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Niche business success stories

THESE SMALL BUSINESSES ARE SURVIVING,
DESPITE COMPETITION FROM ONLINE SALES

PAGE 3

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Niche business success stories

These small businesses are surviving, despite competition from online sales

Article and photos by
DAVID BLANCHETTE

Eighty percent survive the first year. Seventy percent are left after two years, 50 percent after five years, and only 30 percent are still around after 10 years. Those 30 percent are the small businesses in the United States that have had

the right combination of capital, management, planning and cash flow to beat the odds and remain a long-term, contributing force in the American economy.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which tracks small business failure rates, has indicated that these small business survival percentages remain relatively constant year after year, regard-

less of what the overall economy is doing. So no matter what the year, you will have only about a one in three chance of long-term success if you open a small business in the United States.

What makes some small businesses successful while others in the same industry wither after only a few years? And has e-commerce dramatically changed the playing field and the

resulting expectation of small business success?

We visited six unique, long-standing Springfield small businesses to find out how they've beaten the odds and have remained economically viable for decades. The formula seems simple, yet so elusive for many: Offer outstanding customer service, be tenacious, and love what you do.



Pete Meeker

► It's a labor of love, that's the key to it," said Ace Bike Shop owner Pete Meeker. "We are all cycle guys who work here; we love to ride. You're not going to get rich working at or owning a bicycle shop. You just enjoy what you do."

Meeker's father founded the new and used bicycle sales and service business in 1957 and Pete, now 53 years old, started working there when he was 14. His entire life has been spent in and around the shop, so he knows what to expect each year.

"Owning a small business is tough, and with a seasonal business like ours, it's even tougher," Meeker said. "During the good months you have to put money away to get through the winter months. So the money you have is not real money. You've got to be frugal."

Meeker sees a lot of multi-generational repeat business and said customer service has always been a top priority.

"People trust us. We're not in it to get rich," Meeker said. "We are a local, family business and we take pride in taking care of our customers."

Internet bicycle sales are a concern for Ace Bike Shop, because with enough searching, people can probably find the

same bicycle offered at Ace at a lower price, Meeker said. In fact, he's spent hours with potential customers in the store, letting them examine and try out different bicycles, only to see them buy one online. The best defense, he said, is to sell customers on the local service they receive at Ace, including next-day repair service and to try and offer the widest possible variety in-store.

"We carry used bicycles for \$40 up to new \$3,000 ones, so when you walk in the door we want to try and have a bicycle here for you in your price range," Meeker said. "We accept trade-ins, so if you have an old bicycle you want to trade in we can give you some money for it, so that helps to keep your cost down."

Meeker isn't ready to retire and he has no successor in mind when he does decide to leave, although an employee who has worked for him for 20 years may be the first person he considers when that time comes. In the meantime, Meeker will continue to ride, sell and repair bicycles, and he has some advice for anyone who wants to start a small business.

"Be very careful with the internet. It's very tough to open a small business right now," Meeker said. "Make sure you know your market." ■



Douglas Mayol

COVER PHOTO

Douglas Mayol, the owner of The Cardologist Card and Sock Store

PHOTO/ BY DAVID BLANCHETTE

► "Tenacity is a good quality to have," said Douglas Mayol, who opened what is now known as the Cardologist Card and Sock Store in 1988. "Be willing to work for nothing. I say that jokingly, but you have to be willing to take the ups and downs, be willing to work for a heck of a lot less than a lot of people are willing to work for."

Mayol said he found a niche when he opened the Cardologist 31 years ago and was busy with customers from the moment he

unlocked the door. The crowds and profits ebb and flow these days, but there is one constant for him.

"I've always been driven by enjoying what I do more than how much money I make," Mayol said.

Mayol said he's had some local competitors through the years, but he's outlasted them and ended up buying some of them out. Online sales are another matter. You can buy just about any greeting card or pair of socks

on the internet, Mayol said, but his store offers an experience.

"To me, buying a greeting card, especially a humorous one, is like telling a joke. You've got the setup on the outside and the punch line on the inside," Mayol said. "By the time you click and enlarge each step of that, it's kind of like a joke that's delivered with bad timing; it's not as funny. I've got a better selection than a lot of online places anyway, in cards and socks."

Mayol is also a believer in the shop local, buy local mantra and supports local causes because he wants to, not as a marketing strategy.

"This is a business that pays local taxes and local rent, and when I am in the market, I employ local people," Mayol said. "These are all things an online business does not do. We are part of the community, and I think that is important."

Operating a small business is also an emotional investment.

"When customers walk into my store or anybody else's store, it is a very personal interaction," Mayol said. "They aren't looking at some chain operation's property, they are looking at my personal property. It's like walking into my home, in many ways." ■

Dick's Shoe Repair

314 W. Laurel



Mark Yeates

▶ “Hard work, doing a good job and not charging customers an arm and a leg,” said Dick’s Shoe Repair owner Mark Yeates about the keys to running a small business.

“With any small business, you have to put a lot of time in. You are running it yourself,” Yeates said. “I am backed up two weeks with work all of the time; I am busy all of the time.”

Yeates’ parents, Richard and Loretta Yeates, operated a shoe repair shop in downtown Springfield and moved into the current location in 1974 when they bought out Vern’s Shoe Repair. Mark ran the business for his parents starting in 1983 and bought it from them in 1992.

“Naturally, as a kid I was around all of this stuff and wanted to get as far away from it as I could,” Yeates said. “Then lo and behold, one day it’s mine.”

“Shoe repair is a dying industry, but there will always be a call for it,” Yeates said. “Unfortunately, the older guys that know this business are dying off and we have no young blood coming in whatsoever.”

That means more customers for fewer shoe repair shops.

“Word-of-mouth is generally all the advertising we ever do,” Yeates said. “I hardly ever do any advertising nowadays. In all honesty, I stay too busy already.”

Yeates does not participate in e-commerce, although he said that major shoe companies like Birkenstock accept online repair requests. However, the retailer always has the shoes sent to a local shoe repair business authorized by the company.

“I don’t really do any online business myself, primarily because that takes another person to handle that whole online, website kind of stuff,” Yeates said. “In this area I don’t know how well it would do, you’d have to invest a lot of time and money into it.” ■

Micropower Computer Systems

923 S. Fifth St.



Robert Fox

▶ “We think of our customers’ needs before we think of our needs, sometimes almost to a fault, even if it means losing money occasionally,” said Robert Fox, who with his wife owns Micropower Computer Systems. The computer sales and service portion of the business will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year, and the photography part of the operation will turn 50 this year.

“God’s good grace and taking care of your customers are the secrets to our success,” Fox said. “Our customer base for all of these years, it’s almost like these people are family. They know us and they trust us, and they come back.”

Fox said Micropower was the first computer store in Springfield. The business has been an Apple dealer since the first Apple model came out, and it’s sold and serviced PCs since day one as well. Micropower has also done programming, and an accounting package developed in the 1980s is still in use.

Fox said that Micropower was the central Illinois computer dealer for grades K-12 and higher education for many years until Apple terminated those dealer-based agreements to switch to direct school sales. That has placed his store in the odd position of competing for some business against the company that produces the computer equipment that Micropower sells, Fox added.

Micropower is a dealer for area state and local government, which means the business is used to the uncertainties of government budgets. There are also many businesses that offer the same merchandise online. But Micropower weathers these challenges by using the same formula that has meant success for four decades.

“We don’t think of it as competing, we think about how we want to run our business with our resources the best way we can for our customers,” Fox said. “We aren’t worried about what online is doing. And we keep good employees. My general manager has been here more than 25 years and the photography business manager about the same. They are almost like family.” ■



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Recycled Records

625 E. Adams



Mark Kessler

“The guys here know I will threaten them if they don’t treat our customers right. I don’t need to threaten them, but I do,” said Recycled Records co-owner Mark Kessler. “They know

that you can’t mistreat customers. If all of the customers leave, they don’t get a paycheck.” Mark Kessler and his brother, Gary, own the 39-year-old vintage music and eclectic

retail store that is located in the same building where their family started Springfield Furniture Company in 1910. All kidding about threats aside, Kessler is proud of the customer service

his longtime employees offer. “If you have a problem with any random box store, you’re going to call an 800 number and it’s going to take you three days before you can talk to anybody who has the authority to do anything about it,” Kessler said. “I tell our customers, ‘If you have a problem, call me.’ Either I will answer the phone or one of my employees will, and you can talk to us and we’ll work this out.” Recycled Records’ longevity is also due to the fact that visiting the downtown store is an experience that draws many customers from throughout the Midwest. It’s an experience that online shopping cannot offer.

“If you come down to buy a Rolling Stones album you might walk out with a neon beer sign. You can buy anything from a diamond ring to used furniture to stereo equipment,” Kessler said. “If it’s a used record, you can sit and play it on our listening station and hear what it sounds like before you take it home. I’m sure there’s some junk in the store somewhere, but as a general rule, our stuff is pretty high-quality and we guarantee everything you buy.”

Recycled Records entered the digital age with a Facebook page and it sells some items on eBay, but it remains at heart a customer-focused, experience-based store.

“If you get a reputation and you treat people correctly, they’ll come back to see you,” Kessler said. “If somebody needs a quarter for their meter, I hand them a quarter. I’m going to get that quarter back when they buy one thing in here.”



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Springfield Clock Shop

629 E. Washington



John McCormick

► "I wanted this location because of the walk-by traffic between the hotels and the Presidential Museum," said John McCormick, owner of the downtown Springfield Clock Shop. "I get a lot of walk-in business that way."

McCormick has blended the storefront clock repair, retail and consignment shop with online sales of new clocks to keep his 25-year-old business going.

"You have to have a storefront for the clock repairs, and for Rhythm, Howard Miller, Seiko and other clock manufacturers, you have to have a brick-and-mortar location to be a dealer," McCormick said. "There are always repairs. I have five employees who repair clocks, and right now I have a two-month backlog on clock repairs."

But he wasn't always that busy. McCormick said the first few years in business were difficult.

"It's really hard, you just have to stay in business a long time and get word-of-mouth advertising going," McCormick said. "You have to get a loan to buy products to sell."

But once the word of a quality business gets out, McCormick said the customers keep coming back.

"We have quite a few loyal customers, especially those with key-wind clocks, who keep getting them repaired every eight to 10 years," McCormick said. "They keep coming back, and they buy a new clock sometimes."

Certain new clocks sell well online, and McCormick said those e-commerce sales are a big part of his business. But the repair service is what keeps people coming into his physical store.

"People usually don't buy new ones; they just keep their old ones, keep getting them oiled and cleaned," McCormick said. "They'll last a 100 years, and you just keep passing them down. A person is only going to buy one grandfather clock in their lifetime and then pass it down to somebody else." ■



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Downtown builds momentum

BY KAREN ACKERMAN WITTER

If you care about the future of downtown Springfield and want to help make a difference, come to the “Momentum on Main Street” event on Thursday, March 21. This is an initiative of the Downtown Springfield, Inc. (DSI) economic vitality committee, which is looking for the next generation of entrepreneurs, rehabbers, investors and anyone else who wants to be a part of building the future of downtown.

DSI is a nationally accredited Main Street program, and economic vitality is one of the four pillars of the Main Street revitalization program. The economic vitality committee is comprised of volunteers, including property owners, real estate professionals, business owners and downtown advocates.

Lisa Clemmons Stott, DSI executive director says, “Momentum on Main Street is a kick-off event to attract and encourage people who may not have considered themselves potential investors, property owners or entrepreneurs, but given the right tools and the support of the downtown community, could actually realize some dreams for themselves and collective growth of the downtown.”

Enjoy complimentary hors d’oeuvres and a cash bar starting at 5:30 p.m. At 6 p.m. there will be a panel presentation by people who are already committed to downtown and are making a difference. They will provide insights on how you can get involved as well, and there will be plenty of networking opportunities.

David Lee, chair of the economic vitality committee, says, “The purpose of the event is to build more awareness of what’s going on in downtown Springfield and activate people to build on the momentum of what’s happening.”

Panelists will include individuals

with long-standing involvement in downtown, successful new business owners and people who took a hobby and turned it into a business, such as Buzz Bomb Brewing Co., Custom Cup, Springfield Vintage and Willow and Birch Salon.

Lee is a 2008 graduate of Springfield High School who moved back to his hometown of Springfield several years ago and works in the medical device field. As a young professional, he is committed to making Springfield a better place for other young people. He believes that retaining and attracting new talent is essential for a vital downtown. This commitment led him to get involved with DSI.

The March 21 event is just the beginning for “Momentum on Main Street.” Lee says he hopes the event will inspire people who have an ambition but don’t know how to pursue it or think it can’t be done. There will be follow-up workshops to assist individuals who are motivated to develop a business plan or pool resources to make an investment. For more information about the event or to get involved with the economic vitality committee of DSI, contact David Lee at davidglee15@gmail.com.

Partners in the March 21 event include Arlington’s, WMAY, Innovate Springfield, the City of Springfield’s Office of Planning and Economic Development and Lincoln Land Economic Development Corporation. ♦

Karen Ackerman Witter is a freelance writer whose goal is to connect people, organizations and ideas to achieve greater results. Having grown up in Springfield, she has seen many changes in downtown over the years and is excited to see what’s happening to revitalize downtown as the heart of the community.



The Downtown Springfield Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit that assists in promoting and preserving historic properties, recently issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the building at 312 E. Adams. The three-story building has been on and off the market for the last several years at various price points but was most recently listed for sale at \$95,000. However, the owners decided to donate the property to the Heritage Foundation, and the organization sought proposals from potential redevelopers. The minimum bid was \$30,000, but a much more important consideration was the planned use for the building and the buyer’s ability to finish the renovations and have it occupied as soon as possible. In addition to providing a feasible plan for financing and construction, potential buyers received bonus points for projects that include residential units for the upper stories as well as included letters of intent or signed leases from potential tenants.

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Someone is always watching

BY RACHEL JOHNSON

It's hard to step out of your house these days without a camera pointing at you from somewhere. We've all seen the crime dramas and spy movies where the protagonist is able to search through thousands of databases and pinpoint a person in a crowd, run the image through facial recognition software and catch the bad guy before the end of the movie. Real life isn't quite that fast or accurate, but from our social media sites to convenience store videos, cameras have become a ubiquitous part of our society. In addition to providing surveillance and security, cameras are now being used to provide retailers with information on shoppers' habits.

Walgreens will be testing smart coolers in the Chicago market featuring digital screens that marketers use to target ads for specific demographics as well as cameras using biometric facial recognition technology. Walgreens says the cameras only pick up on age and gender, and the coolers merely note the selections made. The shopper cannot see through the cooler doors to the actual products. The screens show a digitized representation of available products.

Interestingly, Chicago-based Walgreens is debuting the coolers in Illinois, one of just three states with laws restricting facial recognition technology. Along with Texas and Washington, Illinois requires a company collecting facial data to get written permission first. This stems from a 2008 Illinois law called the Biometric Information Privacy Act, which was enacted to protect an individual's biometric identifiers, including facial geometry, from unauthorized collection, use and sale.

This law was challenged in 2014 when the



PHOTO/ PEXELS

family of a teenager whose fingerprint data was collected when he bought a season pass to Six Flags Great America filed a lawsuit. Great America now states on its website that a person may choose to decline the biometric version of the season pass and instead choose the traditional photo identification. Apparently, this satisfies the law's requirements to obtain a written re-

lease, inform the person why their data is being collected and let them know for how long the data will be stored. The company collecting the data is also required to keep it safe.

Fears are not that hackers will discover that middle-aged women like ice cream on the weekends when the temperature is above 85 degrees but that identifying information could

be used for more nefarious purposes.

The cooler screens don't use exact facial recognition; rather, the cameras analyze faces to determine age and gender so companies can determine whether they're targeting the right demographics with their advertising. Also, the technology has iris tracking capabilities so that companies know if you looked at their items.

"Anytime somebody sees a new way to identify their demographics, they're going to grab at that," said Lorilea Buerkett, an attorney with Springfield law firm Brown Hay & Stephens.

This is a legal gray area, and Buerkett questioned Walgreen's ability to test the technology. "I don't know how Walgreens will be able to pull this off. You can't get permission from someone for a camera like that," she said. However, she noted that consumers have become increasingly accepting of technology. "If the public gets very used to facial scans for demographics and what not, then they'll get more used to biometric scans," Buerkett said.

For some time now, laws have lagged behind technology. Technology is changing faster than the ability of humans and laws to adapt, and experts predict that this won't be changing soon. The market is keeping pace with technology, but not laws.

During the last Illinois General Assembly, an amendment to the law was proposed which would allow private entities to use biometric information, but not sell it. While no action was taken before the end of January, it could be reintroduced in the new General Assembly.

Either way, both the lawmakers and consumers will have to figure out how to deal with less privacy going forward since technology will continue to progress. ♦



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Rebuilding older neighborhoods

Springfield has many opportunities for small-scale development

BY CATHERINE O’CONNOR

Governing magazine recently published the results of an in-depth investigation into segregation in Illinois communities, including Springfield. A recent cover story in *Illinois Times* included excerpts from the lengthy report (“Segregated in the Heartland, Feb. 7), which also focused on income disparity between black and white Springfield households.

Pouring through U.S. Census data, state and federal school enrollment data, government documents, interviews with elected officials and academic reports, the magazine found that “...no Illinois city displayed its segregation more plainly than Springfield, marking the city’s dividing line at the railroad tracks along 10th Street.”

Finding that median black household income was a mere 42 percent of that of whites in Illinois’ capital city, the report pointed out that “west of the tracks, the neighborhoods got progressively whiter and wealthier.”

Polly Poskin, the vice-chair of Inner City Older Neighborhoods (ICON), is one crusader who is bothered by the economic indicators showing black residents here are far more likely to be surrounded by poverty than whites, at rates higher than all of the downstate Illinois cities studied by *Governing*.


Understanding that nowhere does the ‘power of place’ exert itself as visibly as in the neighborhoods that many of Springfield-area minority residents call home, she would like to see the city, developers and “profiteers” work together to find solutions.

Poskin asserts the need to ask how zoning, land-use patterns and limited location opportunities for moderate-income, residential rental units have created a landscape that seems to keep black families segregated from whites. Mayor Jim Langfelder, who was interviewed by *Governing* said, “It’s driven by private development and what’s available in the city.”

Poskin suggests that a natural place to start would be by asking large, successful developers whose projects have led the westward expansion, how smaller scale developers can start to make a difference.

JOHN KLEMM

John Klemm is a longtime west-side developer and Realtor who has seen decades of change in the capital city. He has been involved in large-scale residential developments west of

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	2018	2017
New Single Family Residence:		
Permit	74	57
Valuation	22,569,800	16,502,500
Revenue	22,898.76	16,476.28
Dwelling Units	74	57
New Two Family Residence		
Permit	19	23
Valuation	7,362,000	8,647,000
Revenue	8,390.52	9,868.92
Dwelling Units	38	46
New Multi-Family Residence:		
Permit	5	4
Valuation	17,380,063	2,400,000
Revenue	58,479.25	9,700.80
Dwelling Units	183	48
New Commercial:		
Permit	17	36
Valuation	40,467,711	32,077,391
Revenue	138,592.73	110,050.05
TOTAL (New, Remodel, Addition & Miscellaneous:		
Permit	2,162	2,650
Valuation	193,440,101.64	155,154,797
Revenue	613,218.31	478,961.29
Dwelling Units	292	151
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Veterans Parkway such as Cider Mill, Panther Creek and Savannah Pointe. According to Klemm, the city could benefit from master planning that would include updating infrastructure, like water and sewer lines in older neighborhoods, as well as streamlining administrative requirements that often make development agreements difficult to maneuver.

Jessica Weitzel, who is a lending officer at LISC, a nonprofit corporation based out of Peoria, has noted that in some cities, developers of open space that is annexed for new developments like Klemm's are asked to contribute impact fees. This money goes to a special fund that can then be tapped to assist small scale developers who want to tackle projects in inner-city neighborhoods.

According to Klemm, a set aside like that could be supported if the city managed the funds properly and ensured that all developers were treated fairly.

Klemm is very interested in creating a coalition with the Illinois Realtors and the Home Builders Association of Illinois to look at a variety of issues faced by developers in all areas of the city. However, older neighborhoods face the unique challenges of small lot sizes and difficulty of getting property appraisals that accurately reflect increased value, even when pockets of new construction are surrounded by as-yet unimproved older residences. "All development means taking a risk, and we need to enable everyone" Klemm said.

DEAN GRAVEN

Another seasoned developer in the Springfield area, Dean Graven is interested in fostering ideas that could help small scale developers tackle the issues of east side redevelopment. Residential construction in the city of Springfield peaked a decade ago, with 650 new housing starts, which fell to only 74 in 2018, due to economic and demographic changes. "You can see the impact on the city in areas

like CWLP, when residents from outside communities use the infrastructure but leave each night to go home to sleep," Graven said.

He would like to see the city work to get communities engaged and look at incentives for redevelopment. Often, there are local issues with oversight of processes such building permits and inspections that should go along with TIF projects.

In addition, Graven has explored ways that the Federal Home Loan Bank and Illinois Housing Development Authority could work together to provide money for upgrades to single-family homes and fixed-rate loans that would make redevelopment of older neighborhoods more feasible. "It's going to take local officials to talk to state and federal officials in D.C. to help us come up with creative ideas," he said.

CHRIS NICKELL

At the other end of the spectrum, Chris Nickell, a downtown developer, has cultivated some expertise and insights about successful redevelopment of buildings. Nickell started small, with the purchase and rehab of a building to create housing for his own family, plus another unit to generate rental income.

While he has the accumulated experience of completing 40-50 residential units and another seven commercial spaces, Nickell's primary enterprise is working for the Springfield office of American Wind Energy Management, a company that serves as a developer for wind-turbine farms throughout the country.

Some of Nickell's downtown projects have been funded in part with Tax Increment Financing (TIF) from the city itself but also through the use of the federal Historic Tax Credit (HTC), which can be used to defray the cost of rehabbing properties within designated historic districts. While this is a tool that has worked beautifully in major cities (think turn-of-the-century high rise architectural beauties on Michigan Avenue in Chicago), it's more difficult

to use on small-scale adaptive reuse projects that might bring underutilized buildings throughout Springfield back to life.

According to Nickell, the HTC requires that the building owner spend at least the purchase price of the building on the renovation itself. In Springfield, where large older buildings can often be bought very inexpensively, it's fairly easy to spend many times the purchase cost because the often-vacant buildings are in need of so much renovation.

As an example, Nickell mentioned the Downtown Springfield Heritage Foundation, which is currently offering a downtown storefront of 4500 square feet for the bargain price of \$30,000 to a developer who will renovate and put it back into use. According to Nickell, who has several years of experience in this very type of renovation under his belt, the clincher is trying to make the numbers work. He offered a simple calculation: If a developer were able to renovate the space, which is currently an empty shell, for \$75 a square foot, the cost would be \$337,500, which would yield \$100,000 in tax credits.

"But who can use that?" he asks. It would take a large income to use that much credit towards a tax liability. Using this financing incentive would mean bringing on a tax equity partner, which becomes a more complex undertaking than most small-scale developers, or even a developer with a few years' experience like Nickell, can handle.

While TIF funding is available to developers for the purchase and rehab of buildings located in TIF districts throughout the city, the assistance comes with an important requirement. Nickell has been successful in receiving TIF money, to use in combination with the HTC, but found that all labor for the project must then be paid at prevailing wage, which could likely increase building costs of \$75 a square foot to \$100 or beyond. "This prevailing wage requirement can result in a per-unit rental price

above where the market rate is in Springfield currently," he said.

Other ideas that Nickell offered to help spur inner-city development include annual caps on local property tax increases in areas where redevelopment would bring buildings back to life and significantly increase their equalized assessed value, a revival of a now-defunct city program that offered \$10,000 facade grants for downtown buildings, a case-by-case relaxation on requirements for such things as a window in every bedroom, (for example, when sprinklers are present), because downtown mid-block buildings often don't have side-walls with windows and the development of a user-friendly financing model that would allow lenders to more easily work with start-up developers in the pre-application stage to calculate the viability of projects in older neighborhoods.

Although Nickell comes to the table with resources, knowledge and advantages that others may not have, one of his greatest strengths is good communication and a positive outlook for the future of Springfield. "I 'drank the downtown Kool-Aid' long ago and continue to preach to DSI and anyone else who will listen. There is some low-hanging fruit in smaller buildings that wouldn't be a huge lift for redevelopment," he said.

Nickell believes the overall market for downtown residential development is stable. He has a shortage of vacancies in his handful of adaptive reuse multi-unit apartment buildings and has met many younger professionals, medical students, legislators and lobbyists that don't want a house and yard. "I'm optimistic for the rest of the city, despite the obvious downward trend in west-side development," he said.

"As a developer, I want to see more goods and services available downtown. We all need to prosper, to make it a neighborhood." ♦

Professional Women's Calendar of Events

You play a key role and we thank you for your contributions to our community.

Association for Women in Communications (AWC)

All AWC professional development programs are held the second Wednesday of the month from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Sangamo Club, unless otherwise noted. Non-members and guests are always welcome. On Thursday, March 14, AWC will host a self-defense workshop with Thomas Altevogt, CKM certified instructor, from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at a location to be determined. For more information or to make reservations, visit www.awcspringfield.org.

Illinois Women in Leadership (IWIL)



IWIL will hold a celebrity bartender event on Wednesday, March 6 from 5:30-7:30 p.m. at Cousin Eddie's in Springfield. All funds raised will support IWIL's four annual college scholarships for young women. Visit www.iwil.biz for more information or to register.


Illinois Women in Leadership is now accepting nominations for this year's ATHENA leadership award. Submissions will be accepted online at iwil.biz through March 1. This is the sixth year that IWIL has presented the ATHENA award, which honors an exemplary leader who has achieved excellence in her business or profession, served the community in a meaningful way and, most importantly, actively assisted women to achieve their full leadership potential.

Women Entrepreneurs of Central Illinois (WE-CI)


Join us for an evening to celebrate women business owners and their contributions to the community. The 2019 WE-CI Women's Showcase will be held on Wednesday, March 13 from 4-7 p.m. at Erin's Pavilion. All advance ticket holders will be entered into a special drawing. For more information on the Showcase or upcoming monthly programs, visit weci.wildapricot.org/events.

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Multiple mergers for Capital Area Realtors

BY ERIC WOODS

Capital Area Realtors (CAR) was founded in 1921, and along with its West Central chapter in Galesburg, it represents approximately 950 members involved in all aspects of the real estate industry. On Nov. 13, 2018, longtime employee Kathy Nicholson was named the association's new chief executive officer.

Nicholson has more than 35 years of association experience, beginning at the Illinois Intrastate Motor Carrier Rate and Tariff Bureau. Her career at CAR began in 1995 when she took the role of administrative assistant to the CEO. She was later named the director of member services and had been serving as acting CEO since last September, after the departure of Dan Sale.

A major goal for Nicholson over the next several months involves mergers. CAR already merged with the Galesburg Association of Realtors back in April 2015. A couple months later, the association then merged with the Jacksonville Area Association of Realtors.

"Associations were having trouble meeting the requirements to provide the services that their members needed," said Nicholson. "We must provide a core set of standards. Realtors are held to high standards and are required to perform at an expected level." These two mergers have worked out well, according to Nicholson. Galesburg has its own office, in addition to the Springfield headquarters.

Association mergers have been popular as of late, with smaller associations finding it more and more difficult to survive in the current climate. "The National Association of Realtors set new membership service criteria, and it has been difficult for smaller associations to compete with the larger ones because of this," said

Nicholson. "They want to keep a seat at the table, and the mergers will allow us to continue being a decision maker."

Recently, CAR has been merging not only with other area associations but also with several multiple listing services (MLS) in the area to form a regional multiple listing service. CAR has become a leader and founding partner of RMLS Alliance, LLC, which is a new regional MLS. CAR has taken a lead role in the creation of this new entity along with the Peoria Area Association of Realtors, the Egyptian Board of Realtors and the Quad City Area Realtors Association.

"We are one of four founding partners of the RMLS, encompassing 62 counties and 3,000 subscribers in Illinois and Iowa," said Nicholson. "We are currently focused on completing the merger with the four founding partners with the final merger in August. After that is complete, we will be open to more discussions."

Although she has been serving in her new position since late last year, Nicholson is looking forward to the months ahead when she can become more entrenched in her new role.

"I am still adjusting to the new position. I have been training my replacement and performing a lot of administrative work," she said. "I am looking forward to being fully engaged in the new position, and being involved in working with local government and the community as a whole."

While Nicholson has a number of goals and priorities for CAR moving forward, her number one objective is helping the members. "We will continue to provide members with a high level of service. We will continue to be the voice of real estate in central Illinois," she said. ♦



Kathy Nicholson

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Rent control won't fix Illinois' affordable housing challenges

BY ED NEAVES

Lawmakers in Springfield are facing a debate this year over whether they should allow governments to cap the amount which can be charged to renters. The measure is seen by some as a way to create more affordable housing, particularly in larger urban areas.

Rent control is not a new concept. It's been tried in other communities such as San Francisco and New York City. The result is always the same: rent control doesn't work.

This isn't just a big city problem. Residents throughout the state could be crushed by rising tax bills if lawmakers sign off on a policy that undercuts private property rights.

Here are six myths about why rent control won't help fix affordable housing challenges in Illinois.

Rent control will make affordable housing more attainable.

FACT: Locking in the amount property owners can charge renters will actually lead to fewer available housing options.

In other cities, rent control policies resulted in apartments being converted into condos. That's because government-set rental rates can't keep pace with the cost of maintenance, upgrades, utilities and taxes for rental properties.

An independent study of the impact rent control would have in Chicago shows that there could actually be a 10 percent decrease over a decade in the number of affordable rental units.

Your taxes will not be adversely affected by rent control policies.

FACT: Under rent control, property values are depressed since property owners can't get a fair return on their investments. Property valuations and rental income are factors in determining tax assessments. If both decrease, that means governments take in less in taxes.

The result: Policymakers will have to raise property taxes to provide basic services. Rent control will come with a massive and costly bureaucracy to handle rental unit inspections and set prices, further adding to tax burdens.

Illinois is dependent on property taxes to fund services. Residents in communities with rent control would end up paying more to make up budget differences.

Investors will continue to build new and affordable rental units in areas with rent control.

FACT: Chicago is one of the costliest cities in the U.S. to develop rental property because of overly restrictive building codes and zoning regulations. Faced with these costs, property investors will avoid areas with rent control. After all, if investors can't afford to make basic upgrades due to restrictive price controls, why would they make additional long-term investments?

Rents are out of control in Illinois and rent control would fix the problem.

FACT: Overall, rents have decreased the past few years in many parts of Illinois. A handful of Chicago neighborhoods are seeing increases, but there are still available supplies of affordable rental housing.

If the market is already addressing the problem, adding layers of government overreach would just make the issue worse for hard-working state residents.

Rent control will immediately fix housing affordability.

FACT: Rent control would have serious and adverse long-term effects for renters.

Policymakers can have a more immediate impact on the issue by altering restrictive building codes which do nothing to ensure life and safety, or by creating areas where development is encouraged through sound fiscal policy.

Absent these policies, investors will shy away from any effort to build new affordable housing in Illinois because they can't make a fair return on their investment.

Rent control will keep property owners from making excessive profits.

FACT: Market demand sets rental rates now. If a property owner charges too much in rent, tenants will look elsewhere. The law of supply and demand actually keeps housing more affordable.

The bottom line for Illinois residents is that under rent control, everyone pays more.

While it sounds good on the surface, rent control would heap more economic hardship on the very people who need quality affordable housing options, and it would wreck budgets for governments which are already financially struggling. ♦



Ed Neaves

PHOTO COURTESY ILLINOIS REALTORS

Ed Neaves is the president-elect of Illinois Realtors and managing broker for Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Snyder Real Estate in Bloomington.

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Young buyers drive home sales

Outlook is positive for local residential market

BY HOLLY WHISLER

Selling or buying a house can be likened to riding a rollercoaster. Anyone who has been through the process understands the uncertainty of what is often a nerve-wracking process that is affected by market fluctuations and other factors beyond the individual's control. However, both local Realtors and the associations that represent them report positive news on the horizon for the coming year.

At the close of 2018, "December home sales declined statewide and the Illinois median price posted a modest increase," according to a statement from Illinois Realtors. Nationally, the market for 2019 was projected to "be softening as home sales seemed to slow in the second half of 2018 amid rising mortgage interest rates, higher home prices, and the sustained issue of low inventory." However, the chief economist for the National Association of Realtors, Lawrence Yun, said he expects the coming year to be a stable one.

Close to home, there's also good news for the Springfield residential market, according to Gina Wolter, broker with The Real Estate Group, who agrees with Yun, "We can already tell it's going to be a great year. The Capital Area Realtors recorded sales in January 2019 of approximately \$1,000 less than the same month in 2018. Therefore, given that interest rates have seen very little change, we are expecting a solid, stable market for the coming year. With spring around the corner, buyers are looking forward to new listings hitting the market."

Nicholas Campo, owner of Campo Realty and president of CAR, said, "We are starting

to see a stabilization of the absorption rate, which means that we have close to a six-month inventory of homes for sale. We have not seen this number in years, and it shows that we are coming out of a seller's market and possibly moving towards a buyer's market."

If residential inventory continues on a positive trend and the market shifts to favor buyers, 2019 could be a good year for all involved. In January of this year, the Federal Housing Administration made grant funds of up to \$6000 for down payment assistance available for home buyers who meet certain criteria.

Some real estate agents say this money is just in time to assist younger home buyers. *U.S. News* reports that, "Home ownership may have a new face in 2019 as younger buyers enter the market, while older homeowners make their exit."

Jami Winchester, broker and partner with The Real Estate Group, said, "With the recent grant money that became available earlier this year, the younger buyers are out in full force and looking to purchase their first home. However, the struggle that these young buyers face is the lack of housing inventory that is move-in ready. These buyers prefer something that's not going to cost them a fortune to update. The homes that are in great shape will outshine those that need attention and are much more likely to sell in fewer days on the market." Winchester continued, "Once these young buyers find their home, it becomes a domino effect where the seller is now the buyer and they are typically 'buying up.'"

The grant money could become fuel for the local market. Wolter commented, "A lot

of buyers are applying and taking advantage of the grant money made available in January. This is great news for the local market. This activity creates additional sales and the momentum continues to generate more buyers and sellers. The grant can also be paired with various loan products, so buyers need to find out if they qualify to participate in the program."

Campo summarized, "As always, the number-one type of home sold in the Springfield area is a single-family residence, usually three to four bedrooms. The average sale price is approximately \$140,000. The homes priced at \$300,000 and above do have above-average days on the market."

With optimism on both a national and local level, along with grant money and a six-month inventory of homes, it sounds like Springfield's residential home sales in 2019 could be a smoother ride than anticipated. ♦



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Sources: The real estate agencies; Illinois Realtors website (illinoisrealtor.org), MLS Firm Market Share Report. + - does not include commercial division. Ranked by sales volume Jan. 1 - Dec. 31 2018.

	NAME / ADDRESS	PHONE / FAX (=)	WEBSITE / EMAIL	MANAGING PARTNER(S) / OWNER(S)	NUMBER OF LICENSED AGENTS	TOTAL TRANSACTIONS	SALES VOLUME	% OF BOARD	
1	The Real Estate Group, Inc. 3701 W. Wabash Ave. Springfield, IL 62711	217-787-7000 217-787=7779	thegroup.com info@thegroup.com	Michael J. Buscher Managing Broker 32 individual broker/owners	152	2,820	\$445,347,775	21.80%	1997
2	Re/Max Professionals 2475 W. Monroe St. Springfield, IL 62704	217-787-7215 217-787=8957	viewspringfieldhomes.com mike@remax.net	Michael D. Oldenettel Managing Broker Al & Linda Young, Owners	85	1,823	\$281,007,301	14.80%	1986
3	Keller Williams Capital 3435 Liberty Dr. Springfield, IL 62704	217-303-8445	kw.com info@kw.com	John Kerstein Managing Broker	44	439	\$57,522,622	2.41%	2016
4	Coldwell Banker Springfield 4205 W. Wabash Springfield, IL 62711	217-547-6655 217-679=8496	coldwellhomes.com	Diane Davenport Tinsley Managing Broker	43	364	\$54,420,260	2.30%	2000
5	Re/Max Results Plus 1046 W. Morton Ave. Jacksonville, IL 62650	217-245-9613 217-243=7183	jacksonvilleillinois-homes.com	Scott Eoff, Managing Broker Judy Eoff, Owner	7	274	\$36,479,515	1.85%	1996
6	Craggs REALTORS, Inc. 650 N. Webster, P.O. Box 109 Taylorville, IL 62568	217-824-8131 217-824=9315	craggsrealtors.com skcraggs@aol.com	Stephen B. Craggs	8	181	\$18,350,300	1.00%	2011
7	Campo Realty, Inc. 610 Sixth St. Pawnee, IL 62558	217-625-4663 217-625=4664	camporealty.com nick@camporealty.com	Nicholas Campo Managing Broker	8	152	\$18,037,499	0.80%	2001
8	Kennedy Real Estate LLC 400 W. Market, P.O. Box 764 Taylorville, IL 62568	217-824-8888 217-824=5080	kennedyrealestatellc.com info@kennedyrealestatellc.com	Helen Kennedy Managing Broker	13	149	\$17,146,800	1.01%	2011

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9	Century 21 Real Estate Associates 2030 Timberbrook Springfield, IL 62702	217-789-7200 217-789=2600	realestateassociates.c21.com kgraham367@aol.com	Kevin Graham	21	114	\$15,570,574	0.68%	2004
10	Do Realty 600 South 6th St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-391-3636 217-391=3666	BPO@dorealty.net	Stephanie L. Do President/Broker	2	193	\$10,645,003	0.78%	2002
11	Blane Real Estate, Inc. 121 E. Douglas Petersburg, IL 62675	217-652-7521 217-652=3262	blaneinpetersburgil.com blaneinpetersburgil@yahoo.com	Judy Blane-Olesen Peter Olesen	3	62	\$8,952,500	0.43%	1950
12	Steve Hills, REALTORS 900 S. Main St. Jacksonville, IL 62650	217-245-9589 217-245=4198	steviehillsrealtors.com hills@jinc.net	Dianne Steinberg	3	63	\$7,759,913	0.41%	1965
13	Curvey Real Estate, Inc. 611 Springfield Road P. O. Box 677 Taylorville, IL 62568	217-824-4996 217-287=2111	curveyrealestate.com curvey@ctitech.com	Bernard A. Curvey Owner/Broker Joe Curvey, Managing Broker	7	55	\$5,882,202	0.32%	1985
14	Advantage Realty 933 South Grand Ave. West Springfield, IL 62704	217-528-1000 217-528=1026	528-1000.com advantagerealty1@hotmail.com	Marty Benoit	11	41	\$5,507,200	0.27%	1987
15	Grojean Real Estate 360 W. State St. Jacksonville, IL 62650	217-245-4151	grojeanagency.com cgrojean@grojeanagency.net	Charles Grojean	5	47	\$5,104,700	0.30%	1947
16	Welcome Home Realty 211 N. Main St. Chatham, IL 62629	217-483-5501	welcomehomerealtyil.com welcomehomerealtymail@gmail.com	Jen Chance	7	32	\$4,006,151	0.18%	2015
17	Snelling-Chevalier Real Estate, Inc. 621 Seventh St. Pawnee, IL 62558	217-625-2411 217-625=7513	snelling-chevalier.com gail@family-net.net	Gail Chevalier Zini Managing Broker	4	35	\$3,671,100	0.18%	1986
18	The Hayes Group 221 Dunlap Court Jacksonville, IL 62650	217-245-2324	mhayes@tampabay.rr.com	Michael Hayes	1	28	\$3,660,795	0.23%	

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ARE USING



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The typical Illinois REALTOR® is a

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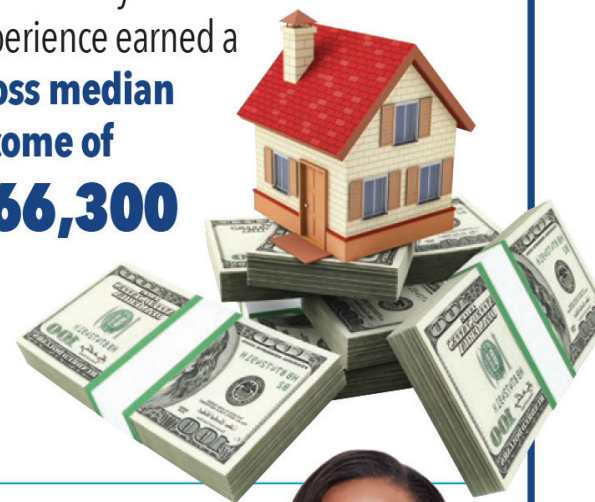
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Marketing Springfield to millennials

BY ZACH ROTH

Like many other towns in the Midwest and Rust Belt, Springfield has seen significant changes in the makeup of its population in recent years. It has become older, not to mention a little bit smaller.

"Since 2010, the indications are that the population is continuing to decline," said Molly Berns, executive director of the Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission (SSCRPC). "Even more importantly, that population is aging."

Indeed, information provided by the SSCRPC indicate that the capital city of Illinois is losing its population. In the 2010 U.S. census, Springfield's population was 111,454, a 4.3 percent increase from 10 years prior. However, this was actually an indication that Springfield's growth was slowing, as the rate of growth had decreased every decade since the 1970 census.

Now, that growth has stopped. Current estimates put Springfield's population at 115,611, a decrease from the 2010 census. This decrease has been most pronounced among younger people, especially millennials, whose declines have been measured at around seven percent in the latest estimates.

People have been supposedly been leaving town for greener pastures, befitting the reputation of Springfield as a city where there isn't much else to do outside visiting Abraham Lincoln shrines and eating horseshoes.

Berns disputes this reputation, noting that Springfield has plenty of interesting places to visit; one just needs to know where to find them.

"Springfield has a lot of activities," Berns says. "You just have to know where to look for them. It's not like they're hidden, it's not like there's a big surprise, but we clearly have a lot of tourists who come to this town to visit various things and to attend festivals. If there were nothing to do in Springfield, we wouldn't have tourism."

Tourists are one thing; residents are another. So why can't Springfield keep younger residents? Berns thinks that younger people are looking more for experiences in where they live and work, something that Springfield may be lacking.

"Millennials look for a slightly different experience," Berns said. "It's not just about attending the activity, they want to experience the activity. It's a slight mind-shift in how those activities are put together, how they're advertised as well as how they're promoted to draw any sort of millennial attendance."

Reports from the SSCRPC confirm this trend. A 2015 study found that millennials are looking to live in mid-sized towns with greater amenities and activities. These were defined as the 6th-60th ranked metropolitan markets in the U.S. Springfield significantly pales in comparison to any of those places, ranking 233rd.

"If the Council of Economic Advisors is correct...this does not bode well for our region," the study noted.

Even though Springfield's population is declining overall, older groups are adding population. For both Springfield and Sangamon County, the only age groups rising in population are those 55-64 and 75 and older, known as baby boomers and the silent generation. Those two groups have seen 20-30 percent growth during the last decade. This has also led to an increase in the average age of the working population, with the average creeping into the 40s, from mid-to-late 30s in prior years.

"The age of the population has trended up ever so slightly, and it continues to grow older," Berns said. "This is not just isolated to Springfield or Sangamon County; the baby-booming population is aging and reaching retirement. As those people are leaving the workforce, you expect new people to be taking their place, but there are fewer millennials than there were of the baby boomers. It's strictly a numbers game."

Despite the city's reputation and numbers, there are also certain advantages to living in Springfield that could be promoted or exploited for further population gains. Not only is



PHOTO/ PEXELS

the cost of living relatively affordable, but the central location of Springfield provides easier access to work and activities than larger communities.

"It's a big enough city to have wonderful tourist activities, but at the same time, you can literally cross town in 20 minutes, so it's very accessible," Berns said. "St. Louis is only an hour and 10-minute drive, and I can get to Chicago in two-and-a-half hours or less. So, it's the best of both worlds. Being centrally located is very attractive to millennials, because they have a whole circle of areas that they can be at in less than half a day."

Berns shared the story of a millennial friend who considered moving to St. Louis for work, and while St. Louis had better activities and more resources, the cost of living and poor accessibility made it untenable for her.

"One of her biggest concerns, having grown up in Springfield, was that the commute is going to be dreadful," Berns said. "'I'm going to have to live so far out of St. Louis just to be able to afford a nice apartment that by the time I do that, I'm going to be on the road 45 minutes in the morning and 45 minutes in the afternoon.' That's time not spent relaxing and doing what this millennial wanted to do. In retrospect, she would prefer to work in Springfield."

Fortunately, there are indications that some are taking notice of Springfield as a good place for millennial workers. A site called RealtyHop recently ranked Springfield as the 39th best metropolitan area for millennials in the country.

Will that bring more millennials to Springfield? Only time will tell. One thing is for sure: Springfield may have more to offer than you think.

"I think that the residents sell it short," Berns said. ♦



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HOME BUILDERS & REMODELERS

Sources: Springfield Area Home Builders Association; The Builders and Remodelers.
Listed by number of full time employees.

	NAME / ADDRESS	PHONE / FAX (=)	WEBSITE / EMAIL	NUMBER OF FULL TIME EMPLOYEES	PARTNERS / PRINCIPALS	% REMODEL RENOVATION	% NEW HOME CONSTRUCTION	YEAR EST'D
1	Buraski Builders, Inc. 3757 S. Sixth St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-5172 217-529=9356	buraski.com buraskibuilders@yahoo.com	27	Jason Buraski, Heather Sobieski, Managing Partners Frank Buraski, President; Barbara Buraski, Secretary/Treasurer	50%	50%	1981
2	Michael von Behren Builder, Inc. 3537 S. Douglas Ave. Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-8484 217-698=8486	mvbbuilder.com aaron@mvbbuilder.com	24	Aaron Acree, Pres./Owner Jodi Acree, Sec./Owner	50%	50%	1982
3	Zinn Construction, LLC 1323 Hawthorne Chase Sherman, IL 62684	217-496-3112 866-359=0816	zinnconstruction.com phil@zinnconstruction.com	14	Phil Zinn	40%	60%	2003
3	Moughan Builders, Inc. 3140 Cockrell Ln. Springfield, IL 62711	217-899-5484 217-793=6013	moughanbuilders.com jim@moughanbuilders.com	14	James E. Moughan, David P. Moughan	10%	90%	1992
4	Bobby Shaw Property Maintenance and Remodeling 2466 Glencoe Springfield, IL 62704	217-546-3973 217-306-1410	bobbyshawmaintenance.com bobby@bsmaint.com	13	Bobby Shaw, Owner	90%	10%	1987
5	Griffitts Construction Co., Inc. 1501 N. Dirksen Pkwy. Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-1431 217-522=5809	griffitts.net griffitts@griffitts.net	12	Harry Griffitts, Vicky Griffitts-Runyon	95%	5%	1953
5	Creasey Construction of Illinois, Inc. 3450 S. Park Ave. Springfield, IL 62704	217-546-1277 217-546=1760	creaseyconstruction.com creaseyconst@comcast.net	12	Jan Creasey, Pres., Lisa Creasey	90%	10%	1983
6	DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen 3730 Wabash Ave. Springfield, IL 62711	217-529-9300 217-529=9333	dreammakerspringfield.com ctrampe@dreammakerspringfield.com	11	Curt & Deb Trampe	95%	5%	1998

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7	Craig Ladage Builders, Inc. 14915 Kennedy Rd. Auburn, IL 62615	217-438-9206 217-438=5706	clbuilders@royell.org	8	Craig Ladage, Debbie Ladage	40%	60%	1977
8	Illinois Builders & Contractors, Inc. 4120 S. Second St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-585-9490 217-529=9456	ilbuildersandcontractors.com ilbuilders2@yahoo.com	7	Fred Pryor	90%	10%	2003
9	All-C Construction, Inc. P.O. Box 9737 Springfield, IL 62791	217-787-1900 217-787=1901	allcconstruction.com allcconstruction@att.net	6	Frank Conder, Paula Conder	30%	70%	1999
9	Coady Construction Co., Inc. 143 Circle Dr. Springfield, IL 62703	217-502-0602	adamcoadyconstruction.com coadyconstruction@comcast.net	6	Adam Coady	20%	80%	2006
10	D & S Builders 30 White Rd. Glenarm, IL 62536	217-529-6288 217-697=8149	todd@d-sbuilders.com or dan@d-sbuilders.com	5	Todd Dudley, Owner Dan Schrage, Owner	40%	60%	1995
10	Stites Development, Inc. 125 E. Main St. Rochester, IL 62563	217-498-1472 217-498=1472	stitesdevelopmentinc.com j.stites@comcast.net	5	John H. Stites, Jr., Pres./Owner	5%	95%	1976
10	Roth Homes 350 Williams Ln. Chatham, IL 62629	217-483-6086 217-483=5200	www.rothhomesinc.net	5	Terry Roth	25%	75%	1984
11	Timber Creek Home Sales, Inc. 2800 Via Rosso, Suite 1 Springfield, IL 62703	217-585-8900 217-585=8908	timbercreekliving.com	4	Douglas Daniels, Pres.	0%	100%	1999
11	Robert McCurley Contractor, Inc. 4152 Mt. Zion School Rd. Springfield, IL 62711	217-553-9730 217-679=3533	www.robertmccurleycontractor.com bobmccurley@comcast.net	4	Bob McCurley, Pres. Ki McCurley, Sec./Tres.	40%	60%	1968
11	Ryan Homes & Development, Inc. Paula Ryan Designs 3149 Hedley Rd. Springfield, IL 62704	217-523-3976 217-523=3990	homesanddevelopment.com paula.ryan2321@gmail.com	4	Mike Ryan, Paula Ryan	30%	70%	1974

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Solar in Springfield

Illinois sees job growth in solar-related jobs

BY KAREN ACKERMAN WITTER

There is a surge in solar power in Springfield, which is good news for the economy and the environment. The Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA), signed into law in December 2016, is landmark legislation that provides funding for solar energy education, job training and renewable energy credits. The intent is to stimulate new clean energy projects, create jobs and improve energy efficiency. The renewable energy credits provide incentives for residential, business and community-scale solar projects.

The Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club was a major advocate for this legislation and says, "Putting us back on track to meet Illinois' clean energy goals, the FEJA directs a budget from utility companies of more than \$180 million annually for purchasing clean energy produced in Illinois. This means that individuals, communities and utility companies that invest in new clean energy will make extra money by putting that power onto the grid and getting the credit back on their utility bill."

Legislation enacted in 2007 established a statewide goal of 25 percent renewable energy by 2025. Nationally, the Sierra Club is working towards 100 percent clean energy, and some communities have even adopted this goal. Elizabeth Scrafford, Springfield-based senior

organizing representative for the Sierra Club, is actively working with the City of Springfield, City Water Light and Power (CWLP), businesses and organizations to expand solar energy in the region and move towards clean energy.



Solar panels atop the new LRS building located on West Monroe Street.

PHOTO COURTESY LRS

Maldaner's and Kidzeum help educate the community on the benefits of solar

Michael Higgins, Maldaner's owner and chef, was an early leader in the solar movement in Springfield and installed solar panels at his business. Julie Rourke of Lincoln Land Community College (LLCC) helped facilitate a grant that enabled Higgins to install solar panels at an affordable cost by agreeing to serve as a com-

munity educational site to help grow solar and contribute to workforce development. Higgins says the benefits are far greater than the energy savings on his utility bill. "If you can do it, why not?" he asks. Installing solar "gave placement

in the community as a small business leader and someone who cares, and this has been good for business," says Higgins. His commitment to solar energy and his rooftop garden 'pollinator pocket' are beneficial from a marketing perspective. Organizations taking advantage of educational tours of the rooftop

schedule their events at Maldaner's, and many individuals prefer to frequent businesses that are leaders in sustainability.

A solar awning will be installed this spring on the south side of the Kidzeum, providing another educational opportunity about the benefits of solar energy. An exhibit will reveal how much solar energy is being produced and the energy efficiency achieved. Michelle Knox, founder and president of WindSolarUSA, facilitated a grant

Illinois is among the top four states with the highest growth in solar energy jobs in 2018, according to the National Solar Jobs Census 2018 recently released by The Solar Foundation, a nonprofit educational and research organization. Solar jobs increased in 29 states in 2018, although nationwide solar jobs have declined for two consecutive years after seven years of steady gains. Illinois experienced a 37 percent increase in solar jobs from 2017 to 2018 and ranks 13th among the states in the number of solar jobs.

for this project through the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation. The solar awning will be visible from a window within the Kidzeum.

LLCC is playing a leadership role in education and workforce development related to solar. Rourke is spearheading efforts at LLCC to develop a certificate program and an associate degree around solar. Knox is teaching an "Introduction to Solar Photovoltaics (PV)" class on March 23 and "PV Site Assessment" on April 27 at LLCC.



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Many Springfield area businesses and individuals have installed solar

A wide variety of businesses in Springfield have installed solar. Knox, whose business is located in the historic Kerasotes Building in downtown Springfield, has helped install over 100 solar systems throughout Illinois, including many in Springfield. She worked with her landlord, Chris Nickell, and his business partner, Stan Komperda, to install solar at the Kerasotes building, Bradfordton Athletic Center and two downtown apartment buildings. Nickell has an extensive background and career related to environmental issues, but says installing solar on the properties he owns has to make sense from a business perspective as well. Solar has made sense where he has long-term ownership in a building and the cost to install solar has a reasonable payback period, typically five to seven years. Solar rebates and renewable energy credits have helped make these projects feasible.

Lisa Clemmons Stott, executive director of Downtown Springfield, Inc. (DSI), says Knox was instrumental in helping her put solar on the building at 407 E. Adams that she and her husband purchased for redevelopment. “Michelle walked us through the project from idea to installation. Her company is also a DSI member and downtown business,” says Clemmons Stott.

The solar rooftop and carport at Crawford Murphy & Tilly’s headquarters in Springfield is the largest solar carport system of its kind in Illinois. The solar energy system provides about 90 percent of the energy for CMT’s office building. Target, O’Shea Builders, Ashley Furniture, Barney’s Furniture, Friendly Chevrolet and Robert’s Seafood are other businesses in Springfield with solar projects.

LRS recently completed a solar installation with 498 solar panels at its new building on West Monroe Street. The solar energy system will provide 40 percent of the building’s electrical requirement on a moderate spring or fall day. LRS is pursuing renewable energy credits and expects the project will have a payback of six-and-half years. LRS vice president Ryan Levi says the solar project has additional benefits from a marketing perspective. LRS does business with many European companies, which want to work with other businesses that are environmentally responsible. This solar project will provide an example of LRS’s business philosophy and commitment to the environment.

CWLP customers go green through MySolar

Individuals and businesses that are CWLP customers can support solar by purchasing a solar energy block for \$4.40 per month for a minimum of one year. This MySolar pilot program provides an easy way for people to support going green without the expense of installing solar at their own residence or building or if they don’t have an opportunity to install solar. CWLP installed a solar field consisting of 716 ground-mounted panels, which was completed in December. It is located behind Harrison Park subdivision and adjacent to the Sangamon Valley Trail and the utility’s Washington substation on Old Tippecanoe Drive.

To date, 56 residential customers have subscribed, which represents 30 percent of the available blocks. Gary Hurley, energy services manager for CWLP, says the solar farm is a research and development project which will help CWLP engineers get more familiar with producing solar energy. It will also demonstrate customers’ level of interest in solar. Hurley says, “CWLP is owned by ratepayers and must meet the needs of customers in the most cost-effective manner. The integrated resource plan now being developed will provide a roadmap for the future.”

Looking to the future

Higgins believes the growth in solar in Springfield provides a marketing opportunity for the

City of Springfield that should be promoted to visitors. Knox says, “The FEJA has attracted many new players to our state who are looking to capitalize on a growing solar industry.”

“The long-term outlook for this industry remains positive as even more Americans turn to low-cost solar energy and storage solutions to power their homes and businesses,” said Andrea Luecke, president and executive director at The Solar Foundation. “However, it will take exceptional leadership at the federal, state and local levels to spur this growth and address the urgent challenge of climate change. Expanding solar energy and storage across America will create high-quality jobs, reduce carbon emissions, boost local economies and build resilient and adaptive communities.” ♦

Karen Ackerman Witter retired from the State of Illinois after a 35-year career working in environmental agencies. As a former natural resources policy advisor and director of the

Department of Energy and Natural Resources during the Thompson administration, she is pleased to see the expansion of renewable energy in Illinois.

For more information about solar energy, go to thesolarfoundation.org or the Illinois Solar Energy Association at illinoisolar.org.

CWLP customers can demonstrate their interest in solar energy by signing up for the program. More information is available online at cwlp.com or by call 217-789-2070 or emailing nrgxprts@cwlp.com.

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Sources: Capital Association of Realtors, the appraisers.
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1	Taft Appraisal, Inc. 1999 Wabash Ave., Suite 205A Springfield, IL 62704	217-787-5533 217-787=6949 barrytaft@aol.com taftappraisalinc.com	3	Barry Taft	90% 10%	1989
2	Green Appraisal Service 3624 Wexford Dr. Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-1277 greenappraisalservice@comcast.net greenappraisalservice.com	2	Angela K. Chiaro	0% 100%	1994
3	Gary D. Harvey 6400 Preston Dr. Springfield, IL 62711	217-483-3534 harveygd@comcast.net	1	Gary D. Harvey	0% 100%	1993
3	Heartland Ag Group of Springfield, Inc. 2815 Old Jacksonville Rd., Suite 204 Springfield, IL 62704	217-498-9660 217-546=0811 Heartland.ag erniem@heartland.ag	1	Ernest Moody, ARA	98% 2%	1996
3	Kienzler Appraisal Service 410 South Grand Ave. West Springfield, IL 62704	217-525-6050 greg@apraze1.com	1	Gregory Kienzler, SRA	95% 5%	1973
3	Michael J. Call Appraisal Service 837 South Grand Ave. West Springfield, IL 62704	217-741-9790 217-747-0252 217-747=0253 callappraisals@comcast.net callappraisals.com	1	Michael J. Call	0% 100%	1987
3	Phillips Appraisal, Inc. 6305 Wind Tree Rd. Springfield, IL 62712	217-529-7351 217-341-5999 rjp01@comcast.net phillipsappraisal.com	1	Randall J. Phillips, SRA	0% 100%	2000
3	Williams Appraisals 881 Meadowbrook Rd. Springfield, IL 62711	217-793-9234 john.williams50@comcast.net	1	John Williams	0% 100%	1993
3	Elder Valuation Services 3000 Professional Dr., Suite 200 Springfield, IL 62703	217-414-2201 217-528=5809 Michael.elder@eldervaluationservices.com eldervaluationservices.com	1	Michael D. Elder, MAI	100% 0%	2013
3	RKB Appraisal Service 2 Hickory Hills Dr. Springfield, IL 62707	217-415-0922 217-546=2776 rkbappraisal@comcast.net rkbappraisalservice.com	1	Robert Briney	0% 100%	2001

The advertisement features a large, light-colored Lennox furnace on the left and a smaller, similar unit on the right, both with the Lennox logo. The background is a light blue gradient. The text is arranged in a clear, professional layout, with the company name and services prominently displayed at the top and bottom. The contact information is provided at the very bottom.



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A portrait of Greg Curl, a middle-aged man with short, light-colored hair, wearing glasses, a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a blue and white striped tie. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Confidence soars during trades training

BY LINDSEY SALVATELLI

Students at South Town Construction Training Center are in week six of the 12-week program, and have just received their OSHA cards, a necessary step to working in the electrical trade.

The students who are part of the current class have left their mark on the training center, with a wall they've painted and designed to be used for wiring during future classes.

Calvin Pitts, South Town Construction Training Center founder, said each graduating class that passes through South Town adds something to the training center. "Who do you think we should put on the wall?" Pitts asked his students when they were making minor adjustments to their contribution during a Feb. 16 class. "Bob Marley," said student Daria Johnson. "He built a bunch of houses in Jamaica."

South Town students Dan Myers, Nakesha Stephens and J'Quarius Renicks described their progress as "accomplished." Their summation provoked a smile from Pitts.

Pitts is always looking for new skills to introduce to his students, and on the day most of the class was taking an exam to receive their OSHA card, Pitts gave student David Alexander a unique opportunity to learn something new. Alexander, having taken similar courses in the past, already has his OSHA card, so Pitts used the time to introduce Alexander to voice-data video wiring.

"I didn't know there were that many aspects to electrical work," Alexander said. He was given 20 minutes to wire an Ethernet cable, a task Alexander gladly accepted.

Despite Alexander having some background in the trade before signing up at South Town Construction, he said he's learned more in the



David Alexander, 20, is testing a line just two days after learning how to install voice-data video wiring.

PHOTO BY LINDSEY SALVATELLI

past six weeks than what he anticipated. He said he's begun to notice things that are related to the construction trade whenever he goes out. More importantly, he's beginning to notice the flaws in jobs he sees.

"I want people to say, 'David Alexander

is the best electrician around. He's fast and efficient, and you never need to call him back because it's done right the first time,'" Alexander said.

What's even more encouraging to Alexander is seeing his fellow classmates spend their free

time at South Town Construction, practicing what they've learned in the past six weeks.

"The project South Town is undertaking is to help train a pipeline of folks who can fill energy efficiency or related jobs in our service area," said Kristol Simms, director of energy efficiency for Ameren Illinois.

Simms said Ameren Illinois wanted to contribute to the community in a few ways, but quickly realized there were some obstacles. Attempts to update a home's wiring to make it more energy efficient often stall due to the presence of knob-and-tube wiring, an outdated form of electrical wiring that hasn't been used in nearly 80 years. Very few contractors are willing or able to replace knob-and-tube wiring.

"We definitely have goals for a reduction of energy, and those goals are aggressive," Simms said. "We as a company decided that it's as important that we can make these reductions in a way that has a positive [targeted impact] on our communities."

Simms said Ameren Illinois' goal through community-based programs like Pitts' training center is to help fill jobs that lack qualified laborers, but to also give back to help expand nonprofits like South Town Construction.

South Town Construction Training Center came into existence in 2017, but Pitts has been teaching job training programs since 2013.

"We're creating human capital," Pitts said to his students. "Look that up if you don't know what it means." ♦

Lindsey Salvatelli is an editorial intern with Illinois Times as part of the Public Affairs Reporting master's degree program at University of Illinois Springfield. Contact her at intern@illinoistimes.com.



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MEDICAL NEWS

Passavant Area Hospital appoints new chief medical officer

Dr. Scott Boston, an emergency medicine physician, has been named Passavant Area Hospital's next chief medical officer (CMO). Boston will use the next two months to transition into the new role before officially assuming duties April 1. He replaces Dr. Marshall Hale, who is retiring March 31.

A member of the Passavant medical staff since 2004, Boston currently serves as an emergency medicine physician, affiliated with Mid-America Emergency Physicians, at Passavant and Memorial Medical Center. He will continue working in the Passavant emergency

department while also serving as CMO.

A Morgan County resident, Boston received his medical degree from the SIU School of Medicine in 2000. He completed his residency at OSF St. Francis Medical Center in Peoria and also earned a master's degree in animal science and an undergraduate degree in agricultural science from the University of Illinois.

"Dr. Boston brings great credentials to the CMO role," said Harry Schmidt, president and CEO of Passavant. "As a former emergency department medical director at Passavant and assistant director at Memorial, Dr. Boston

has the proven leadership skills. By continuing to practice in the emergency department, he'll keep in close touch with his fellow physicians."

Hale, a former Memorial Physician Services physician, has lived and practiced medicine in Jacksonville since 1983. He has been instrumental in leading and shaping health care in the community and was the 2018 recipient of the Woody Hester Legacy of Leadership Award, Memorial Health System's top leadership award.

"As Dr. Hale retires, we thank him for his commitment to serving Passavant, the medical staff and community," Schmidt said. "We will certainly miss his leadership, but wish him well as he transitions to a new chapter in his life." ♦



Scott Boston, MD

PHOTO COURTESY PASSAVANT AREA HOSPITAL



Marshall Hale, MD

PHOTO COURTESY PASSAVANT AREA HOSPITAL

Springfield Clinic opens new rehabilitation services clinic

Springfield Clinic has opened a new location for rehabilitation services named Springfield Clinic West Wabash. It is located at 4525 Wabash Avenue in Suites D and E in the YellowStone complex, which formerly housed Anytime Fitness and a physical therapy office.

O'Shea Builders recently completed a \$650,000 renovation of the 6400 square foot space. The new location opened on Feb. 4, and several therapists with the rehabilitation services team will be working from the west side clinic.

"We are excited to expand Springfield Clinic Rehabilitation Services to the west side

of Springfield," said director of therapy services Stephanie Olysav. "With this addition, we now have five locations conveniently located throughout Springfield and Sherman. We look forward to being able to provide services to patients who live or work on the west side."

Springfield Clinic Rehabilitation Services therapists will also continue their services at the following locations:

Springfield Clinic Rehabilitation Services,
3020 South Sixth Street

Springfield Clinic 1st – 800 Building, 800
North 1st Street

Springfield Clinic at the Villas, 100 Marian
Parkway, Suite 149, Sherman

Springfield
clinic

A COMMUNITY OF CARING



Keeping creditors from your personal assets

BY JACKSON B. FREDMAN

It is not uncommon for a small or new business owner to operate as a sole proprietorship, which means that both the individual and the business are one and the same. Unfortunately, this arrangement can often lead to some very big headaches down the road for an owner, particularly when it comes to covering the business's debts and liabilities. It is for this reason that most owners elect to operate as some sort of entity – usually as a corporation or as a limited liability company. In fact, the primary purpose of incorporating or forming a limited liability company in the first place is insulation from unlimited liability.

For the most part, incorporating or forming a limited liability company shields the individual assets of members and shareholders from creditors. That is, while creditors are able to reach the assets of the entity itself, once those assets have been exhausted, the personal assets of the entity's shareholders or members can't be touched. That being said, creating a separate business entity does not always provide 100 percent immunity from personal liability. There are a number of situations where someone could be on the hook for what happens to their business.

Piercing the corporate veil

Under the right set of circumstances, courts will occasionally "pierce" through an entity to get to the personal assets of its individual shareholders, members or directors. This is known as "piercing the corporate veil," and is reserved for situations where a court determines that the entity has been operating as a dummy or sham.

When deciding the appropriateness of piercing the corporate veil, Illinois courts use a two-part test. First, a court will analyze if there is "unity of interest and ownership." Secondly, a court will determine whether it would "promote injustice or inequity" to allow the entity to exist separately from the individual(s).

Under the first prong, a court will determine whether separate personalities for the entity and individual(s) exist. To do this, a court will examine many factors, including whether: (1) the entity was adequately capitalized, (2) stock was ever issued, (3) "corporate" formalities were observed (things like annual meetings and keeping minutes of those meetings), (4) dividends or distributions were ever paid, (5) the entity was insolvent, (6) officers, managers and/or directors actually performed their corporate duties, (7) records were kept, (8) individual funds were commingled with funds of the entity, (9) funds were diverted from the entity at the expense of creditors, (10) there were arm's length transactions between related entities, and (11) the entity was a mere façade for the dominant owner.

A court may look beyond these factors. And, no single factor is more important than any of the others – instead, it's a totality of the circumstances test. As a matter of practice, it is always a good idea for business owners to check up on their operations just to make sure that they are not violating any of these guidelines.

Under the second prong of Illinois' piercing the corporate veil test, a court is going to ask whether there is some inherent unfairness – such as fraud or deception – or if there is a compelling public interest to justify piercing. In layman's terms, it basically comes down to whether the situation seems fishy to a court. Common examples involve thinly capitalized entities, especially where there's just one owner.

Use of personal credit cards

This occurs more frequently in small businesses than in large ones, as personal and business expenses often crisscross for small business owners. Using a personal credit card to purchase office supplies or materials may not seem dangerous on its face, but doing so can lead to personal liability for the balance – and this can be the case even when the business' name is on the credit card. It's never a bad idea to review the terms of the credit application that was originally signed on behalf of an entity.

Signing documents in a personal capacity

From time to time, an owner or officer will be asked to sign documents in their official capacity on behalf of an entity. Any business owner or officer who wants to stay out of hot water would be wise to use a "corporate signature" on documents that do not specify that a signature is on behalf of the entity.

Making personal guaranties

Most banks require personal guaranties when giving out loans to businesses. Typically, only the largest and most credit-worthy companies can obtain such "non-recourse debt." So just be aware that, as a guarantor, your personal assets will be up for grabs if the entity fails to repay the loan.

Committing a crime or misrepresentation

This may seem like a no-brainer, but if a person breaks the law, they can't hide behind their entity for protection. Similarly, if a person applied for a loan for the entity and lied about the details, they will most likely be personally liable for the fraudulently procured debt.

The bottom line here is that any business owner seeking to avoid personal liability can't just incorporate or create a limited liability company and then throw caution to the wind. If you believe that your business meets any of these criteria, contact your legal counsel for advice. It's much better to be prepared now than to face possible personal liability later. ♦

There are other variations, but the most important thing is that any such signature includes the name of the signor, the entity and the signor's title in relation to the entity.

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By: Jackson B. Fredman
Its: President

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MARINE BANK

Recognizing the Best Places to Work

BY MICHELLE OWNBEY

On Feb. 20, members of the local business community attended the Best Places to Work reception and awards ceremony at the United Community Bank location at 1900 West Iles Avenue in Springfield. Dr. Ron Romenelli of the Orthopedic Center of Illinois, a former recipient, gave the keynote address.

The recipients of the 2019 “Best Places to Work,” sponsored by *Springfield Business Journal* and United Community Bank, were America Ambulance Services, Country Lane Memory Care and Illinois Real Estate Title Center. In addition, Sacred Heart-Griffin, a previous winner, was recognized in the alumni category.

To be considered, a business must be located in Sangamon County or Morgan County, have 16 or more employees and have been in business for at least two years. A selection committee chooses the winners from nominations submitted by employees about why their company is a great place to work.



Todd Wise addresses the crowd.



Susan Zappa and employees of America Ambulance Services accept their award.



Jennifer Bettis, Terri Noel-Pelc, Greg Pelc.



Guests mingle at the reception.



Dr. Ron Romenelli congratulates Sr. Mary Alberta.

PHOTOS BY LEE MILNER.



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Participants in the GoodGuides Youth mentoring program with executive director Sharon Durbin.

PHOTO COURTESY GOODWILL

Goodwill does good work in many ways

BY JANET SEITZ

Most people know Goodwill as a place to donate or shop for clothing, home goods and assorted treasures. Yet, the full offering of this organization prepares many for success.

The nonprofit Land of Lincoln Goodwill Industries' territory consists of 33 counties in Illinois and four counties in Indiana. Its programs affect thousands of people by providing job training, employment placement services, youth mentoring and other community-based programs for people who have a disability, lack education or job experience, or face employment challenges. In central and southern Illinois, Goodwill operates six career centers and 14 retail operations and donation centers.

Of LLGI's annual operating budget of nearly \$27 million, 90 percent goes to support its programs and services. Revenue comes largely from retail stores, e-commerce (shopgoodwill.com), recycling and salvage operations and an outlet store in Jacksonville. Donations, grants and contract services income help boost the organization's mission further. Goodwill Clean, a janitorial program, and Goodwill mowing services are available to both businesses and residents.

At the organization's helm is Sharon Durbin, who "fell in love with the passion for the mission glowing from the employees" and took the reins as LLGI president and CEO in 2006. Her greatest challenge, she said, was walking into an organization on the brink of bankruptcy with the need to rebuild a broken organization and regain trust in the community.

Since then, she has watched the organization grow and expand services to help more people. "Listening to testimonies of how our organization continues to impact and change lives -- there is no greater reward. We are not just another nonprofit. We are a group of individuals who embrace our mission, and we are a family."

Among those individuals is Tom King, whose life was in a downward spiral with gaps in his employment history. He took measures to get his life back on track, and Goodwill took a chance on him and hired him as a truck driver. He now serves as director of transportation logistics in Springfield.

"I am the mission for Goodwill," he said in a video. "Someone with special needs. And they gave me the tools that I needed to become a productive member of society again. I can't imagine what my life would be without Goodwill. I don't know where I would be. And today I understand what my purpose in life is, and I embrace that. My life is exponentially better."

"Our belief of giving individuals 'a hand up, not a hand out' stays true in our goal to become fully self-sufficient as an organization," Durbin continued. "Our business model focuses on self-sufficiency through the power of work. It's our core mission and drives every business decision."

Durbin pointed out that LLGI strives to sell only quality products in its stores. Lower-quality clothing and other donated items are sent to its 100,000-square-foot warehouse in Jacksonville to be recycled or sold to vendors for rags. When quality items are still on the sales floor for a season at regular price, they are marked to half off, and after two cycles, sent to the outlet store to sell for 99 cents a pound. In addition, LLGI has partnered with organizations to refurbish computers and other electronics.

All this activity helps provide opportunities. "We seem to always have a position within our organization open in one of our 14 re-

tail operations," Durbin said, "but we will help anyone who walks through our door looking for a job. Through our Career Centers we will assist anyone with barriers to gain new skills, such as through our Computer 101 classes, or through our life skills training and many others. We are happy to conduct mock interviews for an upcoming interview with individuals as well."

In addition to its career development services, Durbin said the one program she believes is a "hidden diamond" is the GoodGuides Youth Mentoring program helping at-risk youth from ages 12-17. Since the program began in 2009, more than 600 youth have been assisted. "These youth are children who are not only facing barriers on the home front but also at school because of broken families, parents with several addictions, poverty, teen pregnancy and the list continues. Our mentors encourage these youth to stay in school, graduate and pursue college."

Since GoodGuides began providing college preparation support in 2011, 35 first-generation college students have entered college

By the numbers in a year

Landfill diversions

4,265 total tons of material diverted from local landfills
246 tons of metal recycled
118 tons of electronics recycled
350 tons of linen salvaged

Retail stores and employment

343 retail employees
14 retail store locations

Vocational rehab program

52 individuals served
14 individuals in supportive employment
6 individuals in Title XX program

Goodguides youth mentoring program

104 youth served
22 volunteer mentors
42 CPR/First-Aid certified
120 colleges and universities visited
39 youth in post-secondary education

Career development program

500 veterans served
1050 ex-offenders coached and counseled
7800 persons served in Career Centers

Source: Land of Lincoln Goodwill Industries 2018 Annual Report

with the support of the program. Durbin added that GoodGuides also has started a basketball team "that instills teamwork, developing goals and learning how to become a leader. The GoodGuides basketball team has won several trophies and ribbons and all are displayed in our lobby. We are so proud of these kids." ♦

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



Sun Thai is located in the former No Agenda space. PHOTO BY STACIE LEWIS

Sun Thai shines

BY TOM PAVLIK

Chatham’s Sun Thai is a most welcome addition to Springfield’s Asian dining scene. We’re glad we visited, and we plan to be back.

Don’t let its clean, angular, minimalist and industrial space throw you off – that’s just remnants of the location’s former occupant, No Agenda at 321, a small-plate restaurant. It’s certainly not what one thinks of for a Thai or Chinese restaurant. We did appreciate the wall of windows for natural lighting and the neat lighting fixtures. But décor isn’t what counts in my mind – it’s food and service. Sun Thai delivered on both.

My guest and I arrived late in the lunch hour on an unusually warm winter day to find Sun Thai about two-thirds filled. We were pleasantly greeted and given our choice of open tables, opting for a four-top against the window.

Although it took a few minutes for someone to take our drink and food orders, Sun Thai appeared minimally staffed that day and it really was the only service faux pas. In following up with some Sun Thai regulars, I understood that the owner may have been out of town the day of our visit – which would explain the staffing.

Sun Thai offers a regular menu, as well as a great number of Chinese or Thai lunch items that all cost \$7.99 and come with fried rice and soup. Lunch specials include the usual suspects like kung pao chicken, chow mein and oyster sauce beef. The regular menu is comprised of soups, Thai salads, rice and noodle dishes, and rounded

out by a slate of more traditional dinner dishes. Although we didn’t try it, we were very tempted to order one of Sun Thai’s five curry dishes (red, Panang, green, Musamon and coconut – each \$11.99, \$13.00 with shrimp). And we were even more tempted by Sun Thai’s wonderful list of

souring agent, a hint of sweetness, fresh herbs and greens and rice or rice noodles. I love them because they are a flavor explosion, so I was particularly happy to see that Sun Thai covered the four general types of Thai salad. Good work.

Our meal started with a small bowl of pleasing soup – a broth with some vegetables and hints of chicken soup. It was a nice start.



Pepper steak is one of the dinner entrées. PHOTO BY STACIE LEWIS

We decided to be gluttonous so we started off with two appetizers after the soup – the fried dumplings (\$6.95 for five) and the summer rolls (\$4.95 for two). Sun Thai nailed these. The dipping sauce for the dump-

plings was spot on with just the right mix of umami, acid and sweetness. Sun Thai should bottle this up and sell it. The dumplings were some of the best local offerings that I’ve had - perfectly pan fried, not too doughy, and with just the right amount of fillings. The summer rolls had a good combination of chicken, cilantro, mint, lettuce and noodles. I generally find the dipping sauces

to be too sweet, but my guest liked it. I just decided to use the remnants of the dumpling sauce – maybe heresy to some, but I enjoyed it.

For entrees, we decided to go with the lunch special pad thai (\$7.99) and the yum nue salad (\$6.95). For those who’ve avoided Thai or Vietnamese food thinking that it’s too hot or spicy, know that Sun Thai (and most of its competitors) allows diners to customize the level of spice. My guest was able to order his noodles “mild plus” while I threw caution to the wind and asked for medium. In each instance, Sun Thai honored our requests.

The guest reported that the pad thai hit all the requisite flavor notes and was as good as any he’d had in town. I managed to snag a few bites and agreed. It was a vibrant dish that played with sweet, sour and funky tastes, all delivered on some well-cooked wide noodles.

My salad, likewise, was a big hit. Although appropriately sized for the price, it likely wouldn’t be enough for an entrée and would be better paired with one other dish. It consisted of sliced beef, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and carrots all tossed in a sour and salty sauce that married all of the ingredients together. It’s served with lettuce leaves that can be used to wrap up the mixture. It really was an excellent dish.

Despite my request for medium, I also asked our server to bring some hot sauce. He brought some Siracha, together with Sun Thai’s own dry spice mix. It was a very nice touch. This stuff packed some real heat, yet still had its own unique flavor. As with the dumpling sauce, Sun Thai should package this and sell it. I know I’d buy some.

Our visit to Sun Thai was definitely a success and we wish it a long and prosperous life. I know we’ll be back. ♦

Thomas Pavlik is an attorney at Delano Law Offices, LLC. Contact him at tpavlik@delanolaw.com.

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