

CENTRAL ILLINOIS Business

February | March 2026
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COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS



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Champaign-based Clark Dietz, born out of a collaboration of UI engineering professors, getting set to mark 40 years of being employee-owned

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Central Illinois Business magazine is published bimonthly by Central Illinois Multimedia Group LLC, 2101 Fox Drive, Champaign, IL 61820. The magazine is published six times per year and delivered to businesses, community development leaders, chamber of commerce members and other professionals in East Central Illinois. Subscriptions are available at news-gazette.com. Click on "subscribe" at the top of the home page. Postmaster: Send address changes to Central Illinois Business magazine, P.O. Box 677, Champaign, IL 61824-0677. ©2026 by Central Illinois Multimedia Group LLC, all rights reserved. Contents may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher.

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From the editor's desk



We've had a great time telling the stories of the businesses that

built us, and there's plenty more to tell, so we're rolling last year's theme into 2026.

Our cover story focuses on Clark Dietz, a firm that began as a collaboration of three University of Illinois engineering professors and has been involved in some of the most prominent projects throughout East Central Illinois. They're about to mark 40 years of being employee-owned.

We're also taking a look at a new — well, maybe "rebooted" is the better word — effort by Urbana-based Campus Ink to bring its merchandise to college sports fans wherever they may be. Their new "NIL Store Live" mobile trailer was inspired by co-owner Jedd Swisher's tours in the 1990s to area tournaments in a van filled with screen-printing equipment.

Have a suggestion for others we should profile? I'd love to hear about it. My contact info is below.

— 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

Sean Widener, left, executive vice president and treasurer at Clark Dietz, and board Chair Jerry Payonk pose in front of a photo display of one of its projects, the West Washington Street (Champaign) Drainage Improvements, at the company's headquarters in the Robeson Building in downtown Champaign.



Visit news-gazette.com for updates of business news and event information.

Michelle Benjamin

STORY Jeff D'Alessio

PHOTOS Provided

Thirtysomething years later, **MICHELLE BENJAMIN** still vividly remembers the exchange that proved she'd picked the right line of work.

"As my guest walked out, she turned to me and said: 'Thank you for giving me back a piece of myself,'" Benjamin says. "That moment struck me deeply, reminding me of why I do what I do — to create a space where people can escape, heal and reconnect with themselves."

The owner of the popular Champaign boutique spa Benjamin & Co. Esthetique is a proud former Catlin High Wolverine who still lives just outside the Vermilion County village of 2,100.

"After high school, I ventured to Indianapolis to pursue my passion for esthetics, immersing myself in the field and embracing the journey of adulthood over the next five years," Benjamin says. "The experience I gained through this time was invaluable, shaping both my personal and professional life. Eventually, I returned to Catlin to be closer to my boyfriend, Scott, who is now my husband of 25 wonderful years."

Mom to Gabe and Ava, who graduated from Salt Fork schools, Benjamin has been a local small-business owner for going on two decades.

She took time out during the busy "spa-liday" season to answer questions from **News-Gazette Editor Jeff D'Alessio** in the 309th installment of our weekly speed read spotlighting leaders of organizations big and small.



The three adjectives I hope my staff would use to describe me are ... supportive, passionate and approachable.

I can't live without ... the unwavering support of my husband, Scott, and our children, Gabe and Ava. They inspire me every single day to strive for better, to push myself further and to be a positive role model for them.

Their love and encouragement are what keep me motivated and grounded, reminding me of the kind of person I want to be for them and the values I want to instill in their lives. They are my biggest cheerleaders.

When it comes to a professional role model ... this is a tough one. I have many, so I will go with the first one I can remember. My grade school teacher, Pam Depratt, believed in me when others didn't. She challenged me to strive for excellence and work diligently toward my goals, encouraging me never to give up on my dreams.

I'm still close to Pam today, and I continue to look up to her and hopefully have made her proud.

The hardest thing about being a leader in the spa industry is ... striking the right balance between managing the business and nurturing my team. I genuinely care about the well-being of my staff, knowing their happiness directly impacts the experience we provide to our guests.

My passion for creating a serene and supportive environment keeps me motivated.

The weight of leadership can feel heavy at times, but the joy we create for our guests and the passion my staff brings far outweighs any challenges. Their smiles easily make me forget any burdens I carry. It's a journey of consistent growth, learning and striving to be the best leader I can be for my team and our guests.

On the walls of my home office, you'll find ... books on skincare, pictures of my kids and dad, artwork from my friends, affirmation cards I read every day and a framed quote: "Only pressure makes diamonds."

I'm frugal in that ... I love to shop, but shoe shopping I can't stand, so I will wear them until they are worn out just so I don't have to shop for them.

If I could trade places for a week with any other business person in town, I wouldn't mind switching with ... Jill Guth. She is an incredible leader who not only gets things done, but also inspires those around her with her unwavering support and strength.

As a fiercely independent businesswoman, I know I could learn so much from her. The opportunity to experience her



perspective and approach would be invaluable, and I deeply admire the impact she has on our community.

I am blessed to have her in my life.

My one unbreakable rule of the workplace is ... guest safety and well-being is always the top priority — whether it's through proper sanitation practices, understanding contraindications or being attentive to their comfort during every treatment.

The single-most important question I ask job candidates during interviews is ... can you describe a time when you faced a challenging situation with a guest and how you handled it?

This question not only assesses their problem-solving skills and ability to handle guest relationships, but also provides insight into their communication style, professionalism and commitment to guest satisfaction.

The first thing I do when I get to work most days is ... take a moment to review the day schedule.

This helps me prepare for the appointments, ensure that everyone is in order and check in with my team to address any needs or concerns before we welcome our guests.

It sets a positive tone for the day and allows me to focus on providing the best experience for everyone.

For lunch ... I skip it — or else I wouldn't be able to get all my guests in.

I often wind down after work by ... indulging in a relaxing dip in my hot tub, adding essential oils. And when my hands don't hurt, I like to manifest through painting.

The last good book I read was ... "The Let Them Theory" by Mel Robbins.

I'm up and at 'em every day by ... 5:30 a.m.

My exercise routine consists of ... walking three to four times a week and Pilates once a week when I'm not training.

I've known I wanted to work in the beauty industry since ... grade school, when I'd spend my time brushing and braiding hair and experimenting with makeup.

For a while, I thought cosmetology would be my path, but everything changed during my junior year of high school. My dad took me to visit a few schools in Chicago, and during our tour, we explored the esthetics program.

The moment I stepped into that school clinic and saw all the girls in white lab coats, looking polished and working on clients' skin with impressive machines and products, I turned to my

dad and exclaimed, "This is it! I want to be an esthetician! I'm going to be an esthetician! This is so me!"

My dad fully supported my decision. Now, 32 years later, my passion for esthetics is just as strong as it was the day I first walked through those clinic doors.

The first job I ever had was ... babysitting. I started at age 12. Wow, that would not fly these days. :)

As for the worst job I ever had ... my dad owned a farm, and my brother and I would walk the fields cutting corn out of beans. Hard work and it was hot, but my brother and I always had fun. So maybe not the worst job — just hot — but great memories.

Helping people and making a difference has always been my motivation for pushing forward and striving for excellence as a professional. ✂

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Hot off the grill

Much-loved eatery to be featured by America's Best Restaurants



The line for the Smith Burger Co. food truck grows at the 2024 Sunflower Celebration at Clearview Farm in Champaign. INSET: Co-owners Drew and Jessica Smith hold up fingers to show how many locations they now have inside Gies Memorial Stadium ahead of the start of last football season.

STORY Jana Wiersema

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

CHAMPAIGN

A popular local burger joint is getting national recognition.

Smith Burger Co. — which has locations in both Champaign and Urbana, as well as a food truck — will be featured by America's Best Restaurants, a media firm that highlights independent eateries across the country.

"It's honestly a great feeling," said co-owner Drew Smith. "Being featured by

America's Best Restaurants puts a national spotlight on the hard work our team does every day and the support we've received from the community. For a locally owned business, that kind of recognition means a lot."

America's Best Restaurants produces the "ABR Roadshow," with episodes of the "TV-quality show" shared on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and other "high-traffic platforms."

"This isn't just a one-time video — it's a marketing powerhouse," the firm's website states. "We create 100+ pieces of social-media content from your episode, keeping your restaurant in front of local customers long after filming. Many featured restaurants see increased traffic, social media growth, and even local news coverage."

Smith said that he does not have an exact filming date yet but was told that ABR expects to be in the area in June or July.

"We are going to be announcing the filming date ahead of time so we can fill the seats with our customers, so stay tuned," he added.

Other area restaurants featured by

ABR include Buford's Pub in Sadorus, Korner Beehive in Villa Grove (prior to its September 2024 closure), Yoder's Kitchen in Arthur and Gilbert Street Cafe in Danville.

"We only feature a handful of restaurants in each area," ABR's website states. "We look for restaurants with great food, strong customer love, and an owner who's ready to take their brand to the next level."

Smith Burger Co. applied over a year ago after Drew Smith saw an episode about one of his favorite places to eat in Bloomington.

The burger joint shared the news of its ABR recognition in a Facebook post, encouraging community members to

comment with their favorite dishes. Those who do so will receive a one-time offer for a free sandwich or burger that can be redeemed in store.

As of mid-January, over 750 people had commented. So far, the most popular items have been the All-American, the Bacon Mac Attack and the City Slicker, Smith told The News-Gazette.

"It's been a really positive response, and we're focused on keeping it fun for everyone," he said. "It's definitely a large expense giving away so much food, but it gets new customers in the door, and it offers a nice little reward for our regular customers that have supported us since Day 1." X

How to train your algorithm



By LAURA WEIS
CIB contributor



An image from the Netflix documentary-drama 'The Social Dilemma' (2020).

My husband and I both downloaded a news-aggregator app that promotes itself as “balanced” news. And to be fair, the app does give access to credible, middle-of-the-road news sources. What the marketing glosses over is that the app also studies what we read and then progressively “personalizes” our news feeds. So, every once in a while, just for middle-aged fun, we play a game: “What’s in your top five?”

The first two stories are always the same. Those are the app’s version of universally “important” breaking news. But after that? It’s like we live on different planets. A glance at my feed would convince anyone that I have an unhealthy fascination with the British royal family (for the record, I am Team Kate). Meanwhile, my husband’s feed contains exactly zero speculation about what Harry did or didn’t say to Meghan.

We use the same app. We live in the same house. We talk about current events at the same dinner table. Yet our news worlds look nothing alike. That’s the algorithm at work.

In 2020, Netflix released “The Social Dilemma,” a documentary-drama hybrid that, honestly, was one of the most unsettling things I have ever watched. The film explains in simple terms how algorithms shape our

online experience. Millions of posts, stories and videos are uploaded every day. No human could possibly sort through them. So, platforms use complex formulas — algorithms — to decide what you see first, what you see most and what you never see at all.

Think of the algorithm as the hyper-attentive assistant who never sleeps. It notices what you like, comment on, share or save. It tracks what you follow. It even measures how long you pause over something. If you linger on a video for a few seconds, even if you’re just confused or annoyed by it, your assistant assumes, “She’s interested. Show her more of this.” Before long, your feed becomes uniquely yours.

Here’s the truth: Your feed feels personal, but it really isn’t about you. It’s about your attention. Social platforms make money by keeping you scrolling. The longer you stay, the more ads you see. The algorithm’s job isn’t to inform you, broaden or challenge you. Its job is to keep you engaged.

It’s the ultimate yes-person.

If you watch puppies, it serves up more puppy videos. If you pause on outrage, it finds more outrage. If you hover over celebrity drama, your world is suddenly filled with that drama. It doesn’t ask whether this content is good for you, your relationships or your understanding of the world.

It just asks, “Will this keep her here?” We are living in an intensely divided political and social climate. Technology has made it incredibly easy to filter our experience so that we see mostly what we already agree with. We join like-minded groups. We follow voices that echo our own. The algorithm reinforces those choices until our digital world feels like a beehive of people who think just like we do. Over time, that bubble starts to feel like reality.

We see fewer and fewer perspectives outside our own. Complexity gets flattened. We stop hearing other people’s viewpoints, and the gray area disappears. People who disagree with us don’t just seem mistaken — they feel like they’re from a different world. The thoughtful conversations that help communities solve problems get replaced with noise and people talking past each other.

Breaking the algorithm cycle isn’t just a tech trick. It’s a responsibility. The first step is awareness. Once you understand that your feed is manipulated to keep you comfortable and engaged, you can start making changes.

That means being intentional about what you click. If you hate-read something and then dive into the comments, you’re training the algorithm to give you more of what annoys you. Scrolling past quickly sends a different signal.

Use the tools all platforms provide: “Not interested.” “Hide post.” “Unfollow.” It may feel like a small action, but it is direct feedback to the system. Just as important, actively seek out reputable sources with perspectives that differ from your own. Read beyond the headlines.

You don’t have to agree with everything you read. The goal isn’t to

change your beliefs on command — it’s to make sure your worldview isn’t being narrowed without your consent.

There is also a personal benefit. When your feed is less dominated by anger, fear or endless drama, your mental space changes. Many people find they feel calmer, less reactive and more focused when they step out of the algorithm’s most emotionally charged loops. Puppies, rainbows, baby elephants and silly toddler videos have their place — we all need lightness — but so does balanced, thoughtful information.

The algorithm will always try to lead. That’s how it’s built. But we don’t have to follow blindly. We can retrain it. And when we do, we don’t just improve our feeds — we improve how we understand the world and each other.

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

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BUILDING PERMITS

Listed are permits for all new single-family and multifamily residences, as well as commercial and industrial work and residential remodeling costing over \$25,000, in Champaign, Mahomet, Rantoul, Savoy and Urbana. Permits are listed by applicant, description of work, location and estimated cost.

CHAMPAIGN

- Solar Mite Illinois, rooftop solar at 310 W. John St., \$25,000.
- Polar Block Sales Inc., window replacements at 2515 Windward Blvd., \$32,000.
- Heights Tower Service, Inc., exterior equipment upgrades at 108 W. Washington St., \$40,000.
- Polar Block Sales Inc., window replacements at Wendover Place, \$43,000.
- Gama Enterprise, interior changes for restaurant at 1905 N. Neil St., \$45,000.
- 414 E. Tremont St., single-family remodel at Rudys Reliable Renovations, \$57,000.
- Miller Enterprises, demolition at 1801 W. Springfield Ave., \$72,500.
- C-U Under Construction, bathroom and bedroom remodel at 1701 Mullikin Drive, \$107,411.
- Prime Retail Services Inc., store alteration — front end at 2610 N. Prospect Ave., \$115,500.
- Remco Electrical Corp., office space and warehouse renovation at 1401 Parkland Court, \$144,000.
- Erik Merz, new daycare at 1508 Ridgeway Ave., \$150,000.
- Fairlawn, interior apartment renovations at 1507 W. Kirby Ave., \$162,732.
- Fairlawn, interior apartment alterations at 1506 Lincolnshire Drive, \$162,732.
- Management Resource Group, tenant fit out at 902 Meijer Drive, Unit Ste. 2, \$352,881.
- ISM Management Company LLC, MFD interior renovations at 611 Crescent Drive, \$804,148.
- Wells & Wells Construction, footing and foundation for five-story at 401 S. Wright St., \$1,160,000.
- ECI Construction Services, restaurant exterior wall repair at 2010 N. Neil St., \$25,000.
- 4-D Construction of Illinois Inc., fire damage repairs to multi-family at 501 E. Columbia Ave., \$1,260,400.
- Solar Mite Illinois, rooftop solar at 4903 Watermark Drive, \$25,000.
- Hall Construction, interior remodel — adding bathroom at 1527 Devonshire Drive, \$28,500.
- Craig Wakeland, interior alterations at 507 S. McKinley Ave., \$50,000.
- CU Midwest Designs LLC, basement finish at 3402 Mill Creek Court, \$31,725.56.
- Maligaya's Exterior Repair — roof repair at 814 S. Fair St., \$30,000.

- Tron Solar LLC, rooftop solar at 2801 Alton Drive, \$41,700.
- Original Bros., bathroom remodel at 1109 Harrington Drive, \$27,100.
- Dan Reuber, interior renovations at 705 S. State St., \$41,000.
- C-U Under Construction, roof replacement at 1111 W. Daniel St., \$25,100.
- Habitat For Humanity of Champaign County, new single-family dwelling at 1208 Garden Hills Drive, \$128,000.
- Vortex Restoration, install of vehicle-charging dispensers at 101 S. Mattis Ave., \$150,000.

MAHOMET

- Unlimited Homes, new residential construction at 1415 Milton Court, \$400,000.
- Les Wilson, remodel at 716 Cole Lane, \$30,000.
- MTC Ventures LLC, site development — remodel at 802 Hickory St., \$117,000.
- Unlimited Homes, new residential construction at 1413 Milton Court, \$400,000.
- CXT Precast Concrete Products, accessory building at 1000 Crowley Road, \$57,000.
- Halo Solar LLC, property improvements — solar at 602 Red Bud Drive, \$30,884.
- Signature Custom Homes, new residential construction at 1417 Cross Creek Road, \$1,066,000.
- Sunrun Installation Services, solar installation at 1509 River Bluff Court, \$33,858.

RANTOUL

- RC Electric, electrical work at 731 E. Sangamon Ave., \$35,000.
- Servpro Champaign, plumbing work at 704 Eden Park Drive, \$95,656.
- Bendsen Signs and Graphics, mechanical work at 700 W. Champaign Ave., \$63,946.
- Taylor Construction & Design, plumbing work at 308 Deerfield Drive, \$269,961.
- Blusky Restoration, residential renovation at 608 Broadmeadow Road, \$142,543.

SAVOY

- Smith Solar Advantage, building work at 412 Gentian St., \$36,500.
- Heather Houser, building work at 204 Ellen Ave., \$135,000.
- Route 66 Solar, building work at 409 Trefoil St., \$41,418.
- J.K. Electric, electrical work at 1333 Savoy Lane, Suite 10, \$75,000.
- Edelman, building work at 307 Trefoil St., \$31,691.

- Signature Construction Inc., building work at 403 Sutton St., \$425,000.
- F.E. Moran, fire suppression at 1333 Savoy Plaza Lane, \$41,534.
- Prospective Plumbing Corp., plumbing work at 1333 Savoy Plaza Lane, \$160,000.
- FE Moran Fire Protection, electrical work at 1333 Savoy Plaza Lane, Ste. 10, \$26,696.
- Premier Homes of Illinois, building work at 505 Lake Falls Blvd., \$700,000.

URBANA

- MJO PLLC, alteration/renovation/remodel at 1601 E. Colorado Ave., \$41,400.
- Pointcore Construction, alteration/renovation/remodel at 1400 W. Park St., \$6,264,088.
- Conveying Convenience Inc., alteration/renovation/remodel at 1809 N. Cunningham Ave., \$157,000.
- A&R Services, alteration/renovation/remodel at 803 W. Kettering Park Drive, \$90,000.
- C-U Midwest Designs, alteration/renovation/remodel at 213 W. Illinois St., \$70,000.
- Heartland Builders PLLC, alteration/renovation/remodel at 605 W. Iowa St., \$27,000.
- Freedom Forever Illinois, LLC, solar installation at 2602 N. Somerset Drive, \$28,000.
- Edelman, LLC, solar installation at 906 E. Harmon St., \$49,536.
- Tim Gibbs Custom Builders, kitchen alteration/renovation/remodel at 505 E. Burkwood Court East, \$54,600.
- The Best Roofing, roof replacement, repair roof or replace sheathing at 607 E. Main St., \$25,000.
- Architectural Expressions, LLP, building and site alteration/renovation/remodel at 703 E. Colorado Ave., \$2,364,146.32.
- Dalco Design Build, new single-family dwelling at 3102 E. Beringer Circle., \$403,699.
- C-U Under Construction, second-floor and attic alteration/renovation/remodel at 710 W. Vermont Ave., \$128,000.
- C-U Under Construction, new single-family dwelling at 1305 S. Smith Road, \$174,850.
- C-U Under Construction, new single-family dwelling at 1307 S. Smith Road, \$177,850. ✕

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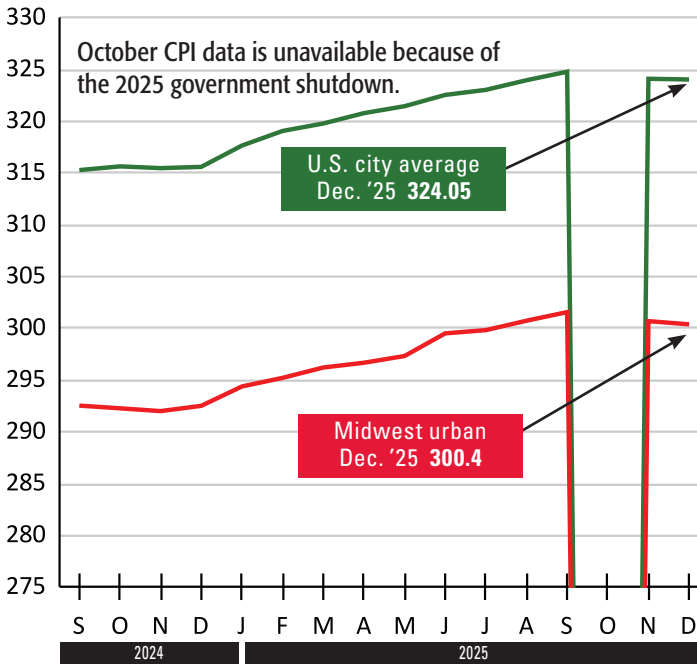
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INDICATORS

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.



Hotel/motel statistics

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

TOTAL REVENUE			
December '25	November '25	Change	
\$505,791.00	\$522,997.34	▼	-3.29%
YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS			
2025	2024	Change	
\$6,065,420.86	\$5,530,394.83	▲	9.67%

Source: Cities of Champaign and Urbana

Unemployment rates for Central Illinois counties, state and nation

County	Labor Force	Jobless	Dec. '25 (%)	Nov. '25 (%)	Dec. '24 (%)	Change Month (%)	Change Year (%)
Champaign	107,980	5,177	4.8	4.2	3.3	▲ 0.6	▲ 1.5
Coles	23,182	1,052	4.5	4.0	3.2	▲ 0.5	▲ 1.3
Douglas	9,875	419	4.2	3.7	3.1	▲ 0.5	▲ 1.1
Edgar	7,757	399	5.1	4.8	3.7	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.4
Ford	6,554	313	4.8	4.0	3.5	▲ 0.8	▲ 1.3
Iroquois	11,712	680	5.8	4.9	4.1	▲ 0.9	▲ 1.7
Macon	43,304	2,850	6.6	5.9	5.2	▲ 0.7	▲ 1.4
McLean	92,594	4,232	4.6	4.0	3.4	▲ 0.6	▲ 1.2
Moultrie	6,701	287	4.3	3.9	3.2	▲ 0.4	▲ 1.1
Piatt	9,021	373	4.1	3.4	3.0	▲ 0.7	▲ 1.1
Vermilion	29,502	1,908	6.5	5.8	5.5	▲ 0.7	▲ 1.0
Region	348,182	17,690	5.0	4.4	3.7	▲ 0.6	▲ 1.3
State	6,506,578	313,698	4.8	4.6	4.3	▲ 0.2	▲ 0.5
U.S.	170,723,000	7,003,000	4.1	4.3	3.8	▼ -0.2	▲ 0.3

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

C-U MTD ridership

	December '25	December '24	Change
Adults	17,608	17,910	▼ -1.7%
School	32,789	34,310	▼ -4.4%
DASH/Senior	26,024	28,361	▼ -8.2%
Annual pass	51,118	44,693	▲ 14.4%
UI faculty/staff	16,973	18,107	▼ -6.3%
UI student	724,433	690,734	▲ 4.9%
Monthly total	896,843	860,758	▲ 4.2%
Fiscal YTD	5,944,167	5,654,844	▲ 5.1%

Crop progress

Released Nov. 24, 2025, by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Agricultural Statistics Board, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Grain	Nov. 23, 2025	2024	'20-24 avg.
Illinois corn harvested	99%	99%	98%
Winter wheat planted	98%	99%	97%
Winter wheat emerged	87%	92%	88%

	VP	Poor	Fair	Good	Xlt
Winter wheat condition	7%	7%	30%	45%	11%

Source: USDA

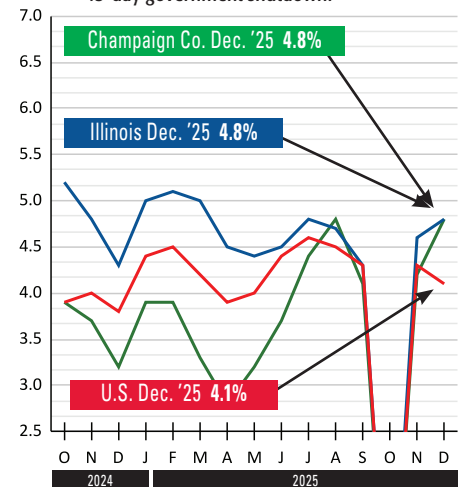
Prices at the pump

Average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas as of Feb. 10, 2026.

Area	February '26	February '25
Bloomington-Normal	\$2.91	\$3.18
Champaign-Urbana	\$2.91	\$3.11
Chicago	\$3.35	\$3.68
Danville	\$2.90	\$3.18
Decatur	\$2.91	\$3.15
Illinois	\$3.01	\$3.26
U.S.	\$2.92	\$3.14

Source: AAA

October data is unavailable because of the 43-day government shutdown.



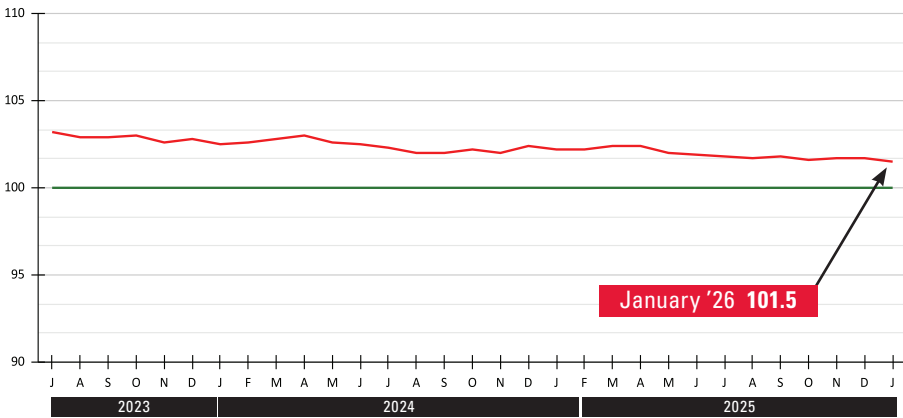
University of Illinois flash index

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

	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	Change ('19 vs. '24)
Champaign	23,761,243.84	\$22,423,142.90	\$21,941,280.97	\$21,169,808.79	\$16,177,806	\$17,255,397	▲ 37.7%
Mahomet	1,423,557.79	\$1,349,874.56	\$1,270,175.71	\$1,168,075.53	\$803,904	\$735,564	▲ 93.5%
Philo	159,392.79	\$168,537.50	\$165,797.37	\$150,664.38	\$110,493	\$105,128	▲ 51.6%
Rantoul	2,020,243.37	\$1,942,623.56	\$1,863,869.32	\$1,890,124.30	\$1,595,889	\$1,525,491	▲ 32.4%
Savoy	3,181,498.39	\$2,956,401.11	\$2,774,294.31	\$2,819,845.62	\$2,414,976	\$2,323,105	▲ 37.0%
St. Joseph	375,011.77	\$362,727.36	\$349,775.82	\$316,934.00	241,633	\$235,632	▲ 59.1%
Tolono	279,782.36	\$258,874.61	\$255,139.44	\$224,679.43	\$172,196	\$152,373	▲ 83.6%
Urbana	7,669,750.41	\$7,496,995.63	\$7,216,138.34	\$6,584,831.41	\$5,478,433	\$5,584,667	▲ 37.3%
Unincorporated	1,772,509.70	\$1,678,985.96	\$1,608,766.99	\$1,489,034.06	\$1,089,562	\$1,371,459	▲ 29.2%
County total	\$40,642,990.42	\$37,564,803.18	\$37,445,238.27	\$35,813,998	\$28,084,892	\$29,288,815	▲ 38.8%

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 2025	4Q 2024	Pct. Change	YTD 2025	YTD 2024	Pct. Change	4Q 2025	4Q 2024	Pct. Change
Champaign	502	471	▲ 6.6%	2,149	2,129	▲ 0.9%	\$239,900	\$220,450	▲ 8.8%
Coles	130	122	▲ 6.6%	480	505	▼ -5.0%	\$139,000	\$123,000	▲ 13.0%
Douglas	47	30	▲ 56.7%	162	130	▲ 24.6%	\$175,500	\$175,750	▼ -0.1%
Edgar	44	43	▲ 2.3%	139	157	▼ -11.5%	\$127,500	\$92,000	▲ 38.6%
Ford	47	41	▲ 14.6%	154	181	▼ -14.9%	\$140,000	\$135,000	▲ 3.7%
Iroquois	70	57	▲ 22.8%	270	269	▲ 0.4%	\$165,000	\$132,500	▲ 24.5%
Macon	310	312	▼ -0.6%	1,387	1,316	▲ 5.4%	\$145,000	\$138,250	▲ 4.9%
McLean	465	517	▼ -10.1%	1,967	2,052	▼ -4.1%	\$253,000	\$238,900	▲ 5.9%
Moultrie	37	33	▲ 12.1%	108	90	▲ 20.0%	\$195,000	\$140,000	▲ 39.3%
Piatt	74	61	▲ 21.3%	229	221	▲ 3.6%	\$210,000	\$240,000	▼ -12.5%
Vermilion	160	162	▼ -1.2%	633	679	▼ -6.8%	\$124,500	\$115,000	▲ 8.3%
Illinois	31,633	31,539	▲ 0.3%	136,650	131,194	▲ 4.2%	\$299,900	\$285,000	▲ 5.2%

Source: Illinois Association of Realtors

Willard Airport passenger totals

Monthly totals	December '25	November '25	Change
Enplanements	7,194	7,390	▼ -3%

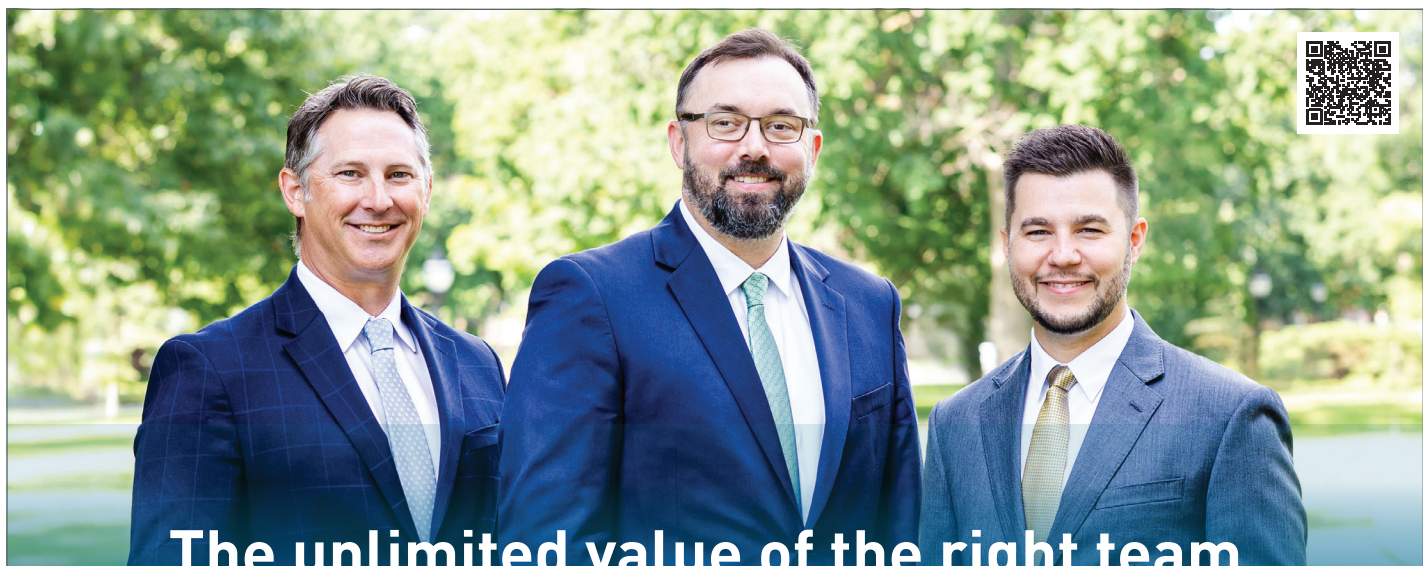
YTD totals	2025	2024	Change
Enplanements	85,676	84,865	▲ 0.09%
Annual totals	2024	2023	Change
Enplanements	84,865	70,355	▲ 20.6%

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. 5, 2026, 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 '26	U.S. February '25
30-year fixed	6.11%	6.89%
15-year fixed	5.5%	6.05%

Source: Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.



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Clark Dietz Inc.

CORE CONTRIBUTOR

Champaign firm that started as collaboration among UI engineering professors behind some of area's biggest projects

STORY Carol Roehm

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

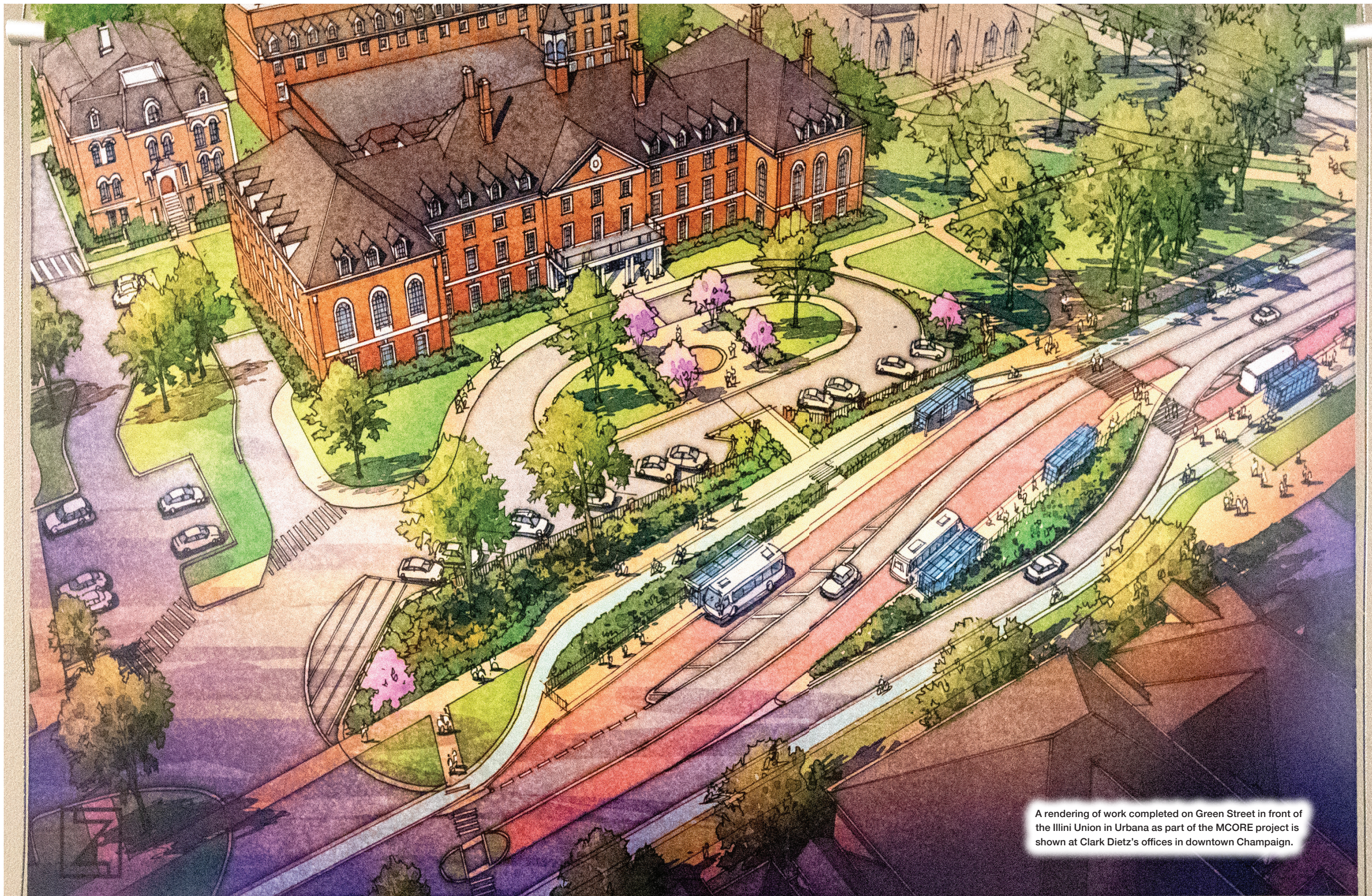
CHAMPAIGN

Improving the quality of life in communities across East Central Illinois, the Midwest and beyond is what Champaign-based Clark Dietz does best.

Working behind the scenes, Clark Dietz's professionals design and manage the complexities of municipal infrastructure improvements, transportation projects, utility-system upgrades and public facility updates.



Sean Widener, left, executive vice president and treasurer at Clark Dietz Inc., and Jerry Payonk, chairman of the company's board, talk about its involvement in the Multimodal Corridor Enhancement Project in the Campustown area at its offices in the Robeson building in downtown Champaign.



A rendering of work completed on Green Street in front of the Illini Union in Urbana as part of the MCORE project is shown at Clark Dietz's offices in downtown Champaign.

Although Clark Dietz's infrastructure engineering often goes unnoticed, the results of the firm's efforts are safer roads, cleaner water and more resilient public facilities that benefit the communities and its residents every day.

"We are improving where we work, live and play," said Sean Widener, Clark Dietz's executive vice president and treasurer. "We have people working in their hometowns, and we encourage them to get involved in their community and to give back."

So, it's no coincidence the motto of the company is "Engineering Quality of Life."

Clark Dietz's roots run deep in the Champaign-Urbana area, tracing back to the 1940s at the University of Illinois. There, three engineering professors — James Clark, Eugene Daily and Jess Dietz — began collaborating on engineering work. The trio incorporated as a consulting engineering firm in 1953 and forged the strong connection to the Champaign-Urbana area that endures today.

By the late 1970s, Clark Dietz was widely recognized as a leading engineering firm with multiple regional offices across the Midwest.

"The firm was bought and sold several times," recalled Jerry Payonk, who has been with Clark Dietz for 34 years and is currently serving as chairman of its board. "In 1987, six employees wanted to buy it, which was the start of Clark Dietz being employee-owned."

The Champaign office finalized the employee buyout after a period of ownership by a national firm. Next year, Clark Dietz will mark its 40th year as a privately held, employee-owned company.



Clark Dietz employs more than 200 professionals in 13 locations across five states — Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan and Wisconsin — with the Champaign office in the Robeson building at 125 W. Church St. being the company's largest. Wesley Christmas serves as president and CEO. "When we talk about Clark Dietz today, we talk about it being employee-owned," Widener said. "That is a key component."

About 30 percent of Clark Dietz's employees own company stock, and 100 percent participate in its employee stock-ownership plan.

"The last four years we also have been certified as a Great Place to Work," Payonk added.

Many of Clark Dietz's longest-tenured professionals are located in the Champaign office, including Payonk, who is retiring at the end of the year after 37 years.

Payonk is well known at Clark Dietz and the communities it serves for his technical expertise, collaborative leadership style and commitment to mentoring; however, his influence also extends beyond the firm. Payonk

currently serves as board chair of the American Council of Engineering Companies of Illinois, which helps advocate for the profession statewide.

Payonk is one of several employees who have established decades-long careers and shaped Clark Dietz's technical depth, client relationships and mentoring culture.

"Our biggest asset is our tenured staff," Widener said. "We have employees that stay on for 40 years."

Payonk, who spent six years at the Illinois Department of Transportation's District 5 office in Paris before joining Clark Dietz, recalled that his first Champaign project was on Bradley Avenue, in which traffic signals were installed at State, Randolph and Market streets.

"I've seen a lot of change since 1990," he added. "When I first got here, we had one computer."

These days, communities across the Midwest are faced with aging infrastructure, tighter funding, evolving regulations and increasing pressure to make systems more resilient to extreme weather.

Clark Dietz supports clients with

limited resources to navigate those challenges by helping them prioritize reinvestment, extend asset life and plan upgrades that are practical, phased and financially responsible. Clark Dietz focuses its efforts on reliability, sustainability and long-term community value.

The firm provides integrated services for infrastructure projects in these core areas: civil, structural, mechanical and electrical engineering; water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure; transportation and traffic engineering; municipal engineering and regulatory compliance; construction engineering, inspection and materials testing; and sustainable and renewable energy solutions.

Champaign-Urbana-area clients not only benefit from the local expertise but also from all of Clark Dietz's technical specialists, who can be deployed as needed to support a project or offer expertise on a niche subject matter.

Clark Dietz's Champaign staff also supports and lends expertise to transportation, water, municipal and infrastructure projects throughout Illinois and neighboring states.

Engineering Quality of Life®

2013 ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE MERIT AWARD

John St. Drainage Improvements

CONSULTANT: Clark Dietz, Inc.
CLIENT: City of Champaign, IL

JOHN STREET

RAIN GARDEN

PERMEABLE CONCRETE PAVEMENT

PERMEABLE BRICK PAVEMENT

The John Street drainage improvement project provided a blend of traditional storm sewer design and sustainable stormwater management solutions to address widespread flooding in an established residential area in the center of the City of Champaign.

Project Highlights:

- Greatly reduced or eliminated flooding of public and private property
- Provided for a healthier environment within the John Street Watershed
- Implementation of rain gardens and permeable pavements
- Enhanced pedestrian and bicyclist accommodations
- Improved infrastructure surrounding the drainage improvement
- Clark Dietz, Inc. was the prime consultant, providing Phase I, Phase II and Phase III services for the John Street Drainage Improvement project.

Other firms involved with the project included:

- Engineering & Research International, Inc. for geotechnical services and assistance with the design of permeable concrete pavements.
- Hitchcock Design Group for landscape architecture and sustainable design of the rain gardens.
- Midwest Engineering and Testing, Inc. for soil percolation testing used for the rain garden design.

A display explaining Clark Dietz's role in the John Street Drainage Improvement project in Champaign is shown at the company's headquarters.

"Most of our work is in the public sector, with 50 percent being transportation/construction, 35 percent being civil engineering, 10 percent mechanical and electrical engineering, and 5 percent private sector," Payonk said. "Our biggest transportation clients are IDOT and the Illinois Tollway Authority."

Clark Dietz has been a part of more than 1,680 infrastructure projects in the past decade, more than \$123 million in municipal infrastructure

improvements, and more than \$2 billion in transportation and construction engineering projects, and has secured more than \$45 million in grants and low-interest loans for public clients in the last five years.

Locally, one of the most prominent Clark Dietz projects was the \$47 million Multimodal Corridor Enhancement project launched in 2017 in partnership with the cities of Champaign and Urbana, the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit

District and the UI.

Clark Dietz was the lead consultant on the multiphase project that has improved access and mobility for all modes of transportation along Green Street between Wright and Race streets (Projects 1 and 5) in Urbana; Green between Neil and Fourth streets (Project 2); White Street between Second and Wright streets, and Wright between White and Springfield Avenue (Project 3) in Champaign.



The new Downtown Plaza is shown decorated for the holidays in downtown Champaign. Clark Dietz is serving as lead consultant on the project, which is now in Phase 2.

The project also transformed major streets through the UI campus, including Green, White, Armory and Wright. “We helped redesign the corridors to better serve pedestrians, buses, vehicles and bikes,” Widener said. “The project overhauled the whole campus district to expand mobility choices.”

Other notable Champaign area projects include:

→ **Curtis Road Grade Separation and Complete Streets, Savoy:** Clark Dietz’s latest project entails rail grade separation, a roadway underpass and corridor safety improvements.

Widener recalled that Curtis Road was his first project with Clark Dietz 23 years ago.

“We designed the enhancements to the interchange and

designed roadway improvements from Duncan Road east,” he said.

→ **Wastewater Treatment Plant Facility Plan and Expansion, St. Joseph:** Planning and design for nutrient removal and long-term capacity expansion.

“They have been planning for more than a decade to answer their long-term needs,” Widener said.

→ **Garden Hills Drainage and Lighting Improvements, Champaign:** Neighborhood drainage, lighting and complete street enhancements.

“There has been a lot of quality-of-life improvement in that neighborhood with the drainage and lighting improvements,” Widener said.

→ **North Prospect Avenue Reconstruction, Champaign:** Conversion of a rural roadway into a major urban arterial to support growth.

→ **Downtown Plaza Improvements, Champaign:** Phase 1 has been completed, and improvements include a new stage element, specialty lighting, sidewalk improvements and landscape enhancements. Phase 2 design is underway, with Clark Dietz as lead consultant, studying existing conditions, coordinating utilities and engineering the reimagined space.

Other Clark Dietz projects around the area include:

→ **Normal:** Clark Dietz played a key role in the long-term redevelopment of the Uptown district with the

Uptown Circular Intersection, which replaced a skewed, stop-controlled intersection with a one-lane urban roundabout. The firm also supported subsequent Uptown enhancement projects, including streetscape, lighting and plaza improvements.

→ **Peoria:** Clark Dietz’s experience with complex urban transportation corridors is evident in the Pennsylvania Avenue Roundabout and Realignment, which reconstructed more than a half-mile of roadway, introduced a modern roundabout near a major medical campus, and addressed stormwater, lighting and access challenges in a tight urban setting.

→ **Decatur:** Clark Dietz was involved in the Lost Bridge Force Main project that entailed a major wastewater infrastructure upgrade to protect Lake Decatur.

→ **Mattoon:** Clark Dietz was involved in the Wastewater Treatment Plant Nutrient Removal Study that evaluated treatment upgrades to meet new regulatory requirements.

Although Clark Dietz’s contribution to a project might go unnoticed by most of the public, the firm still plays a critical role in its overall success.

“We’re a smaller part of a large project, but a necessary component,” Payonk explained. “We fix the traffic problem you didn’t know you had or were going to have.”

The public may never experience the flooding, traffic backup or utility failure that were prevented because of Clark Dietz’s engineering designs.

Clark Dietz engineers regularly hear feedback years later from community leaders who say they haven’t had a problem with a project since it was completed, which reinforces the firm’s philosophy that engineering isn’t just about solving problems, it’s about protecting quality of life in ways people may never see but always feel.

For more than seven decades, Clark Dietz has been involved in the development of the Champaign-Urbana area, so when the time comes to improve or expand on an existing local infrastructure project, it’s no surprise the original project started on a drafting table in Champaign.

“It’s funny when you ask for the original plans and it often comes back with Clark, Daily and Dietz on them,” Widener said.

With its recent expansion into Kentucky, Clark Dietz plans to be around for a long time.

“We continue to grow and look forward to continuing to grow for years to come,” Payonk said.

Widener agreed.

“We are sincerely grateful for our clients — most of our business is repeat customers – and we plan on being here for the long term.” ❧

Campus Ink

Merch on demand

Steven Farag, co-owner of Campus Ink, lowers the end of the new mobile trailer that the business is taking on the road to create merchandise on the spot at college basketball games, on Friday at the business on Kenyon Road in Urbana.



Urbana firm bringing its NIL Store to fans with new mobile trailer

STORY Jana Wiersema **PHOTOS** Rob Le Cates

Flashback to the 1990s. Jedd Swisher of J&M Sports would load up his step van with screen-printing equipment and drive around to softball and cross-country tournaments throughout the area, making and selling merchandise on the spot. Swisher and his wife would do that every weekend, said Steven Farag.

Corey Rice fastens together a doorframe for Campus Ink's new 'NIL Store Live' mobile trailer.



Flash-forward roughly 30 years to 2021, the year that Campus Ink co-owners Swisher and Farag launched the Name, Image and Likeness Store to sell merchandise in partnership with student athletes.

With the dawn of NIL opportunities, Farag began to think about having an on-the-road operation like Swisher did back in the day.

"I think merchandise is an experience," he said. "T-shirts are a personal billboard, and for (fans) to be able to see it made in real life, to be able to participate in it, it makes it a collectible."

Today, the NIL Store represents 160 schools and about 30,000 athletes — and it's finally taking the show on the road.

Farag and his team are launching "NIL Store Live" and have modified a trailer whose first stop was the University of Connecticut. In addition to being open for the Huskies women's basketball game, the business had other events planned on the Storrs campus through the middle of February.

The initial plan is to pilot the roadshow at college basketball games, especially once March Madness begins.

"We hope to end up at the Final Four in Indianapolis," Farag said. "We're already talking to the NCAA to figure out how that's going to work. And hopefully the orange and blue are there as well."

He added that since the NIL Store

represents "all sports, all athletes," the business hopes to operate the trailer year-round at events such as football games and the College World Series.

"We just got licensed with the WNBA and the MLB Players Association," he said. "So we're expanding into other verticals with other leagues, and the idea is that it could also be used for that."

When asked what made 2026 the right time to bring this idea to life, Farag said the business recently went through "a big funding round."

"With how good the Big Ten is this year and some of our biggest properties, we just felt like it was time to put our foot on the gas," he added.

The idea started “brewing” in late October, and Farag began to do some research. He and Swisher bought the trailer around December, and once the holidays were over, it was “go time.”

“We’re putting a lot of really sensitive equipment in the trailer, like super-expensive printers that need to be climate-controlled,” Farag said. “We actually had to gut the trailer completely. We had to insulate it, put new walls up.”

Additionally, the business went to It’s a Wrap Automotive in Champaign to get the trailer wrapped and has also been in contact with colleges to plan visits and work out logistics.

As of Friday morning, Complete Electrical Systems was finishing work on the trailer, as Campus Ink will need “a significant amount of power” to run all the equipment, Farag said.

Meanwhile, the team at Campus Ink was prepping blank apparel, supplies and tools for the trailer.

“Later this afternoon, we’ll start putting the equipment in there and testing it,” Farag said. “We have a generator that’s powering it. So it’ll be a pretty busy 48 hours.”

When asked what’s been the biggest challenge of bringing this dream to life, he said that getting NIL Store Live off the ground has been “a big distraction” during basketball season, which is the business’s busiest time of year.



Ryan Coleman, an electrician with Complete Electrical Systems, cuts siding for Campus Ink's new NIL Store trailer.



Coleman cuts siding for the trailer.

“To be able to pull a lot of resources from the company and say, ‘We’re building this metal box and taking it cross-country,’ it’s not like we have a dedicated team,” he said. “So everyone’s had to work extra hours, nights, weekends and basically call on every resource possible to get this thing done.”

Still, he’s had fun working on the project, and he noted that Campus Ink’s behind-the-scenes videos on social media — which have documented the process of the

trailer’s creation — show the work and the people that have made this dream a reality.

“I would say that this is an original idea, but not really, because (Swisher) did it first,” Farag said. “And he’s really been behind the scenes just like inspiring us, motivating us, but then also just working nights and weekends to help us make this possible.”

Farag noted that one of the benefits of printing on the spot is that it reduces waste because production is

driven strictly by demand.

He also shared during an appearance on “News-Gazette Radio” that having the trailer opens up exciting opportunities to sell merch that is not only hot off the press — literally — but also features completely new artwork.

“If there’s a hot moment that happens, a buzzer-beater, we’re going to be able to design and print right on the fly and have merch right there for the fans, right when they leave the stadium,” Farag said. ✂



Coleman, right, holds a an interior panel in place as Rice secures it with screws.

‘EngAging Illinois’: A multisector plan



By JOAN DIXON
CIB contributor



Participants enjoy a spirited game of pickleball during Active Aging Week in 2023.

According to Mary Killough, director of the Illinois Department on Aging, 23 percent of Illinoisans are age 60 and above, and in more rural areas, that figure is almost 33 percent. They are facing issues of poverty, physical and mental disabilities, difficulty accessing resources and the lack of reliable transportation. Over 250,000 of state residents live with Alzheimer’s and other cognitive diseases. In response to these issues, Gov. J.B. Pritzker issued an executive order that has resulted in the Multisector Plan for Aging, which will help ensure that in the Land of Lincoln, at every stage of getting older, we can live dignified, engaged, productive and meaningful lives. The Legislature initially created the Multisector Task Force and charged it with coming up with a plan. This brought together 15 state agencies, such

as the departments on Aging and of Labor, Public Health, Transportation and Veterans’ Affairs and others, and a 24-member Community Advisory Council. It was informed through nine public-engagement sessions held throughout the state. The intent, of course, was to focus the state agencies on what it means to age in Illinois and how they can work together to make this a state that cares and respects our older adults. The resulting document is titled “EngAging Illinois.” It is a road map for the state, outlining four key focus areas: Creating livable and connected communities, ensuring health for all ages, investing in caregivers and affording aging. The report has also identified 10 pillars, which include: **→ Illinois as an Age-Friendly State:** “Pursue statewide Age-Friendly designation and provide implementation support, including

guidance on equity and inclusion, toolkits and design guides for accessible public spaces, community checklists and case studies to increase the number of age-and dementia-friendly communities.” Champaign-Urbana received this designation from the World Health Organization and AARP in 2017. For C-U, it represents a collaboration between the cities, the University of Illinois, the Champaign and Urbana park districts, the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District, the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, the United Way of Champaign County, the Community Foundation of East Central Illinois and other organizations. In December, Champaign-Urbana also received the designation as a “Dementia-Friendly Community,” and there are now training programs and resources available to businesses, banks, attorneys and law enforcement on the

proper way to identify and interact with people with dementia in a respectful and helpful manner. **→ Statewide Academic Collaborative on Aging:** “Facilitate partnerships and collaborative research, education and support for policies, programs and services and workforce development that foster positive aging.” In Champaign-Urbana, Advocates for Aging Care is trying to create a new skilled and rehabilitative care facility to address the significant need in our area. The group is working with a number of departments at the UI and Parkland College to develop technology, care-delivery systems and a new approach to training caregivers and other staff. This will result in a unique community-wide collaboration that will serve as a pilot project for the nation. **→ Statewide Caregiver Awareness Campaign:** “Develop and launch a statewide comprehensive caregiver

awareness campaign to help caregivers of all ages.” According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, just over 2.2 million Illinois adults are unpaid family caregivers. An additional 12 percent of adults expect to have a relative that they will need to provide care for in the future. The economic impact of unpaid caregivers is significant, with the value of this unpaid labor estimated to be \$323 million annually. These caregivers provide for the needs of older Illinois residents that allow them to stay in their homes and out of long-term care facilities — saving the state millions of dollars. As the adults age and become more isolated, their caregivers also become more isolated. There is significant burnout among caregivers, leading to exhaustion, depression, stress and the feeling that they have to do it all. The state’s efforts to draw attention to these

essential members of the health care system is intended to take better care of the caregivers themselves and provide access to information and resources. **→ EngAge Central: The Illinois Aging Resource Center:** “Create a comprehensive website built from existing information to increase awareness of, access to and utilization of resources available to help Illinoisans age in place and in community.” The governor and agencies throughout the State are committed to work toward the goals, create the initiatives and foster an environment of health and respect as our citizens age in Illinois. The full report is available at ilaging.illinois.gov/forprofessionals/multi-sector-plan-for-aging/engaging-illinois.html. *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 East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging’s corporate board.*

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