jenkins said distance has been a challenge for growing the presence here but "since we have begun putting our team together, we're excited about having a presence in the community and getting to know the residents as well as learning how we can effectively work alongside the businesses and organizations in the Springfield community."

She added that the work TFA is doing and the people's lives that are impacted – participants, partners and employers – is the greatest reward. 

Janet Seitz is a local communications professional, writer and artist. To share your story, contact her at janetseitz1@gmail.com.



Administrative assistant Jaliza Brown is pictured at the Dec. 5 open house for the Springfield location at Kumler United Methodist Church, 600 N. Fifth St.

PHOTO COURTESY THE FOUNDATION ACADEMY

program is for ages 12-18, and it aims to equip teens and young adults with the essential personal and professional skills needed to succeed in school, work and life. The program focuses on building communication, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving abilities through group projects, role-playing and real-world scenarios to assist students in gaining confidence in networking, interviewing and professional behavior. Participants are then better prepared to enter the workforce, pursue higher education and build positive relationships that support future success.

The adult program, for those 20 years of age and older, addresses the issues of poverty, unemployment, economic disinvestment and labor force participation. The program's objective is designed for adults to acquire the necessary skills to secure decent jobs and higher income resulting in poverty reduction, sustainable income and social development. Participants will also learn why soft skills are

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Owners Sierra and Eric Farrell opened Vondra Social House in November, offering brunch, lunch and a cocktail bar with small plates in the evening. *PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS*

Vondra Social House

By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr.

Vondra Social House, just south of Lincoln Home Historic Site on Edwards Street, inhabits a quaint and historic two-story brick structure. The building was brought back from the brink of ruin in 2007 and operated as a restaurant under various owners until closing at the end of 2024.

With a front porch that spans the whole front of the building, Vondra is an appealing sight to hungry visitors. Everything is freshly painted and clean. The walls are no longer dark colored, which gives the space a more pleasing feel. There's a tin ceiling, homey accents (each table has a different set of salt and pepper shakers), a separate bar area and table seating up front. Although we didn't check it out, we were told that additional seating is available on the second floor, which is set up to handle larger groups.

We arrived on a blustery January day with the wind howling. Vondra was full (with a

party waiting to be seated by the time we left), and we ended up at a table near the door, which meant each time visitors entered we were blasted with cold wind. A temporary vestibule would have been a nice touch, but given how temperate our winters have been lately, I can understand why one was not installed.

The menu is fun, with almost all dishes having a different spin or a surprising twist. You can tell that it was prepared by someone much younger than me as the font is pretty small – throw a bone to your elders and make the print a little larger, please. If you're so inclined, there's a very thorough drink list that occupies the entire back side of the menu. There's also a separate evening menu that features small dishes that are best shared and that are more suitable for the cocktail hour.

Other than the two salads (five grain and Caesar), most dishes are handheld. The

menu has some sweet dishes like "Smash and Press" (sourdough with powdered sugar, maple-glazed ham, maple bacon, cheese and caramelized onion aioli), the Hawt Hunny (buttermilk biscuit, chicken, jalapeño bacon, honey butter, fried egg and a hot honey drizzle), the French toast (served with house butterscotch and eggnog cream) and the beignets. On the savory side, there's the BLTT (sourdough, bacon, fried green tomato, lettuce and spicy vodka tomato chutney), the horseshoe (with a green chili cheese sauce) and the kielbasa sandwich. There were no starters or appetizers.

We decided to go with the chopped Italian sandwich and the blackberry jalapeño grilled cheese.

First, let's talk about Vondra's excellent potato chips that appeared to come with most all sandwiches – in our case, they were very generous portions. They had to be



Additional seating is available on the second floor, which can accommodate large groups. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

homemade and were fried to a golden-brown right to the edge, but not past the burning point. Like everything we tasted, they were well-seasoned and among the best in town.

The chopped Italian consisted of ham, salami, prosciutto, provolone, onion, banana peppers and sun-dried tomatoes all bound together with an Italian aioli. It was served on a toasted baguette. I really liked this dish, particularly the inclusion of the sun-dried tomatoes. No one ingredient prevailed, and it was a well-balanced offering with everything in harmony. I don't like mayo and believe that aioli is just a fancy name for mayo, but this didn't bother me in the slightest.

The portion was so large that I ended up eating it as an open-faced sandwich and even then, thanks to the heaping serving of chips, I couldn't finish the dish. Had I eaten it as a sandwich, it might have been a slightly messy dish. One suggestion in that regard: Hollow out the baguette so that it can better contain the filings.

My guest asked for her grilled cheese to come with regular bacon and that it be extra crispy. Vondra delivered in both regards. She appreciated that the blackberry and jalapeño jam was served on the side. I snagged a taste and it was not all that spicy. She considers herself a grilled cheese connoisseur and enjoyed how the creamy, buttery melt of the

Muenster paired with the tangy, sharp flavor of the white cheddar. In her words, the result was a sandwich that was both rich in texture (thanks, also, to the wonderfully grilled bread) and complex in taste. Again, she also was tickled with the potato chips.

Service was a team effort. I noticed that if our server was busy that another server would take care of us, including getting our dishes off of the line and to our table quickly. And, as silly as it sounds, my guests and I particularly appreciated that the paper napkins were

substantial – a nice touch when compared to most of Vondra's peers.

Vondra is a welcome addition to the downtown area dining scene and is worth a visit. We plan to be back. **SBJ**

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The blackberry jalapeño grilled cheese with house-made chips. PHOTO FROM FACEBOOK

Hiring for empathy

A competitive advantage for excellent customer service

By Kelly Gust

Empathy often gets a bad rap as a soft skill in business. But if your goal is to provide excellent customer service, empathy isn't just nice to have, it's a differentiator. Whether a customer is calling about a billing issue, returning a product in your store, asking for help planning an event or navigating your firm's complexities, their emotional state often shapes the entire interaction. An empathetic employee can diffuse frustration, build trust and turn a potentially negative experience into a meaningful connection.

For leaders across industries, hiring for empathy isn't optional, it's essential to service quality, brand reputation, customer loyalty and long-term success.

Yet empathy can be surprisingly difficult to identify in traditional hiring processes. Résumés don't reflect it. Standard interviews often overlook it. And fast-paced service environments can unintentionally filter out candidates who excel at emotional connection but are less comfortable in high-volume, transactional settings.

The good news? Empathy can be identified, reliably and consistently, when you intentionally design your hiring approach.

Why empathy matters in every industry

No matter the setting, your employees are the face of your brand. Their ability to listen, understand and respond with care can:

- Reduce escalations and complaints
- Boost customer satisfaction and loyalty
- Improve first-contact issue resolution
- Strengthen brand trust
- Reduce employee burnout by fostering healthier interactions

Whether a customer is shopping for a gift, asking about a menu item, disputing a charge or troubleshooting a service issue, empathy is the skill that helps them feel not just served, but truly valued.

What to look for to hire for empathy

1. Behavioral indicators that signal empathy

Empathy reveals itself through observable behaviors, such as:

- Active listening
- Emotional curiosity (asking meaningful follow-up questions)
- Patience



- Warmth in tone and language
- Ability to take another's perspective
- Composure during moments of stress

To surface these traits, shift from transactional interview questions to story-based, behavior-driven ones. Try asking: "Tell me about a time you helped someone who was upset or frustrated. What did you do?" or "How do you make sure someone feels heard during a difficult interaction?"

Look for candidates who naturally reflect on others' perspectives and use emotional language in their stories.

2. Use talent assessments to identify natural tendencies

Tools like The Predictive Index can bring clarity and objectivity to your hiring strategy. While PI doesn't measure empathy directly, it reveals behavioral patterns that influence empathetic communication.

For example:

- High collaboration: Warm, people-focused, team-oriented
- Low dominance: Supportive rather than controlling; helpful in diffusing tension
- Moderate to high patience: Able to stay calm during repetitive or emotionally charged interactions
- High formality: Thoughtful, careful communicators who choose their words intentionally
- Using PI alongside structured interviews reduces bias, increases consistency and surfaces candidates naturally wired for customer connection.

3. Use realistic scenarios and role playing

Scenario-based exercises are one of the strongest predictors of empathetic behavior. Consider situations such as:

- A guest frustrated about a long wait at a restaurant

- A retail customer returning an item without a receipt
- A client confused about a bill or service agreement
- A guest at a hotel experiencing a booking error
- During the simulation, watch for candidates who:
 - Reflect emotions: "I can see why that would be frustrating."
 - Slow down instead of rushing
 - Choose supportive, clear language
 - Maintain calmness even when the customer is upset
 - Balance empathy with practical guidance

These exercises reveal whether empathy comes naturally or only appears when prompted.

4. Hire for attitude, train for skill

You can train someone to use a script or follow a protocol. You cannot train someone to genuinely care. Hiring people with natural empathy:

- Lowers turnover
- Speeds up onboarding
- Improves service quality
- Creates healthier team cultures
- Skills can be developed. Empathy is a mindset.

Final thoughts and your next step

In any business, customers remember how your employees made them feel long after the transaction is over. Empathy is the human connector that transforms routine service into a memorable, loyalty-building experience.

If you're ready to raise the bar on customer service, start by integrating behavioral assessments like The Predictive Index, redesign your interviews to surface emotional intelligence and incorporate empathy-based scenarios into your hiring process.

Want help building an empathy-driven hiring model for your organization? Let's connect: I'd love to support you in crafting a customer experience that sets your business apart. 



Kelly Gust is the CEO of HR Full Circle, a Springfield-based consulting firm that provides talent management and human resources consulting to organizations of all sizes and stages.

New businesses

Sangamon County new business registrations, Dec. 16 – Jan. 15. 2026

Parkland Logistics, 1333 N. Wheeler Ave. 217-525-2935. David Stowers.

Professional Preference, 1815 South Grand Ave. E. 217-843-1667. Aeyshia Crockett.

BVA Home Improvement, 3000 Taylor Ave., Apt. 44. 217-899-6291. Evelyn Ivy.

Cornerstone Caregiving East LLC, 3171 Greenhead Drive. 217-670-6371. Mariah Warren.

ishop4fun, 1412 E. Reynolds St. 217-720-5214.

Helix Precision Works, 3204 Red Bud Lane. 217-414-7197. Joshua L. Smith.

Joey Smith Hauling & Recycling, 726 E. Black Ave. 217-522-5915.

Bulldog Builders, 10570 Waverly Road, Waverly. 217-650-9752. Staci Stewart.

Beler Financial Services, 216 N. Milton Ave. 217-361-6613. Lucresia Beler.

Ocean's Treasures, 2417 S. College St. 618-697-8156. Jamie P. Webb.

DocRisk AI, 3602 River Road, Riverton. 217-653-6307. Syed Rizvi.

Yudira's Deals and Creations Boutique, 53 Adloff Lane. 217-691-5485. Yudira Segura.

The Healed Woman Coaching and Counseling Services, 17 Redwood Lane. 618-506-0027. Tyra Jones.

Clear View Entertainment, 1830 Holly Drive. 217-862-4602. Cashmere Davis.

StudioLomprez, 2800 Ridge Ave., Lot 114. 217-986-0184. William R. Lomprez.

Daily Grace Bakery, 310 W. Walnut St., Chatham. 217-891-0741. Audrea Starnes.

KC Counseling Service, 3921 Pintail Drive. 217-299-1099. Kynda Canada.

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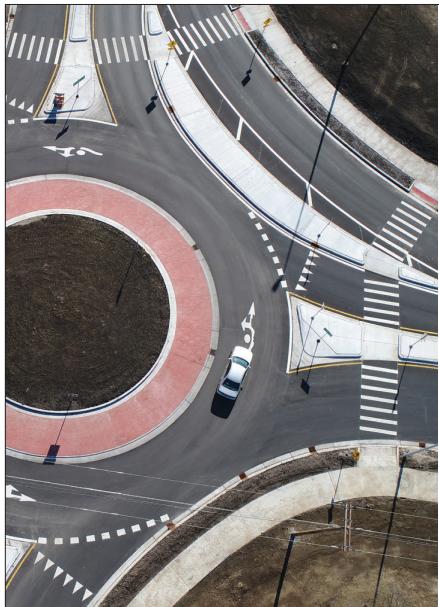
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