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EDITOR'S PICK

Tom's #Mailbag, Nov. 1, 2019

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Tom Kacich

Columnist

Tom Kacich is a columnist and the author of Tom's Mailbag at The News-Gazette. His column appears Sundays. His email is tkacich@news-gazette.com, and you can follow him on Twitter (@tkacich).

Ask our veteran reporter a question by clicking here

No theme this week, just a lot of questions and answers about the eagerly anticipated Starbucks in Champaign, Wilber Street outside Champaign, the Art Theater, early snowfalls, the UI's zero growth space policy, the C-U gas station market and OSF pricing policies.

Also, Thanksgiving restaurant openings, golf course closings, the Mahomet Aquifer, Cowboy Monkey, bicycle light requirements, a baseball rule, the short-lived Little Red Hen Restaurant and a big pile of dirt along I-57.



Early snowfalls

“Can you tell me the earliest snowfall in C-U? Maybe (Thursday)?”

October snowfall is not that unusual. In fact the average snowfall for October in Champaign-Urbana is 0.1 inch.

The earliest snowfall I could find in Champaign-Urbana weather records was a trace on Aug. 29, 1918.

As for October dates we received 2.8 inches on Oct. 19, 1989. And we got a trace of snow last year on Oct. 13.

The greatest Oct. 31 snowfall in Champaign-Urbana weather history — before Thursday — was a half-inch in 1917.

UI-Urbana footprint

“A while back, the University of Illinois made a big show of enacting a ‘Net Zero Growth Space Policy,’ as a part of a ‘Climate Action Plan.’ Allegedly, the total square footage of all UI buildings should not increase beyond the 2015 levels. Looking at all the recent and ongoing construction on campus, including the IBRL (Integrated Bioprocessing Research Laboratory), Siebel Center and the new facility where once there were clay tennis courts, I cannot believe that the policy is actually being followed. Has the UI published data to show compliance? Are they relying on exemptions, variances, and accounting gimmicks, or is the UI footprint really not growing?”

I would never be so coarse as to call it a gimmick but consider this:

The university’s “net zero growth” policy comes from the 2015 Illinois Climate Action Plan.

According to the metrics cited in the August 2018 Campus Master plan update, here’s how the Urbana campus would almost get to that goal over the next 10 years:

Demolition: 270,000 gross square feet

Demolition and replacement: 400,000 gross square feet

New construction and additions: 1,574,000 gross square feet

Net new square footage: 904,000 gross square feet

Applied space bank reserve: 626,000 gross square feet

Net new square feet in 10 years: 278,000 gross square feet (approximately 1.25 percent above the goal).

The fine print: The “demolition and replacement” line is counted as a net loss even though it includes replacement construction.

The “space bank reserve” is square footage banked from “the recent demolition of several outdated campus facilities.”

Recent is not defined nor is it documented.

Finally, the net zero growth goal isn't met in 10 years anyway.

Among the buildings designated as demolitions and/or replacements:

- Aeronautics Laboratory (already demolished)
- Burnside's Research Laboratory (already demolished)
- Biomedical Animal Swine Research Replacement
- Feedmill Replacement
- Natural Resources Studies Annex— Natural History Survey Greenhouse
- Shelford Vivarium

Here's what the master plan says: "No net new square footage of space does not mean no new square footage. The university will continue to need new construction, to replace space lost to removal, and to provide new, state-of-the-art facilities for learning and discovery."

"An evaluation of usable space on campus as a ratio to the student population has shown that the university has the second highest assignable square foot (ASF) ratio per student compared to its peers. If we assume the campus continued 'Business as Usual,' this could result in close to 2 million GSF of additional campus development to accommodate projected enrollment growth in the next 10 years. If, however, the university added its anticipated enrollment, but did not increase its total square footage, the ASF per student ratio would be reduced, yet still be above the average ASF/student compared to peers.

"Balancing growth with no net new square footage will require new models for growth that emphasize quality over quantity, sharing resources, renovating space, and right-sizing space to fit new models of learning, research, and collaboration. Sixty percent of total campus space is used for academic, research, office, and support space. Increased utilization in these space categories, and converting space to more appropriate uses will gain efficiencies to offset demand for additional new construction."

Gas stations

“I arrived from elsewhere last year and noticed that the few Exxon/Mobil and Chevron stations have disappeared. The only national chain represented by two stations in the area is Shell. Any idea as to why?”

and

“What’s the deal with many of the local gas stations becoming Circle K? Is this a monopoly in the making?”

and

“In the past few months a lot of gas stations in the area have been converted to Circle K stations. Many former Mobil and BP stations have been converted with signs that don’t indicate Mobil or BP anymore. While other stations that were already Circle K have remained as Mobil or BP. Are these new Circle K stations still Mobil or BP? If so, why are they no longer branded. If not, what are they? Do you know what is the story behind these changes?”

After months of calling and emailing I have given up on getting a response from Circle K.

So here’s what I know based on their corporate annual and quarterly reports:

Circle K is owned by Alimentation Couche-Tard Inc., a multinational company based in Laval, Quebec. It has more than 7,500 stores in 48 states in the U.S. It currently has about 6 percent of the U.S. fuel and convenience industry and says that “high fragmentation leaves ample room for consolidation,” which is what the company did in Champaign-Urbana, purchasing BP and Mobil stations.

Convenience stores are recession resilient, says the company, noting that convenience sales grew even in the last two recessions — up 8 percent for example from 2007 to 2009.

It’s vision, says the company, is to “become the world’s preferred destination for convenience and fuel.”

“To keep building on our success, this year we set ourselves an ambitious objective for the future: to double our financial results again by 2023,” said Alimentation Couche-Tard’s CEO, Brian Hannasch.



Wilber Heights streets

“Can you find out if there is a plan to repair or replace Wilbur/Wilber Avenue in Champaign? This road would not be acceptable in most third world countries.”

The last time the street was the subject of public discussion was in 2016 when the Champaign County Board took it up. The conclusion at that time was that no government agency would take control of the street, most of which is in an unincorporated area.

Here’s a portion of the minutes of the August 2016 meeting of the county board’s Environment and Land Use Committee: “Ms. Monte noted that no local government highway authority has expressed any interest in maintaining Wilber Avenue and the work can not be completed without their involvement.

“Ms. Petrie asked if intergovernmental cost share agreements have been discussed in order to keep the project moving forward in a timely manner.

“Ms. Monte noted that one-third of Wilber Avenue is within the city of Champaign, but no other entity has been identified to establish a cost sharing agreement for the additional two-thirds of Wilber Avenue. Mr. Hall confirmed.

“Mr. Weibel asked who currently maintains Wilber Avenue. Mr. Hall noted that IDOT currently maintains Wilber Avenue. Mr. Schroeder asked if IDOT is responsible for reconstruction costs if they are already providing maintenance to the road. Mr. Blue noted Wilber Avenue is technically an IDOT road and they are currently providing minimum upkeep. Mr. Schroeder asked if Champaign Township could place a weight limit sign on the road. Mr. Blue noted that it is IDOT’s jurisdiction.”

John Hall, the county’s zoning administrator who took part in that discussion three years ago, said the stalemate continues.

“IDOT will not give enough money to pay for a full reconstruction and even if they did there is no other highway jurisdiction that wants the responsibility to maintain Wilbur Avenue. That was a very frustrating outcome,” he said. “We have not talked to IDOT about this in a couple of years but I doubt that the situation has changed.”



Savoy dead end

“I’ve noticed some concrete blocks and straw bales where Prospect Avenue ends at Curtis Road. Any idea what’s going on there?”

That is a temporary concrete truck washout, said Savoy Village Manager Dick Helton, an area where the chutes of mixed concrete trucks are cleaned out before the concrete hardens.

“It is contained and will be removed and cleaned up when the Prospect Avenue project is completed,” Helton said.



Salt and Light appeal

“How is Salt and Light’s fundraising going?”

The local ministry that addresses poverty issues has raised \$106,593 of its \$450,000 goal, according to its website.

Starbucks update

“Do you happen to know when the new Starbucks on Mattis will be opening? My extensive research has awarded me no answers thus far.

“We expect Starbucks to open mid-November but we do not have a firm date,” said John Carson of Ramshaw Real Estate.

The Crossing business redux

An addition to this question from last week: “Where are all the businesses at ‘the Crossing’ (Duncan and Windsor roads in Champaign) going? I read on social media that Prep.freeze.cook was closing ...”

Wendi Langstaff of Prep.freeze.cook responded: “We decided to close our storefront, but still stay present in the Champaign market via deliveries.

“At the end of the day, our customers do not want one more stop so we opted to come directly to our customer (work, home, etc). And until the end of 2019, delivery will continue to be free.”

Mahomet Aquifer levels redux

An addition to this question from two weeks ago:

“With the growth in C-U, and all of the additional towns surrounding supplied by Illinois American Water, and other communities drawing water from the Mahomet Aquifer, I would like to know if the aquifer water level is holding steady or decline. Could the water company show the levels in 10-year increments from 1950 to present?”

George Roadcap, a hydrogeologist at the Illinois State Water Survey (who is about to retire) offered this information:

“The Mahomet Aquifer in the Champaign-Urbana area is confined under roughly 200 feet of clay-rich deposits and is completely full of water, a condition classified as artesian. Pressure in the aquifer is maintained by recharge from streams and sandy areas to the north and west in Champaign, Ford and Piatt counties.”

The Illinois State Water Survey began monitoring water levels in a well along Rising Road in 1953 and has observed a drop in the artesian pressure of 45 feet (equivalent to 20 psi). The lowest water levels occurred during the drought of 2007 and 2012. Since 2009 the water level have begun to rebound slightly due to increased conservation, decreased industrial demand, and the use of production wells located further to the west where the aquifer is thicker and more permeable.

“Today the water level remains about 100 feet above the top of the aquifer which has an elevation of 510 feet above sea level.”

Year — Groundwater Elevation (feet)

1953 — 647

1955 — 640

1965 — 625

1975 — 621

1985 — 611

1995 — 605

2005 — 596

2015 — 601

2019 — 605

Bicycle lights

“If bicyclists can use our roads the same way as cars do, why don’t they have to be required under law to have headlights and taillights?”

They are required to have headlights and taillights.

The Illinois Vehicle Code 625 says:

“Sec. 11-1507. Lamps and other equipment on bicycles.

“(a) Every bicycle when in use at nighttime shall be equipped with a lamp on the front which shall emit a white light visible from a distance of at least 500 feet to the front and with a red reflector on the rear of a type approved by the Department which shall be visible from all

distances from 100 feet to 600 feet to the rear when directly in front of lawful lower beams of headlamps on a motor vehicle, except that a lamp emitting a steady or flashing red light visible from a distance of 500 feet to the rear may be used in addition to or instead of the red reflector.”

New restaurant 50 years ago

“In Sunday’s News-Gazette history feature, it mentions a 1969 ground-breaking for Little Red Hen Restaurant. I remember the place, can you tell me how long it was open? Was it a locally owned place or a franchise?”

The Little Red Hen was at 2104 W. Springfield Ave., Champaign, at what is now a Papa John’s Pizza. It was a chain restaurant that started in 1964, specializing in chicken, fish and sandwiches.

It wasn’t open very long.

According to the website “Restaurant-ing through history,” the Chicago-based John R. Thompson Co. acquired the Little Red Hen chain. By 1971 Green Giant bought Thompson, which “had about 100 restaurants, including Red Balloon family restaurants, Henrici’s restaurants, and Little Red Hen Chicken outlets.”

OSF pricing

“At the beginning of this year, HHS began requiring hospitals to provide lists of standard prices for services in an attempt to improve transparency for consumers.

“Carle Hospital publishes their list online at <https://carle.org/billing/answers-to-billing-question-s#transparency>. The userface is not very accessible and it lacks a link to download the entire table of charges, but to Carle’s credit they list the billing code, the price, and the name of the procedure or item that the billing code refers to.

“In contrast, OSF publishes their list online at <https://www.osfhealthcare.org/osf/forms/price-estimate-request/price-list/>. While OSF allows for a download of the entire table of charges, the table only provides the billing code and the price but NOT the name of the procedure or item that the billing code refers to.

“In other words, I can see on OSF’s table that they charge \$3,064 for code #2705554, \$6,800 for code #3100246, and \$139,750 for code #2724823 ... but nowhere in the document does OSF say what those codes actually represent. Can you please ask OSF why they do not provide information about the names of procedures and billing items in their required list of charges? Even if providing the names is not required by law (I don’t know whether it is or isn’t), does OSF think that providing a list of charges for unnamed billing codes provides meaningful transparency to their patients?”

OSF’s senior vice president of revenue cycle, Laurie Herwitz, offered this explanation:

“At OSF HealthCare, our goal is to supply our patients with the most accurate estimate possible prior to any procedure. We have complied with the recent law, which requires all hospitals to post their list prices online. However, each charge listed is just one component of a total bill. In order to get an accurate estimate, a patient would have to locate and piece together the price for each individual part of their visit, from particular blood tests to medications dispensed, and then contact their insurance company to determine what they would pay, and what the patient would have to pay.

“Because no two patients are alike and insurance benefits vary widely, we prefer to work directly with patients in order to provide them the most accurate information for their particular situation. OSF HealthCare encourages patients to call 833-673-4322, and a Patient Financial Navigator can walk them through the process, and provide a detailed estimate. This estimate not only accounts for the charge of the procedure itself, but also includes an estimate of patient responsibility for deductible, co-insurance and co-pay. Patients can also go to osfhealthcare.org and submit their inquiry through email 24/7.”



House Manager B Erickson pauses a moment to look at the word 'CLOSED' that he just put up on the marquee of the Art Theater on Friday, Oct. 25, 2019, in Champaign. The theater has stopped showing films and will close for good on Halloween.

Robin Scholz

Art Theater finances

“Did the Art Theater make money?”

The downtown Champaign movie theater, which abruptly announced last week that it was closing, reported in 2017 that it had made \$94,861.

That's the most recent year for which its IRS Form 990 is available. The Art Film Foundation reported revenue of \$359,597 and expenses of \$264,736.

In announcing the closing Art Film Foundation interim Executive Director Rhiannon Bettivia said “the film industry is changing and we will face systemic challenges that show no signs of abating.”

Bettivia wouldn't offer any more details when contacted by The News-Gazette, saying only: “We're in a tough industry that presents many challenges. ... As I hope we were able to convey, we are very grateful for our time in the community and very sad it has come to an end.”

Baseball rule

“While watching the World Series, for the second night in a row I saw the first baseman dive and tag 1st base with his glove hand with the ball in the glove for the force out. A routine force out is made by holding the ball in either hand and touching the base with a foot. So my question is...if the first baseman has the ball in his glove and dives for the base, can he touch the base with his bare hand for the force out? Or does that only apply when using a foot to touch the base?”

It is an out based on the MLB definition of a tag:

“TAG is the action of a fielder in touching a base with the body while holding the ball securely and firmly in the hand or glove; or touching a runner with the ball or with the hand or glove holding the ball, while holding the ball securely and firmly in the hand or glove. It is not a tag, however, if simultaneously or immediately following his touching a base or touching a runner, the fielder drops the ball. In establishing the validity of the tag, the fielder shall hold the ball long enough to prove that he has complete control of the ball. If the fielder has made a tag and drops the ball while in the act of making a throw following the tag, the tag shall be adjudged to have been made. For purposes of this definition any jewelry being worn by a player (e.g., necklaces, bracelets, etc.) shall not constitute a part of the player's body.”

From the bad ideas department ...

“The definition of a chief is ‘One who is highest in rank or authority, a leader.’ A chief does not have to be an Indian. Thus, why can't the UI create a new chief of athletics as our new mascot?”

In August 2005 the NCAA effectively banned the use of American Indian mascots and nicknames during its postseason tournaments.

“Colleges and universities may adopt any mascot that they wish, as that is an institutional matter,” said Walter Harrison, at that time the president of the University of Hartford and chairman of the NCAA Executive Committee. “But as a national association, we believe that mascots, nicknames or images deemed hostile or abusive in terms of race, ethnicity or national origin should not be visible at the championship events that we control.”

So the UI could resurrect your “chief of athletics” (wink, wink as if the forgiving folks at the NCAA wouldn’t see through that) as a symbol/mascot and just not participate in any tennis, volleyball, golf, basketball, etc. postseason tournaments.

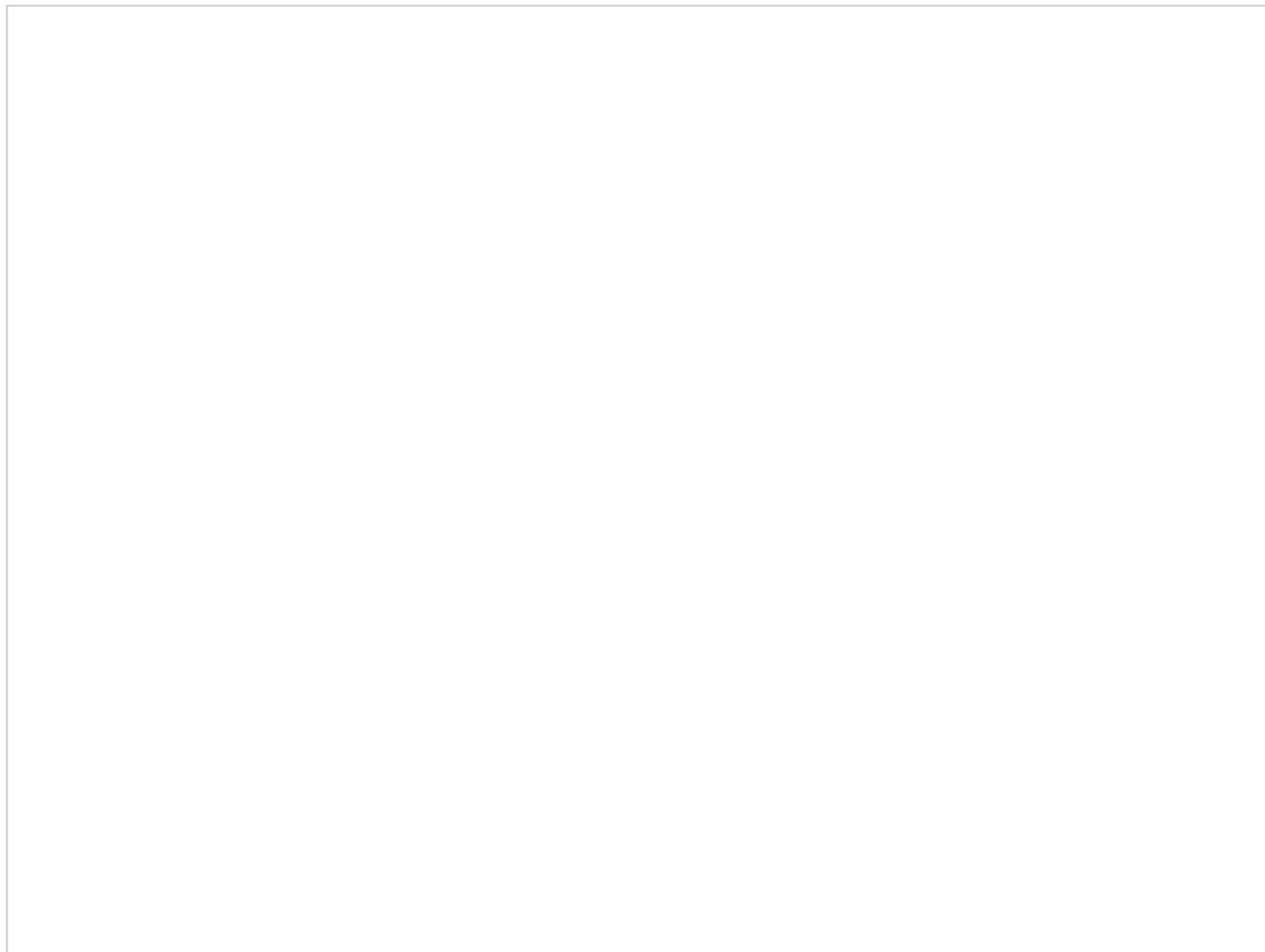
Or the university could abide by the rules instituted by the organization of which it has chosen to be a member.



Cowboy Monkey

“I think Cowboy Monkey is open now, but I am unsure if they are serving food year-round. Can you clear this up now?”

Yes, it is open and it serves food. Here’s a link to the menu ... <http://www.cowboy-monkey.com/food.html>



Dirt pile

“The giant pile of dirt at the southwest corner I-57 and Monticello Road. Who, what for, etc.”

The dirt was brought to the site — which is owned by Duce Construction — by a contractor working on the Bradley Avenue bridge project over Interstate 57. The dirt will go back to the Bradley Avenue overpass next year as that project is being completed, said Duce.

Two fewer golf courses

“Is it true the golf course in Oakland is being sold and will go back into agriculture?”

The 9-hole Norton Knolls Golf Course in Oakland, 50 miles southeast of Champaign, closed Thursday. The Oakland Independent reported that Kyley Willison, one of the course's owners, said he planned to plant industrial hemp on about half of the facility's 65 acres next year.

The Oakland property is one of two golf courses south of Champaign-Urbana to announce that it is going out of business. Earlier the family-owned Rogala Public Links, west of Mattoon, announced that it would close Dec. 31.

264 papers a year?

“If the News-Gazette is published ‘Daily except Christmas’ as stated in the ‘Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation’ in the USPS Public Notice on page C7 in the Thursday, Oct. 31 paper, shouldn't the ‘Number of Issues Published Annually’ be 364, not 264 as stated?”

Yes, you are correct. The News-Gazette publishes 364 issues a year and not 264. If there were only 264 editions a year that would mean 14 fewer Mailbags annually.

Holiday openings

“Will there be any restaurants open Thanksgiving Day?”

Absolutely.

Perkins on University Avenue in Urbana will be open 24 hours.

Bob Evans in Champaign will be open until 8 p.m.

The Red Wheel restaurants in Rantoul will be open from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.

In Danville Rich's Deluxe Restaurant will be open until 3 p.m.

Other restaurants that will be open on Thanksgiving should send us an email and we'll include it in a list later this month.

News-Gazette

Stone Creek Golf Course to close at month's end

'We are committed to the success of the master plan community of Stone Creek, but unfortunately, due the negative financial impacts of the golf business, we are no longer able

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