

CENTRAL ILLINOIS Business

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SPINNING RIGHT ROUND

Champaign's Exile on Main Street, which just marked 20 years in business, has seen highs and lows of changing media tastes

From the editor's desk



Expansion and growth are the themes for this issue.

To that

end, please welcome Nicole Bateman, president of the Economic Development Corporation of Decatur-Macon County, to our stable of columnists. She joins Vermilion Advantage President and CEO Mike Marron, whose column debuted last issue, and longtime contributor Laura Weis, president and CEO of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce.

This new lineup represents an effort to leverage new resources made possible by Central Illinois Multimedia Group's acquisition last year of radio stations in Decatur and Danville and lean into the "Central Illinois" part of our name.

I hope you'll take the time to read about all the exciting things happening down the road west on Interstate 72 and east on I-74, and check out some of them for yourself.

As always, I'd love to hear your feedback and concerns.

—Niko

Niko Dugan is the Managing Editor of The News-Gazette. Reach him by email at ndugan@news-gazette.com or by phone at 217-393-8253.

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ON THE COVER

Customers peruse the many offerings and speak with owner Jeff Brandt, left, at Exile on Main Street in The Station in downtown Champaign. Photo by Robin Scholz

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Holly Birch Smith

STORY Jeff D'Alessio

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

It started as a family favor for a cousin who needed a photographer to shoot his wedding. Which got **HOLLY BIRCH SMITH**, then three years removed from college and making a living as a photographer for another company, to thinking: Maybe it's time to go solo.

"I wasn't sure what would happen, but here I am 18 years later," says the pride of the west central Illinois village of Easton (pop. 302). "My business has definitely evolved over time, and I am very happy to no longer be shooting weddings and focusing now on business and brand photography."

An Illini fan, alumna and football sideline regular, the self-described "red-haired ginger photographer" runs a small business that does a little bit of everything, from commercial photography to personal brand photography, headshots to video.

She calls Mahomet home with husband Aaron, children Max and Hadley, Roscoe the Rottweiler and Lucy and Moo the cats.

The fan of hot tea, iced tea, lobsters, college sports and socks took time out to answer questions from Editor Jeff D'Alessio in the 256th installment of our weekly speed read spotlighting leaders of organizations big and small.





If I could trade places for a week with any other business person in town, I wouldn't mind switching with ... Stacy Trager from IdeaWorks. Her job looks so fun. I love her designs, and there's something so satisfying about seeing your work printed.

The most beneficial college class I took was ... one I hated at the time: my black-and-white photography class — the only

photography class I took in college.

I *hated* the darkroom and didn't really enjoy shooting on film, either.

At the time, I'd have said you were crazy if you had told me my career would be a photographer.

When it comes to my single favorite moment of all-time in this job ... I didn't expect to have such a brain lapse on this one. I've had a lot of "pinch me"

moments and lots of great opportunities.

I recently traveled to Idaho for a product shoot with a former NFL player. The Illinois-Purdue football game this season will stick with me for a while too — it was one of the best games I ever photographed and the overtime win solidified it for me as a core memory.

My philosophy on meetings is ... brevity is the key to communication.

The hardest thing about being a leader is ... delegating.

I can't live without my ... MacBook Pro.

The three adjectives I hope my staff would use to describe me are ... loyal, punctual and outgoing.

On my office walls, you'll find ... lobster art and knick-knacks, orange accents and Illinois decor.

My professional role model is ... Maddie Peschong. She's a brand photographer based in North Dakota who coaches other photographers and she's an amazing business owner and has so much wisdom as it relates to brand photography and connecting with clients.

I'm frugal in that ... I shop at Aldi

— and most people close to me know it. My Aldi cup is my emotional-support water bottle.

The first thing I do when I get to work most days is ... answer email.

For lunch ... I frequent lots of places, but a couple of favorites are the Harvest Market salad bar and Seven Saints' "Triple S."

I wind down after work by ... watching TV or movies with my spouse.

The last luxury in which I indulged was ... recently going to Phoenix for the Chicago Bears game. The game was awful, but the company and tailgating were top-notch.

The last good book I read was ... "The Housemaid," by Freida McFadden. I need to get my hands on the second book soon.

I'm up and at 'em every day by ... 6:50 to get the kids out the door. Sometimes earlier if I need to work out before I get them up.

As far as my exercise routine goes ... three to four times per week, I do strength workouts through Ali K. Fitness using an app. Then on Saturdays, we do a live Zoom workout, which I try to make when I don't have football games or other commitments.

For my first job ... I grew up on a farm, which I don't really consider my first job, so my first real job was in college as a ... wait for it ... photographer.

The worst job I ever had was ... walking beans. I was probably in high school before the invention of Roundup Ready soybeans. It was hot, humid work with no shade, lots of bugs and scratchy beans. 

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Former Urbana Garden Family Restaurant ready for next chapter after changing ‘literally everything from the floor to the ceiling’

STORY Jana Wiersema PHOTOS Robin Scholz

The Urbana Garden Family Restaurant has been a local fixture for over 30 years. The business was opened by Alit Selimi and is now owned by his sons, Alban and Agron. Alban said they’ve been working there since they were kids, and their father still comes in every day. However, while the restaurant is just as much of a family business as ever, it’s getting a new name, along with a variety of other changes. “Customers have changed,” Alban Selimi said. “And we want to change to appeal to the customers ... so we can be here another 30 years or 50 years or however long we can stay.” Urbana Garden closed for renovations in January. It hopes to reopen as Maple & Yolk in late February, though that could be pushed to early March, he said.

The restaurant’s last major remodel was in 2011. Its latest revamp includes a slew of changes — such as a remodeled dining room, an updated kitchen, new furniture, new lighting, exterior renovations and a new color palette. In short, they’ve changed “literally everything from the floor to the ceiling,” Selimi said. “We were trying to create a warm, welcoming feeling,” he said. “A light, airy (look) to get kind of that breakfast/brunch vibe.” While the renovations are nearly

finished, there are still inspections that need to be completed and staff, both old and new, that need to be trained before they can reopen, Selimi said. Maple & Yolk has also created an updated menu. While the restaurant is eliminating dinner service, Selimi said they are adding a variety of new items, including coffee drinks and other beverages, more breakfast options, paninis and wraps. They also plan to keep many of their old items while also updating them with new toppings and flavors — such

as s’mores pancakes or blueberry-cheesecake French toast. “Every item, even the things that carried over, are just using high-quality ingredients, a little more addition to detail just to make the whole dish elevated from what it previously was,” he said. Additionally, while the space that previously housed the restaurant’s salad bar is now home to a coffee and drink bar, Selimi said they are adding more salads and will probably keep growing that section of their menu. ✕



INSET ABOVE: The new coffee and drink bar at Maple & Yolk in Urbana.
INSET BELOW: The dining room before the renovations, left, and after, right.



FIVE WHO THRIVE

Two Centennial Chargers, a pair of Urbana Tigers and one Central Maroon will share the spotlight April 11 at the I Hotel and Conference Center, when the Champaign Urbana Schools Foundation honors Unit 4 and District 116 alumni “whose achievements, strength of character and citizenship serve as role models to inspire and challenge today’s youth.” Here’s your first look at this year’s winners:



Distinguished Alumni:
JENNIFER LANSFORD
(Centennial '91)

The daughter of a UI professor and a Unit 4 teacher has made her own mark in education, serving as a research professor at Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy and, since 2008, leading an international team of peers in nine countries studying child development and parenting in different cultural contexts. A former Sholem Pool swim instructor and Krannert regular, Lansford's list of most impactful teachers includes Topper Steinman (inspired her interest in psychology), Georgine Hembrough (inspired her interest in culture and international work), George Valentine (made learning fun and interesting) and Elsie Engelhaupt (made her a stronger writer).



Distinguished Alumni:
DONNA TANNER-HAROLD
(Central '72)

This makes two high honors in a month for the alumna of Marquette Elementary, Edison and Central, who was presented with the Doris Hoskins Prestigious Community Service Award at the MLK Countywide Celebration. A retired Parkland College counselor and founder of Champaign County's first Treatment Foster Care program, Tanner-Harold is renowned locally for developing one innovative program after another: a parenting and life skills course for incarcerated women, the Black Student SUCCESS Project and the Black Mental Health and Wellness Conference among them. Her proudest feat? “Watching each of my four children earn graduate degrees.”



Distinguished Alumni:
DR. SUSAN NAGELE
(Urbana '73)

“I cannot think of another person who has done more to make the lives of those with whom she has worked better,” nominator David Thies says of the medical missionary, humanitarian and winner of the American Medical Association's 2012 Medal of Valor for “courage under extraordinary circumstances.” After joining Maryknoll Lay Missioners in 1984, Nagele served in Tanzania, South Sudan, Kenya and Mombasa, leading efforts in tuberculosis treatment, primary health care and hospital development. Among her fondest high school memories: UHS debuting girls' tennis her senior year after the 1972 passage of Title IX: “The tennis courts at Blair Park were my second home.”



Local Hero:
ROBERT LEWIS
(Urbana '64)

Among the former Salem Baptist music tutor's greatest hits: playing in the Douglass Center drum corps as a child and co-founding the Mo'Betta Music Program and Banks Bridgewater and Lewis Fine Arts Academy as a grown-up, mentoring countless young musicians along the way. The lifelong percussionist's “remarkable contributions have left a profound and lasting impact on generations of students and families in Champaign-Urbana” — and extend beyond the arts. An engineer with two patents to his credit — he invented a plastic structural system for seating intended to shift demand away from lumber — Lewis also represented Ward 3 on the Urbana City Council.



Local Business Community Impact: **BRETT SHAW** **(Centennial '07)**

The Garden Hills, Jefferson and Centennial grad might not be where he is today — president of Champaign's Shawlux Premier Renovations — if not for one impactful teacher. “When I lost my mother in high school and I could have given up, Connie Brillhart brought me in, treated me like a son, invested in me, helped me through a dark time, checked on me every day and kept me going strong.” Years later, Shaw has paid it forward, nominator Cathy McArthur notes: “Recognizing the inequity between the boys and girls locker rooms at Central High School, he and his team at Shawlux went beyond a simple paint job, providing a full makeover at no cost to the boosters, athletic program or Unit 4.”

Looking to volunteer? Try a nonprofit

In any thriving community, nonprofits are the threads that bind together compassion and opportunity. These organizations tackle challenges that often fall outside the traditional business models, addressing social, cultural and economic gaps that elevate the entire community.

For business leaders, serving on a nonprofit board is not just a goodwill gesture — it's a powerful opportunity to merge their strategic expertise with purpose while making a significant, tangible difference.

A quick Google search shows 1,630 nonprofit organizations in the greater Champaign-Urbana metro area. These nonprofits employ 20,385 people, earn more than \$4 billion in revenue annually and have assets of \$11 billion. That's a lot of money, and despite the nonprofit status, these organizations are significant contributors to our local economy.

While each nonprofit organization's vision and scope vary widely, they typically serve a social cause or public benefit rather than generating profit for owners. Money earned is reinvested into the organization to further its mission and not distributed to members or shareholders.

The role of a nonprofit's staff and board is to provide a service or support to the community, not make money for the individuals involved. Nonprofits with a mission-driven focus usually have tax-exempt status. This allows them to direct the funds they raise towards fulfilling their mission instead of paying taxes on those incoming dollars.

The structure of individual nonprofits can be as unique as their causes and values, but legal requirements dictate a certain amount of uniformity among them.

Incorporated nonprofits are required to have a board of directors that serves as the primary governing body. A board's responsibilities include ensuring that the organization complies with legal and ethical standards, setting its mission and goals through strategic planning, confirming that the organization is run properly through good governance, and making sure that the nonprofit has the resources (people, goods, and money) it needs to accomplish its purpose.

Serving on a board comes with both legal and nonlegal responsibilities. A board member's duties must include care, loyalty and obedience, and, as a body, the board ensures that a nonprofit uses its assets responsibly. There is also an overarching board obligation to ensure that the activities and programming of the organization advance its mission, all while following its bylaws.

Nonprofit organizations are only as strong as their leadership. Finding community members to serve on a board is often a challenge. Many nonprofits operate on tight budgets

that limit their staff's expertise in areas like human resources, marketing or legal compliance. By bringing in board members, an organization can tap their knowledge and business skills, enabling the nonprofit to make the most of its financial resources and fulfill its mission.

Volunteering also makes good business sense. According to doublethedonation.com, 71 percent of employees believe that volunteering and working at a company that gives back through philanthropy and volunteerism is important. A staggering 96 percent of companies report that their employees who volunteer are more engaged in the workplace. This statistic alone should motivate employers to promote volunteer opportunities to their employees.

So, what's in for the volunteers? Serving on nonprofit boards enables people to contribute directly to a cause they care about, develop leadership skills by making strategic decisions, expand their professional networks, gain valuable experience in governance and fundraising, and ultimately, positively impact our community.

If you want to volunteer your time and skills to a cause you are passionate about, consider these steps to get started. First, find a nonprofit whose mission aligns with your interests and values. You will be a better board member when you have an internal passion for the organization's success.

After finding the cause or organization that resonates with you, volunteer your time. You'll gain firsthand experience with the organization's operations. Think of it like dating. It is an opportunity for you and the nonprofit staff to get to know each other before you commit to a more formal or legal role. Consider networking with the staff and current board members. It is an opportunity to highlight your expertise and interest and the value you can bring to the organization.

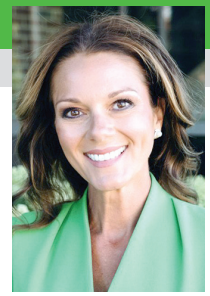
Joining a nonprofit board is an opportunity where your business skills, community spirit and desire to make a difference can all come together. It's more than just attending meetings or approving budgets — it's about shaping the future of organizations that truly matter to you. You'll connect with like-minded people who care about what you care about, tackle meaningful challenges, and see the impact of your efforts in real time.

Serving on a board is a unique chance to give back while growing as a leader. And honestly, what's more rewarding than knowing your time and expertise can help move the needle and make a positive change in our community? 



By LAURA WEIS
CIB contributor

Laura Weis is president and CEO of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce. She can be reached at LauraW@champaigncounty.org.



By NICOLE BATEMAN
CIB contributor

Decatur, Macon County are doing big things

Several years ago, a chamber member stopped me after a management workshop and asked, “Why are there always seminars on how to be a better manager but never any on how to be a better employee or coworker?” That question prompted chamber staff to put together a seminar on this topic.

If you jump in your car in Champaign-Urbana and drive about 50 miles west on Interstate 72, you will soon arrive in Decatur, hailed as the Soy City and the Soybean Capital of the World.

Decatur was known for its soybean production back in the early 1920s when the Staley Manufacturing Company opened a major grain-processing plant that used soybeans to make products for human consumption. It has been said that more than a third of the world’s soybeans were processed in Decatur thanks largely to A.E. Staley’s pursuit of the American dream.

Decatur’s transformation over the century is a testament to our innovative spirit, turning corn and soybeans into products unimaginable. If you have tracked recent happenings in Decatur and Macon County, you know major investments have developed over the past few years, some agriculture-related, some not.

Here are just a few examples of how Decatur’s reputation as a global force in advanced manufacturing, biotechnology and bioprocessing, electric vehicles and clean energy, logistics, and precision fermentation continues to advance through ongoing investments:

→ **ADM Alternative Protein Expansion & Protein Innovation Center (\$300 million):** An investment to increase soy protein concentrate production in Decatur and the creation of an innovation center that will power partnership, innovation, and speed to

meet growing customer needs.

→ **Cardinal Warehouse/Ryder Logistics (635,000 square feet):** Construction of a warehouse and distribution facility highlighting Decatur’s position as an emerging logistics and distribution center.

→ **Innovafeed Insect Innovation Center (\$60 million):** The French company’s first investment in the United States to provide sustainable solutions to meet the fast-growing demand in insect feed, making Decatur’s plant the largest insect protein plant in the world.

→ **Primient plant modernization (\$400 million):** An investment to replace a mix of essential equipment, implement facility improvements, and environmental upgrades.

→ **Tillamook ice cream plant (\$65 million):** The company’s first owned and operated ice cream manufacturing facility outside of Oregon churns out 48-ounce family-size ice cream containers and 3-gallon food-service ice cream containers in Decatur.

→ **TCCI electric compressor plant and Climatic Research & Innovation Center (\$35 million):** An investment to manufacture electric compressors and to establish an electric-vehicle innovation hub, a first-of-its-kind research and innovation facility and training program in collaboration with Richland Community College.

But that’s not all.

The Illinois Fermentation and Agriculture Biomanufacturing (iFAB) Tech Hub was recently awarded \$51 million from the federal Tech & Innovation Hubs program through the Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration, positioning it to become the global leader in precision fermentation and biomanufacturing — an industry expected to grow to \$200 billion over

the next 15 years.

The iFAB consortium (a collaborative effort between the University of Illinois, UI Research Park, Champaign County Economic Development Corporation and Economic Development Corporation of Decatur-Macon County, among other leaders from higher education, local governments and industries) will receive grant funds to create a unique lab-to-line approach that establishes the iFAB region (Champaign, Piatt, and Macon Counties) as the pre-eminent destination for the biomanufacturing industry.

As part of the iFAB Tech Hub management team along with Beth Conerty, regional innovation officer and associate director of business development at the UI’s Integrated Bioprocessing Research Laboratory, and Carly McCrory-McKay, executive director of the Champaign County EDC, I am excited for the United States to rival Europe and China, who have been investing heavily in this space. It is through this special, regional partnership that Decatur and Champaign-Urbana are collaborating and driving our regional economies to the next level.

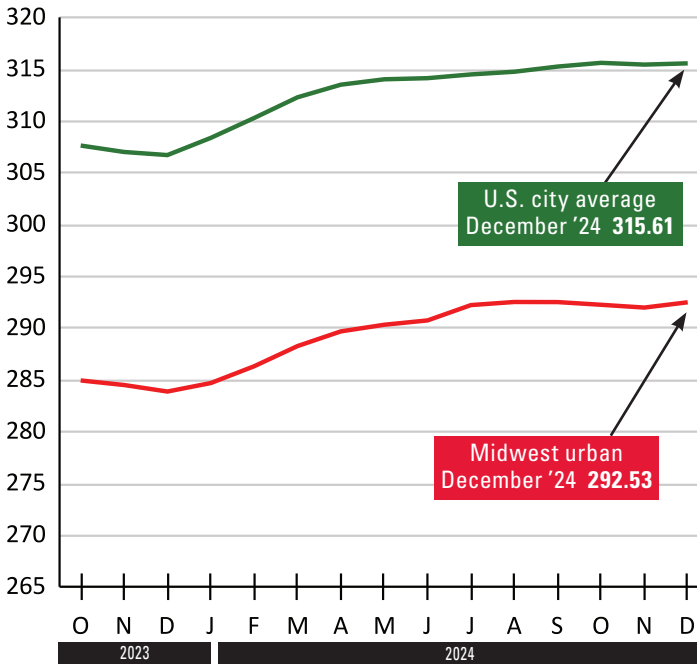
It was reported that A.E. Staley said in a local newspaper interview, “Big men don’t do small things.” I like to think this is true of Decatur. If our local and regional communities wish to continue creating endless opportunities, we must think big. Whether it’s with corn and soy or insects or ice cream or electric vehicles, Decatur and Macon County are doing big things. ✕

Nicole Bateman is president of the Economic Development Corporation of Decatur-Macon County and can be reached at nbateman@decaturedc.com. For more investment project details, visit DecaturEDC.com.

INDICATORS

Consumer price index

The CPI measures average price changes of goods and services over time, with a reference base of 100 in 1982-84. To put that into context, a current CPI of 270.75 means a marketbasket of goods and services that cost \$100 in 1982-84 now costs \$270.75.



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Amtrak total monthly riders

	January 2025	Dec. 2024
Bloomington-Normal	15,800	21,634
Champaign-Urbana	16,350	21,992
Mattoon	2,256	3,423
Rantoul	429	475

Weekly grain prices

Unofficial prices for grain crops for the week of Oct. 7, 2024. Figures are for this week and the percentage change compared with a year ago.

(b) = per bushel; (t) = per ton; (100 wt.) = per hundredweight

Grain	Oct. 7, 2024	2023
Central Illinois Corn (b)	4.25	▼ -13%
Central Illinois Soybean (b)	9.86	▼ -23.2%
Central Illinois 48% Soybean Meal Rail (t)	358.80	▼ -0.06%
Hard Red Winter Wheat (b)	5.23	N/A
Truck to Kansas City		
Dark Northern Spring Wheat (b)	N/A	N/A
14% MN, Rail		
Soft White Wheat Portland (b)	6.88	N/A
Sorghum, Kansas City (100 wt.) Rail	N/A	N/A

Source: USDA Livestock & Grain Market News

Hotel/motel statistics

Total amount of revenue generated in Champaign and Urbana by hotels and motels for room rentals only.

TOTAL REVENUE		
December '24	November '24	Change
\$422,779.09	\$544,413.85	▼ -22.34%
YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS		
2024	2023	Change
\$5,530,394.83	\$5,596,187.32	▼ -1.18%

Source: Cities of Champaign and Urbana

Prices at the pump

Average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas as of Feb. 11, 2025.

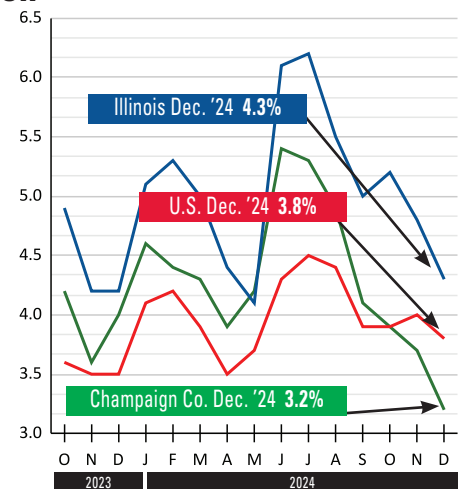
Area	February '25	February '24
Bloomington-Normal	\$3.18	\$3.27
Champaign-Urbana	\$3.11	\$3.25
Chicago	\$3.67	\$3.75
Danville	\$3.17	\$3.27
Decatur	\$3.15	\$3.26
Illinois	\$3.25	\$3.38
U.S.	\$3.14	\$3.19

Source: AAA

Unemployment rates for Central Illinois counties, state and nation

County	Labor Force	Jobless	Dec. '24 (%)	Nov. '24 (%)	Dec. '23 (%)	Change Month (%)	Change Year (%)
Champaign	114,611	3,721	3.2	3.7	3.9	▼ -0.5	▼ -0.7
Coles	23,814	824	3.5	4.0	4.0	▼ -0.5	▼ -0.5
Douglas	10,307	310	3.0	3.3	3.2	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.2
Edgar	8,924	299	3.4	3.7	3.5	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.1
Ford	6,477	232	3.6	3.7	3.8	▼ -0.1	▼ -0.2
Iroquois	12,676	499	3.9	4.1	4.5	▼ -0.2	▼ -0.6
Macon	44,203	2,324	5.3	5.6	5.7	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.4
McLean	90,781	3,282	3.6	3.9	3.6	▼ -0.3	0.0
Moultrie	6,957	224	3.2	3.5	3.7	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.5
Piatt	8,950	277	3.1	3.2	3.6	▼ -0.1	▼ -0.5
Vermilion	31,345	1,706	5.4	5.9	5.4	▼ -0.5	0.0
Region	359,045	13,698	3.7	4.1	4.1	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.3
State	6,514,061	279,482	4.3	4.8	4.2	▼ -0.5	▲ 0.1
U.S.	167,746,000	6,452,000	3.8	4.0	3.5	▼ -0.2	▲ 0.3

Source: Illinois Department of Employment Security, U.S. Department of Labor. Figures not seasonally adjusted.



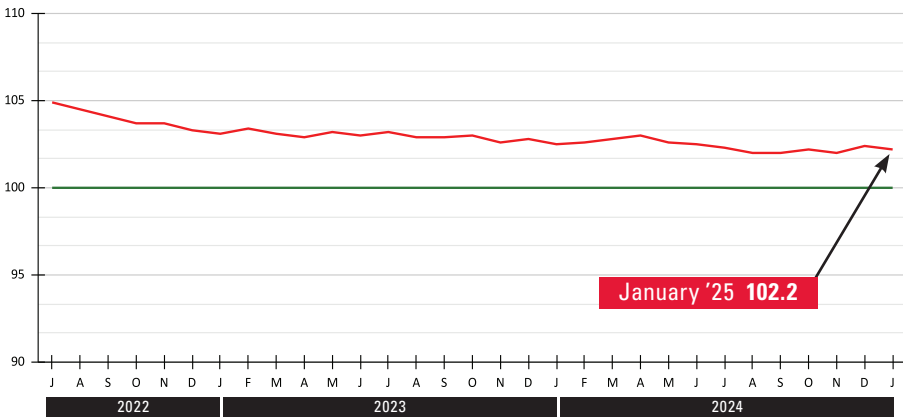
University of Illinois flash index

What is the flash index?

The flash index is an early indicator of the Illinois economy's expected performance. It is a weighted average of Illinois growth rates in corporate earnings, consumer spending and personal income.

An index above 100 indicates expected economic growth; an index below 100 indicates the economy is contracting.

Source: Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois



Champaign County retail sales collections

	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	Change ('18 vs. '23)
Champaign	\$22,423,142.90	\$21,941,280.97	\$21,169,808.79	\$16,177,806	\$17,255,397	\$17,088,725	▲ 31.2%
Mahomet	\$1,349,874.56	\$1,270,175.71	\$1,168,075.53	\$803,904	\$735,564	\$761,147	▲ 77.3%
Philo	\$168,537.50	\$165,797.37	\$150,664.38	\$110,493	\$105,128	\$111,841	▲ 50.7%
Rantoul	\$1,942,623.56	\$1,863,869.32	\$1,890,124.30	\$1,595,889	\$1,525,491	\$1,435,536	▲ 35.3%
Savoy	\$2,956,401.11	\$2,774,294.31	\$2,819,845.62	\$2,414,976	\$2,323,105	\$2,434,367	▲ 21.4%
St. Joseph	\$362,727.36	\$349,775.82	\$316,934.00	241,633	\$235,632	\$239,371	▲ 51.5%
Tolono	\$258,874.61	\$255,139.44	\$224,679.43	\$172,196	\$152,373	\$198,891	▲ 30.2%
Urbana	\$7,496,995.63	\$7,216,138.34	\$6,584,831.41	\$5,478,433	\$5,584,667	\$5,210,233	▲ 43.9%
Unincorporated	\$1,678,985.96	\$1,608,766.99	\$1,489,034.06	\$1,089,562	\$1,371,459	\$1,427,403	▲ 17.6%
County total	\$37,564,803.18	\$37,445,238.27	\$35,813,998	\$28,084,892	\$29,288,815	\$28,907,515	▲ 29.9%

Source: Latest statistics available from Illinois Department of Revenue

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Home sales Total units sold, including condominiums, by most-recent quarter.

County							Median sales price		
	4Q 2024	4Q 2023	Pct. Change	2024	2023	Pct. Change	4Q 2024	4Q 2023	Pct. Change
Champaign	465	481	▼ -3.3%	2,122	2,216	▼ -4.2%	\$220,000	\$215,000	▲ 2.3%
Coles	120	135	▼ -11.1%	502	551	▼ -8.9%	\$123,000	\$125,000	▼ -1.6%
Douglas	30	24	▲ 25.0%	130	175	▼ -25.7%	\$175,750	\$139,500	▲ 26.0%
Edgar	43	37	▲ 16.2%	157	147	▲ 6.8%	\$92,000	\$67,700	▲ 35.9%
Ford	40	40	= 0.0%	180	156	▲ 15.4%	\$135,000	\$139,550	▼ -3.3%
Iroquois	57	53	▲ 7.5%	269	241	▲ 11.6%	\$132,500	\$104,900	▲ 26.3%
Macon	309	311	▼ -0.6%	1,312	1,270	▲ 3.3%	\$137,000	\$127,000	▲ 7.9%
McLean	514	478	▲ 7.5%	2,048	2,019	▲ 1.4%	\$239,450	\$220,500	▲ 8.6%
Moultrie	33	33	= 0.0%	90	113	▼ -20.4%	\$140,000	\$95,000	▲ 47.4%
Piatt	60	55	▲ 9.1%	220	203	▲ 8.4%	\$242,000	\$170,000	▲ 42.4%
Vermilion	159	163	▼ -2.5%	672	669	▲ 0.4%	\$115,000	\$101,750	▲ 13.0%
Illinois	31,325	29,954	▲ 4.6%	130,908	132,380	▼ -1.1%	\$285,000	\$260,000	▲ 9.6%

Source: Illinois Association of Realtors

Willard Airport passenger totals

Monthly totals	Dec. '24	Dec. '23	Change
Enplanements	7,081	6,135	▲ 15.4%

YTD totals	Dec. '24	Dec. '23	Change
Enplanements	84,865	70,335	▲ 20.7%
Annual totals	2023	2022	Change
Enplanements	70,355	63,128	▲ 11.4%

Primary Mortgage Market Survey

Freddie Mac surveys lenders each week on the rates, fees and points for the most popular mortgage products. The following are the average rates for the week of Feb. 6, 2025, for the U.S. and for the North Central region, which includes Illinois, and the average rates for the U.S. one year ago. The Primary Mortgage Market Survey no longer publishes fees/points or adjustable rates, as of Nov. 17, 2022.

Mortgage type	U.S. February '25	U.S. February '24
30-year fixed	6.89%	6.64%
15-year fixed	6.05%	5.90%

Source: Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.

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Exile on Main Street

Keepin' 'em happy

**20 years in, downtown
Champaign record store still
riding waves of consumers'
changing media tastes**

STORY William David Higgs III
PHOTOS Robin Scholz

CHAMPAIGN

In the little more than 20 years since Jeff Brandt opened Exile on Main Street in the then-new One Main building in downtown Champaign, he's been on the front lines of consumers' changing tastes in media consumption, from records, CDs, cassettes and cartridges to internet streaming and back again to physical media.

Brandt originally opened the store — named after a 1972 Rolling Stones album — in November 2004 in a space beneath the offices of the Volition Inc. video-game studio, whose employees soon became some of his best customers.



Jeff Brandt, owner of Exile on Main Street, talks with a customer at the business in the former Illinois Central Passenger station in downtown Champaign, across the street from the Illinois Terminal.



Exile on Main Street's front entrance in the former Illinois Central passenger station in downtown Champaign faces Chestnut Street ...



Some of the eclectic art on display in the store includes, clockwise from bottom left, a mural on the ceiling painted by local artist Langston Allston; a mishmash of stickers on the back of a door; and a portrait of the late actor Abe Vigoda behind two Johnny Cash vinyl albums for sale.



... and the rear entrance faces the railroad tracks, and includes a key feature its previous home lacked — dedicated customer parking.



Customer John Knoblett of Champaign walks across the store's stage, designed to look like a giant version of the 1972 Rolling Stones album that serves as its namesake, as he browses the vinyl selection.

About 10 years later, in September 2014, the store made a move down the street and around the corner to a space in the former Illinois Central Passenger Terminal on Chestnut Street.

“When we moved to Chestnut, we thought about changing our name since we weren’t on Main Street anymore,” Brandt says. “We tossed around a few ideas — ‘Exiled Off Main Street’ was one — but we wanted to keep the same name, like the Stones album.”

The store took advantage of the site’s vintage architecture, including the station’s original ticket office, which now houses boxes of vinyl records that customers can browse. A new addition was a central stage for the many live performances the store hosts; it’s designed to look like a turntable playing a giant version of — what else? — the Stones’ album that serves as the store’s namesake.



Two kinds of music royalty: At left, a poster of a local R&B septet that named themselves after their hometown and hit No. 12 on the Billboard Hot 100 with 1981's 'How 'Bout Us'; at right, vinyl, CDs, cassettes, cups and a rare bootleg Blu-ray celebrating the music of global pop superstar Taylor Swift.

Brandt also kept many of the fixtures from the original space. Longtime customers might recognize the end counter between the cash register and display case.

"My dad built the fixtures, let's be honest," Brandt says. "I was just there handing him things. He was always building something in the garage growing up. So when I first opened the business, he just helped me build these two counters."

Brandt points inside the display case where customers can find some rare items, including an original print of the 1970 album "Led Zeppelin III." He slides the record from its sleeve to show off the original printing.

"Mint condition," he adds.



Hundreds of CDs, framed artwork and even posters sit on display in one corner of the store.

NEW NEIGHBORS



From left, co-owners Steve McQueen, Larry Williams, Barbara Levine and Joy Davis.

Now open in store's northern end: Needful Things Warehouse Gallery

CHAMPAIGN — A new business selling vintage goods has opened in a particularly fitting location: a historic train station in downtown Champaign.

Needful Things Warehouse Gallery is located inside The Station at 100 N. Chestnut St. Its temporary entrance is through the Exile on Main Street record store.

Co-owners Joy Davis, Barbara Levine, Larry Williams and Steve McQueen opened the shop in November, touting it as the place to find both vintage and modern items, including furniture, decor, art, gifts, clothing, accessories and collectibles.

"The four of us, having been friends for decades, have a shared sense of community and bringing people together," the group told The News-Gazette. "We also have a shared passion for vintage items and the history behind them. As soon as we entered the train station, we realized that our vintage offerings, soon to be more readily available inside a historical building, would help

preserve local history and heritage, allowing customers to connect with the past."

Additionally, the owners of Needful Things do their best to source goods locally, which enables them to provide more detail to customers about the history behind these items. They also feature items made by local artisans, including custom furniture.

The shop currently occupies the space that formerly housed Dandelion. However, they are working to expand into The Station's north end, which would be combined with their current home, and hope to have the renovations finished by April 1. They would then plan to hold a soft opening within a week of completion.

In the meantime, the four owners are enjoying the ride.

"We have been friends for decades and are having a great time with this venture," they said. "People enter our store as strangers and leave as new friends. We just love it!"

— JANA WIERSEMA



Among the store's offerings, clockwise from above: CDs from local bands; cassettes recorded by customers; and a wall of VHS tapes and DVDs.



Zeppelin fans can find other original pressings behind the register or on the shelves. Exile on Main Street offers one of the widest selections of physical media in Champaign-Urbana, particularly vinyl.

"We sell way more records than we do anything else," Brandt says. "That trend started slowly about 17 years ago, give or take. By four or five years into the store being opened, it became clear that things were trending for us selling more vinyl than anything."

"But then, over the last 10 years, cassette tapes have really started to come back," he adds. "It's shocking what I can sell some of these things for. Most

cassettes I'd put a quarter on 20 years ago; there are some I'll sell for \$20 today."

"The only reason we're still here is because people continue to buy pretty much everything we offer, physical-media wise," he says.

Vintage media makes up an increasingly large portion of sales for the store. According to Brandt, many customers come for its wide selection of collectibles.

"We've started to carry more old-school video games," he says. "I don't get as much in as I want, but we've started to see more cartridges. Everyone finds something to collect, and we try to carry something for everyone here."

Although Exile on Main Street carries many older forms of media, Brandt has noticed an uptick of interest in physical media and collectibles among younger people in particular. Although everything from songs to video games are available on the internet, the convenience of streaming comes with a loss of quality.

"Some people are switching back [to physical media] because of an audio-quality issue," Brandt says. "But I'm also noticing that a lot of people younger than me didn't grow up consuming physical media, so they're gravitating to things like CDs."



Customer Bill Freres of Champaign reminisces over a vinyl copy of The Who's 1969 album 'Tommy' near the store's new-arrivals section.

“A lot of people are just now discovering those again.”

As you might imagine, the store has also been an important fixture in the local-music scene. Many of its employees are also in bands and work as booking agents and sound engineers, and it hosts in-store performances and has been part of local festivals, including Pygmalion.

It has also been a longtime participant in Record Store Day, a movement that began in 2007 to “celebrate the culture of the independently owned record store” that features exclusive releases and a slate of live performances. This year’s event is set for April 12. ✂

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A+ Cutz Barbershop

Generating buzz



New haircutting stations are shown at the Danville Area Community College Barber School at the Village Mall in Danville.

Danville barber passing along his lifelong passion as director of DACC's new barbering program

STORY Jennifer Bailey

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

WHEN Terry Gouard was 13 years old, he started cutting people's hair.

"I would cut my friend's hair ... at home. My dad was one of my first clients. I was messing

him up, but he didn't care because he just wanted a free haircut," the now-32-year-old said. "My mom, she actually bought me my first pair of clippers for my birthday because she knew that's something I wanted to do."



Terry Gouard, director of DACC's new barbering program, tends to a customer at his A+ Cutz barbershop on East Main Street in Danville.
Photo provided



The classroom space at the DACC Barber School at the Village Mall in Danville.

At Danville High School, he was cutting the hair of his fellow students and members of the show choir before their competitions.

He also would visit his mentor, Phil Davis, at Davis Barber Shop behind the post office. Gouard realized during his junior year that it was something worth pursuing after high school.

Gouard said it wasn't always his plan to own his own barbershop, but as he grew, it was something he wanted to do.

After graduating in 2010, he went to

Peoria Barber College, where he was the youngest person in his class, for his barber license, and Larry's Barber College for his barber instructor license.

Returning to Danville, he worked at Davis Barber Shop for about five years, and at the age of 23, he decided it was time to start his own shop.

"I always had the name A+ Cutz," Gouard said.

He said if you look at old pictures of him in barber school, he used to draw the name and logo for his barber shop,

and he'd have it on his mirrors.

"That was pretty cool. So, I look back at it now, like man, everything that I said I was going to do, I did it," Gouard said.

He said he followed his dream, worked hard and made everything lead up to today.

He started his barber shop on East Main Street and occupied two different buildings on that road. He moved it downtown for two years, then back to East Main.



Gouard is reflected in a mirror at one of the stations in the DACC Barber School.

Gouard also always wanted to start a barber school, and a partnership with Danville Area Community College is making that dream come true this year, as he now serves as director of its recently launched barbering program.

As to what makes a good barber, and advice he'd give others about being a barber?

"Haircuts are good, but that's not the most important thing," he said. "Being a people person; being reliable; being somebody that somebody can talk to."

He's watched clients grow up from being boys to men to fathers.

"That's big," Gouard said.

One client, who started coming to him for haircuts at age 10 is now 21 and has a child of his own, whose hair Gouard also cuts.

"We're sort of like family in a sense," Gouard said. "As long as you treat them good, they'll treat you good. That's the most important."

"Haircuts are important, but customer service is important," he added. "Being professional is important. Being reliable is important."

Gouard said certain clients trust him enough with their kids that they will drop them off for a cut and pick them up later.

He's also a dad to three kids, two boys and a girl. He said his oldest used to be interested in being a barber, but his daughter might also follow in his footsteps.

"Barbers, we're professionals," he said. "A lot of people feel like we're not, but we are, we're essentials. We go back from 5,000 B.C. We've been around for a long time. We have to be essential."

Gouard also explained why barber poles are red, white and blue. The red represents blood, white is for bandages and blue symbolizes veins — a reference to Medieval times, when barbers, who were adept at using razors for cutting hair, were also called upon to perform surgery and dentistry.



A barber pole spins outside the new DACC barber school at the Village Mall, and Gouard said he's excited to start this next chapter in his career.

"I'm just going to promote not only great haircuts but being good people, accountable people, reliable people, professional people," he said.

He said the five eight-week courses he's instructing will turn students into licensed professional barbers. Areas of study include anatomy, history of barbering, chemistry, life skills, tools and implements, hair coloring, and business management.

"It is a lot. We're going to go over

a lot of things," he said, about the approximately nine months of classes that end with an exit exam and then a state board test.

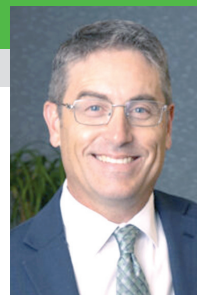
"I'm just going to push that lifestyle on them," Gouard said. "Lead by example. My old instructors always say, 'Walk it like I talk it.' If you see me, you're going to see that's the lifestyle I lead too as well."

There's a high need for barbers and it's a lucrative career, he said.

He said someone can be the coolest hair-cutter in the world, but once they become professional and licensed, the sky's the limit. ✂



Making tough choices now to ensure success in future



By MIKE MARRON
CIB contributor

I am a fierce defender of Vermilion County and believe in my heart of hearts that it is the best place on Earth. I will not back down to anyone on that point. I believe we have assets here, like a resilient, generous population, that other communities would die for. I would pick no other place to raise my kids.

That does not mean, however, that we as leaders of this county don't have a lot of work to do to make sure we make it an even better place to live and that we are laying the groundwork for the economic successes of the future.

We have been challenged economically and seen retraction for the last 40 to 50 years. It is a trend we must reverse. Economic renewal is a tough job, but one we are cut out for. The job of economic renewal is not linear, and we will have our setbacks.

Once we make the tough choices for real and necessary change that can be disruptive to the status quo and will upset people, we will lay the groundwork for a better future, but unfortunately, that won't mean all the headlines will always be rosy.

We are likely to experience more setbacks, and there may even be more headlines. I pray this isn't the case, like when we learned about the closure of the Quaker Oats plant. People don't want to hear that, but I believe in shooting straight, and I also believe that when you are on the right course and things get rocky, you must be committed to following through and seeing your plan through to fruition.

The first part of Vermilion Advantage's plan for economic renewal is to start planning again for industrial development.

We must identify areas that are conducive to industrial development and get those areas under option for purchase. We must do a thorough evaluation of those areas to figure out what the infrastructure needs are and get a good handle on the cost of upgrades to make development happen. We then must do a thorough study based on data and an analysis of the regional economy and our workforce availability to determine what industries might be successful in Vermilion County and what industries we can be successful in recruiting.

When all that planning is done, we then must figure out how to fund the needed infrastructure upgrades for

the targeted industry. It is Vermilion Advantage's role to show our local government leaders how those investments will result in a significant return on their investment of taxpayer resources. It is the role of local government leaders, because those resources are so scarce, to be extra judicious in allocating those funds.

Our local leaders need to make sure that any projects they fund will be for the ultimate long-term economic viability of the county. This organization intends to hold their feet to the fire on that standard. We have to make every dollar count in this county.

These efforts are already underway. Vermilion Advantage was notified recently that we were awarded a grant from the Federal Economic Development Administration. Those grant funds will be used to commission the study I described above. We will do an analysis of the local and regional economy, find a list of companies we can try to recruit, do an evaluation of what infrastructure those companies might need, and then use software we invested in last year to show our local leaders what they can expect to get back in tax revenue for their investments in infrastructure.

The final course of action will be to go out and put the hard sell on those targeted companies to get them to come to Vermilion County. This is a long-term plan that is likely to take a number of years to see through to completion, but we have to get started sometime. Now is that time.

This is only one part of our renewal plan. I will share details on other parts of the plan in future articles. This is a solid plan, and Vermilion Advantage is committed to seeing it through to completion — and we intend to be successful.

That doesn't mean this is going to be easy, or that we won't ever see any more bad news economically in our county. Challenges will continue to come and go. What it does mean is that we are committed to this renewal plan for the long term, and we will see it through until the end, no matter what happens.

Vermilion County is worth it. After all, this is the best place on Earth. ✕

Mike Marron is president and CEO of Vermilion Advantage and served as representative for the 104th Illinois House District from 2018 to 2023.

Tax-prep services for older adults



By JOAN DIXON
CIB contributor

It's that time of year again.

Regardless of our feelings about the government, most adults incur an obligation to pay taxes annually.

It would be nice if — at a certain age or upon retirement — we no longer had to pay, but that is not the case. Taxes are not determined by age, so we never age out of paying taxes.

The process of preparing taxes can be confusing, difficult and intimidating — especially if your life situation has changed. Fortunately, there are a number of organizations that offer free tax-preparation assistance.

Most of these services are provided by local nonprofit organizations, and the assistance is given by well-trained volunteers. Many of the volunteers are retired accountants, bookkeepers and tax preparers. All of them have received training and updates on current rules, annual updates and changes, and are typically IRS certified.

These volunteers have been trained to file accurately and they are aware of exemptions and special rules and opportunities for older adults.

Here are some options around the area:

RSVP, a program of Family Service

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program partners with AARP Tax-Aide and the Champaign Public Library to provide its service.

RSVP recruits and trains receptionists who schedule appointments, walk people through the process and explain what they need to bring.

In addition, RSVP recruits at least 10 tax facilitators who review paperwork, IDs, etc., when people arrive for their appointments. If someone shows up without a required item, it will be necessary to reschedule their appointment. This makes it

efficient for the tax preparers and others receiving assistance.

Appointments began in early February and run through April 15. They are scheduled for Tuesday through Saturday each week. The Saturday appointments are only in the mornings, and there are no evening appointments.

Taxes are prepared in a conference room on the second floor of the Champaign Public Library. The facilitators (who will check the paperwork) are in the adjacent study room. Because of the number of volunteers, appointments are booked every 15 minutes with two people per timeslot. Clients should expect at least 90 minutes for the whole process to submit both federal and state tax returns.

The service is free and open to all adults (not just seniors) who have simple taxes (those that use Form 1040 with Schedule A and have taxable incomes low enough to be computed from the tax tables). You may submit for prior years as well, but you must make an appointment for each year to be filed.

Tax volunteers are also trained to assist part-year residents and foreign residents, including college students. For these situations, you will be asked to bring additional items with you to the appointment.

In 2024, the local Tax-Aide program (including Rantoul and Monticello) filed more than 1,000 returns. The national average cost for a basic tax form preparation is about \$220 for standard 1040 and state returns with no itemized deductions. This free program saved residents at least a quarter of a million dollars in filing fees.

To make an appointment, call RSVP at 217-359-6500.

CRIS Healthy Aging

CRIS is a Tax Counsel for the Elderly Site, which is an IRS designation. Adults 60 and older in Champaign and Vermilion Counties are eligible to participate in this free program. Appointments can be scheduled by calling CRIS at 217-355-1543.

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance

The University of Illinois Gies School of Business runs this service, which is available for those 60 and older; those with low- to moderate income (typically below \$67,000 per household); those with disabilities; and those with limited English proficiency. You only have to qualify in one of these areas.

Appointments are scheduled between 3 and 7 p.m. on Tuesdays, 1 and 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, and 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Saturdays. The service is provided at Salt & Light, 1819 Philo Road, Urbana.

Call Salt & Light at 355-5654 or contact VITA@business.illinois.edu.

These are very popular services, so even if you are not ready to work on your taxes today, call for an appointment now before all the slots are claimed.

If you are going to use one of these options, remember that you should bring all your tax-related documents and appropriate forms of ID.

Here's hoping we all get income-tax refunds! ✕

Joan Dixon is a member of the steering committees of Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana and Advocates for Aging Care and represents Champaign County on the corporate board of the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging.

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