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PLAYING BALL

RESULTS FROM PLAY ON THE DIAMOND

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STATE

Audit: Bridges went without inspections

SPRINGFIELD (AP) — Some bridges in Illinois are not being checked as often as they should be, according to a state auditor's report released this week.

Many of the bridges that have gone years without inspection were labeled as "structurally deficient" and need to be more closely monitored.

The critical report from the Office of the Auditor General examined inspection records in the last fiscal year for the more than 26,000 working bridges in the state. It found almost 60 bridges that were at least 4 years old and hadn't received recent or regular inspections. One bridge built in 1998 only had one inspection on the books.

IDOT spokesman Guy Triggall said "there are no unsafe or dangerous bridges open to the public in Illinois." He said the agency follows a rigorous inspection schedule and shares the results on its website. IDOT officials are holding meetings around the state to gather public input.

The state's bridges received closer scrutiny in 2007 after a Minnesota bridge collapse prompted former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich to order more inspections. Nearly 10 percent of Illinois' bridges were found to be structurally deficient. And earlier this year, IDOT officials announced that a bridge over the Mississippi River that

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REMEMBERING A FALLEN POLICE OFFICER

Stretch of I-55 named after Kohlmeier

By Paul Westermeyer
Staff Reporter

On Oct. 30, 2013, Pontiac Police Officer Casey Kohlmeier and his K-9 unit partner Draco were struck and killed by a drunk driver on duty while idling in a median turn-around on I-55, just north of Illinois 23.

His death sent shockwaves of grief through the community, and police officers from all over the state came to Pontiac to mourn the loss of Kohlmeier at his wake, held in the Pontiac Township High School auditorium.

After his passing, members of the community sought their own ways to remember Kohlmeier, including t-shirts and hooded sweatshirts adorned a logo of Kohlmeier and Draco designed by Diaz Sign Art.

On Friday morning, it was officially announced that Kohlmeier will have a part of Interstate 55 dedicated to his memory. Thanks to the efforts of Illinois Sen. Jason Barickman, R-Normal, the stretch from exits 197 to 201 on the interstate will permanently honor Kohlmeier's name.

Shortly before 10 a.m., a crowd of people — including media, police officers, public servants and friends and family of the late Kohlmeier — gathered around the 201-overpass interchange to witness the unveiling of a temporary sign dedicated to Kohlmeier.

The unveiling of the temporary sign, which will soon have a more permanent residence on the interstate proper, Kohlmeier's name and life can now be known to generations hence.

Kohlmeier's father Jeff and mother Kerri Jo Schmidt pulled down a tarp covering the sign, which left the crowd of more than 50 people speechless, as each reflected on the dedication to Kohlmeier's legacy. Shortly thereafter, Barickman and Illinois Benevolent and Protective Agency Chief Legal Counsel Sean Smoot addressed the crowd.

"We're thrilled to be able to memorialize Casey and his service in this way," Smoot said. "He lived his life as a life of service, and he exemplifies what people to think of when they think of police officers."

There's never been a time when we need more positive role models like Casey Kohlmeier than right now in American history."

Barickman, who was a driving force behind

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Ryli Schmidt, left, with her Belgian Malinois, Star, by her side, is comforted by older brother, Jordan Kociss, after the unveiling of the sign designating a stretch of Interstate 55 in honor of their brother, the late Casey J. Kohlmeier, a Pontiac Police officer who died while on duty on Oct. 30, 2013. Kohlmeier's canine partner, Draco, that was also killed, was also a Belgian Malinois. JOY BUTLER/DAILY LEADER

NEW COMPANY

Business Futures venture venture relies on special workers



Futures Unlimited client Howard Law places rolled seed balls into a counter before individually placing them in a plastic pouch for distribution. The business recently orchestrated the purchase of Seedballz to provide work for clients who would otherwise find it difficult to keep work. LUKE SMUCKER/DAILY LEADER

By Luke Smucker
Staff Reporter

Every Friday a small celebration takes place in the lobby at Bank of Pontiac. That's because 15 clients at Future's Unlimited, who were otherwise unable to find work, are now cashing in earned paychecks; paychecks they often spend that evening at Fiesta Bowl.

These paychecks come from a new business, Seedballz, which is housed and operated by Future's Unlimited. Seedballz are hand-rolled clay balls made up of a mixture of seeds, red clay and soil humus. In addition to the product's unique look, it is also unique in the sense that it is rolled and packaged entirely by adults with developmental disabilities.

"I'll have been with Futures three years in July, but to my knowledge Futures has not purchased another business before," Jackie Harms, business development coordinator

at Futures Unlimited, Inc. said.

It all started with an advertisement. Harms said she was initially approached about Seedballz by one of her co-workers, who saw the product advertised in a catalogue.

"It was an advertisement for these seed balls and the advertisement said, 'hand rolled by people with disabilities,'" Harms said. "I thought I might look into it and see if we could help supplement what the owners were already doing. When I called, I spoke to Alice Strong, the owner of the company."

Communication continued and eventually the Seedballz company from Eugene, Ore. was interested in making Futures a distribution center.

"She thought it would save them on shipping," Harms said. "In March of 2014, a couple of Futures associates and myself went out to meet Long at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show."

A few more months of discussion

and Future's Board President Larry Martell and Harms went to visit Long once more in Chicago; she was back for another trade show.

"At that point, she told us she was looking to sell," Harms said. "She wanted to retire and move on to other things. So she asked us if we would be interested in purchasing the company. How do you know in this day and age whether to buy a business, especially one located across the country? We wondered if we could successfully bring a business from so far away to Pontiac."

The decision was brought before the Futures board which said it would require bringing Long in to discuss the proposal. Eventually Long did fly in. She presented what she had and the board liked it.

Humiston Trust came up with the down payment to purchase the company. Humiston Trust Board Chairman Louie Lyons said the board was excited to be providing

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the Senate bill to get the new highway designation under way, spoke of how much it meant to him to be able to honor Kohlmeier in this way.

"For me, this was an honor to be able to memorialize Casey in this way," he said. "I knew Casey, and I think everyone in this community knew Casey, and he was one of those guys who left you with an incredibly positive impression when you first met him."

Barickman later commented on the bittersweet nature of the day, calling his effort to get the memorial set up insignificant compared to Kohlmeier's service to his community.

Schmidt, who wiped tears away as she unveiled the sign, spoke on just how much the testament to her son meant to her.

"It's so incredible, it's overwhelming that people think so much of him," she said. "I knew he'd make an impact on people since the day he was born, so the continuing impact he makes on people is over-



Jeff Kohlmeier and Kerl Jo Schmidt, parents of the late Casey J. Kohlmeier, revealed the sign dedicating a stretch of Interstate 55 to the fallen police officer and his canine companion, who were both killed in the line of duty in October of 2013. A dedication ceremony was held Friday morning with colleagues and family members. JOY BUTLER/DAILY LEADER

whelming and amazing."

Kohlmeier's father Jeff echoed Schmidt's sentiments.

"It's an overwhelming honor," he said. "It's going

to be weird seeing his name on a sign, obviously, as a constant reminder. But I'm very proud.

"I think it will be a constant reminder that the

police are risking their lives everyday, and I hope it can make people think twice about decisions, then I think some good will come of it."

House passes \$35 billion bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans Friday passed the second of 12 spending bills for the upcoming budget year, a \$35 billion measure funding the Energy Department and popular water projects connected by the Army Corps of Engineers.

But the 240-177 tally fell short of the margin that would be required to overcome a promised veto by President Barack Obama. The White House and its Democratic allies say the measure would short-change renewable energy programs like solar power and is studded with anti-environmental "riders," or contentious add-on provisions that actually affect policy and not spending.

The measure includes a big boost to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal and also contains money that would keep the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste site in Nevada from

being completely shuttered, a challenge to Senate powerhouse Harry Reid, D-Nev., who has been largely responsible for blocking the project in the past.

With Democrats now in the Senate minority, Reid's power has been diluted. But the Yucca funds continue to be opposed by Obama and still face an uphill climb.

The bill advanced the day after House Republicans adopted a plan for the budget year starting in October that would award a \$38 billion, 7 percent increase to the Pentagon but leave in place a freeze on domestic agencies under automatic cuts known as sequestration.

Democrats accuse Republicans of having a double standard that would let the Pentagon avoid cuts while making real cuts to many domestic accounts, including anti-poverty accounts in a \$55 billion transportation and housing meas-

ure released this week. The cuts were approved as Baltimore reeled from protests and violence in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray, a young black man, in police custody.

The transportation and housing measure would cut funding to rehabilitate housing projects by almost \$200 million to \$1.7 billion, and would offer just \$20 million to Choice Neighborhoods grants to help cities rebuild poor neighborhoods, a 75 percent cut.

While community development grants to states and local governments would be maintained at current levels of \$3 billion and funding for a key program for the homeless would receive a nominal \$50 million increase, money to help cities like Baltimore deal with poisonous lead paint in its antiquated housing stock would absorb a \$35 million cut, or almost one-third.

Consumer sentiment rises on optimism

WASHINGTON (AP) — Optimism about the job market lifted U.S. consumer sentiment in April to its second-highest level since 2007.

The University of Michigan's sentiment index rose to 95.9 from 93 in March. Only January's reading of 98.1 has been higher since 2007, the year the Great Recession began. Over the past five months, sentiment has been, on average, at its highest level since 2004.

Richard Curtin, chief economist of the Michigan survey, attributed the April increase to opti-

mism over consistently low inflation and low interest rates and improving prospects for jobs and incomes.

Curtin said consumers expect interest rates to be shrugging off recently low levels but only modestly. And they expect any economic damage from higher rates to be offset by the benefits of more jobs and incomes.

Since March 2014, the U.S. economy has produced a healthy 3.1 million job gains. The government said Wednesday that the economy grew at an annual rate of

just 0.2 percent from January through March. But economists expect growth to strengthen in the spring.

"Consumers appear to be shrugging off recently disappointing economic data and stock market choppiness," Jim Baird, chief investment officer for Plante Moran Financial Advisors, said in a research note. "Despite evidence that the economy slowed considerably in the first quarter, sentiment remains relatively high and suggests that the important consumer spending engine isn't at

risk of stalling."

Last month, a separate measure of consumer attitudes — the Conference Board's confidence index — told a different story: That index fell to 95.2 from 101.4 in March, the business group said this week.

The Conference Board blamed a lackluster jobs report in March for the drop. The American economy added just 126,000 jobs in March, breaking a 12-month streak of at least 200,000 added jobs a month. Thirty-one states registered job losses in March.

SEEDBALLZ

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jobs for people who may not be able to work otherwise.

"It makes you feel really good to know we are helping them out," Lyons said. "I have seen the Futures clients downtown cashing in their paychecks on Fridays. There are so many benefits that it is hard to put into words."

Also playing a vital role in the process was the Greater Livingston County Economic Development Council. CEO Adam Dontz said, "Through its Community Enhancement Grant, the GLCEDC contributes to not-for-profit organizations which provide business and economic development opportunities in the greater Livingston County area. Futures Unlimited is one of the largest not-for-profit employers in Livingston County and we are pleased to help support their recent business expansion."

For Futures client Joe Foley, the new business is an opportunity to feel a sense of accomplishment.

"I like doing this because it makes me money," he said. "On Fridays we take our paychecks and go bowling. I hadn't been able to do that before I had this job. It makes time go faster."

Harms said the business gives jobs to those who are

otherwise unable to work, despite having the desire.

"If someone can only roll balls, that's what job we give them. Or if someone can only staple, that's what job we give them. Maybe they are good at placing stickers, that's somebody's job, too," Harms said. "We have one client who is legally blind. So, it is very challenging to find a job for her, but she can roll."

"Once she found out what the rate was to make minimum wage, she has been making that many. She rolls approximately 1,200 per day. That's just incredibly amazing for people to be that excited about work."

That amount may sound like a lot, but Seedballz has approximately 25 different varieties of seeds in three product lines: vegetables, herbs and flowers. The seeds are being sold mostly to big name catalogues, but also in gift shops across the country. To buy them locally, people can either call Futures directly or visit the company's website, seedballz.com.

"At this point, we are still in the learning process," Harms said.

"Anytime you get a new business, there is a time when you are still trying to figure out the ins and outs. However, we are looking to expand. We are trying to get out now into the stores of Pontiac so they will be available to people."



Futures Unlimited client Jeri Norris has found work at Seedballz. She helps to individually roll hundreds of the seed balls. If not for this new business, some of Future's clients would find it difficult to keep a job. LUKE SMUCKER/DAILY LEADER

AUDIT

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connects Missouri with Illinois will be closed until March 2016 for repairs. An annual inspection uncovered steel beams and joints in need of repair.

Tridgell said about 2,200, or a little more than 8 percent, of the bridges in Illinois are labeled as structurally deficient — meaning parts of the bridges need to be monitored more closely

through normal inspections.

The auditor's report released Thursday found that around 79 bridges were overdue for special inspections. Nearly all of those requiring special inspections were under local control. About 15 of those bridges were rated structurally deficient.

Some bridges have been repaired or replaced, according to the report, and this eliminated the need for special inspections.