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HOLIDAY 2026 MAGAZINE

FEATURE STORY

PAGE 6 | Bringing Effingham's 'Wonderland in Lights' to life | by Dylan Barbee



Visitors walk through different light displays — that are only accessible via car on other nights of the season — in Effingham City Park during Walking through Wonderland. Marie Adamick photo

PUBLISHER

Beverly Joyce
beverly.joyce@indianamediagroup.com

EDITOR

Jeff Long
jeff.long@effinghamdailynews.com

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Cathy Griffith
cathy.griffith@effinghamdailynews.com

ART DIRECTOR

Natalie Reidford

CONTRIBUTORS

Dylan Barbee
Alex Wallner
Herb Meeker

SALES SUPERVISOR

Jody Hardiek
jody.hardiek@effinghamdailynews.com

ADVERTISING SALES CONSULTANT

Julie Harkins
julie.harkins@effinghamdailynews.com

CONTACT US

(217) 347-7151

E-MAIL

news@effinghamdailynews.com

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Santa arrives on a firetruck for the 2020 Hometown Christmas. Effingham Daily News file photo

From the editor

Happy Holidays!

It's that time of year to be thinking about Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas parties and Hanukkah gatherings and New Year's Eve celebrations.

A growing tradition for many families is a drive or stroll through Effingham's "Wonderland in Lights." Dylan Barbee chatted with city officials about how planning for the spectacle goes on throughout the year.

While the collection of winter light displays may mark the beginning of the holiday season for some, for the city of Effingham it's the finish line, Dylan writes. The work starts long before the first display of lights turns on.

"Planning never ends," Nick Hartke, Effingham's public properties foreman and sexton, told Dylan.

Holiday displays are also a big part of the season for a Strasburg couple.

Cathy Griffith spoke to Joe and Sheila Stratton, who have been lighting up their yard for the holidays ever since they moved to Strasburg in 1993. But they didn't know the village had a Christmas light contest until they won a couple of years later.

For 30 years, the couple either won or placed in the top three of the village contest. They missed only one year: 2019, when Sheila was in the hospital. They don't do it for the recognition, though Sheila likes seeing how many vehicles drive by to look at their display.

Freelance writer Herb Meeker attended pet blessings in Teutopolis and Effingham.

LJ, a 7-year-old Basset Hound, attended one of them with owner John Burford, who kept a good grip on the leash to keep LJ in line.

"He's been blessed here a few times. He gets excited around other dogs. He's a bad boy and needs a lot of blessing," Burford said.

Dylan also spent some time in a Unit 40 classroom to learn how teachers and students are using artificial intelligence.

The computer science based course is offered to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and taught by self-described "guinea pig of AI," for the Unit 40 school district, Jeremy Rinkel. He has been using the technology in his classes since 2022.

"Most of these guys and girls come in with very little computer knowledge and background, so it's hard to totally just go in and just jump into understanding the basic programming of things," Rinkel said. "Whenever I give them source code, I challenge them."

"AI can help with a class of 12 people if there's a syntax error in a line of code that would've taken 10 minutes combing through 600 lines of code," he added.

Those stories and more make up this holiday edition of *Effingham Magazine*.



Jeff Long
Editor



Jeff Long is the editor of the *Effingham Daily News*. He is a 1987 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and has worked for newspapers in England, Pennsylvania and Virginia. For 13 years, he was a reporter and later an editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. A past president of the Illinois Associated Press Media Editors, he lives in Altamont with his wife, Karen.



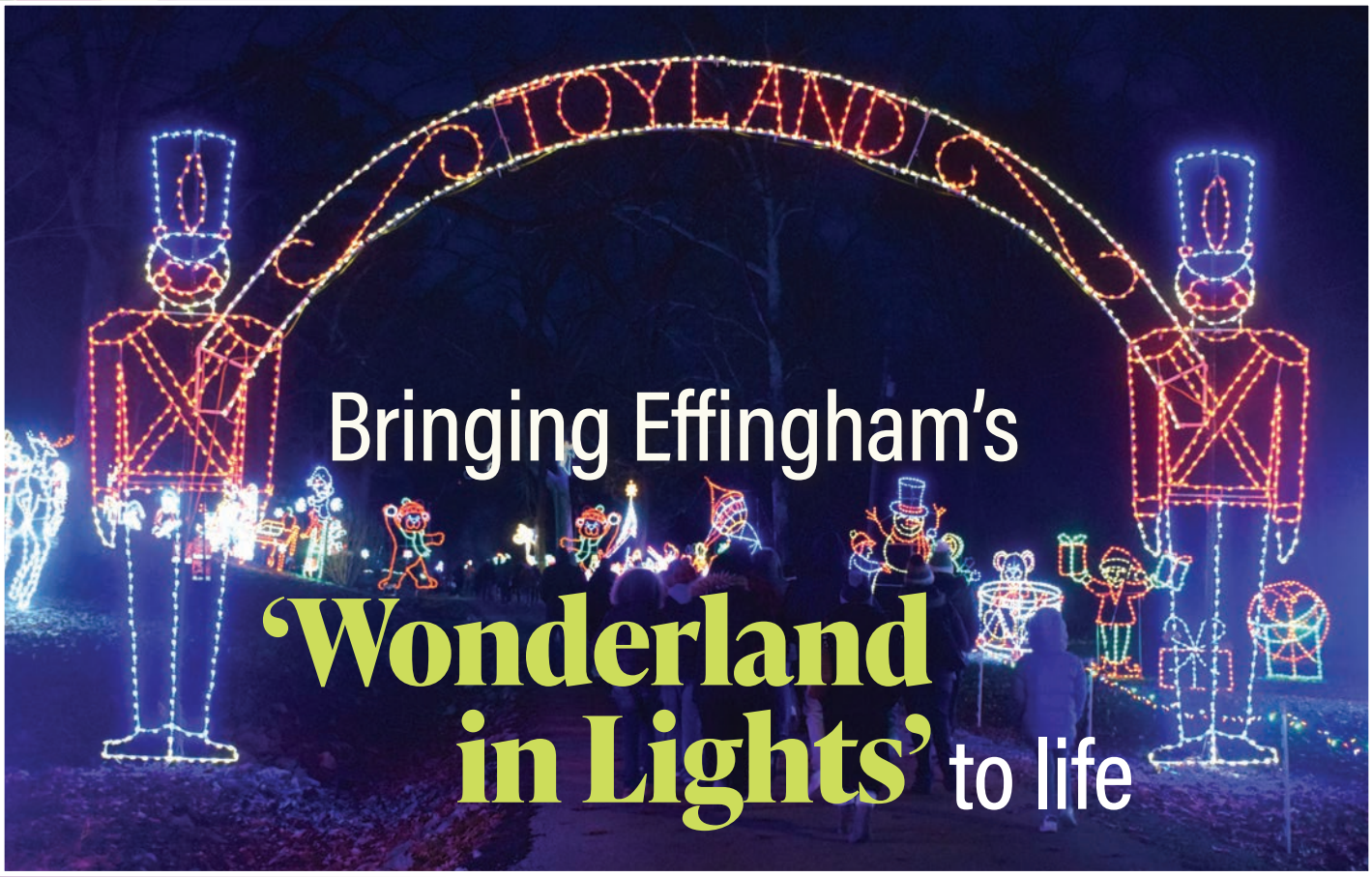
Cathy Griffith is news editor of the *Effingham Daily News*. She is a 1998 graduate of Eastern Illinois University with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism. She has worked at the *Daily News* for 25 years in news and magazine publications. She is a lifelong resident of Effingham, where she resides with her husband, Tim, and daughter, Leah.



Alex Wallner is the sports editor of the *Effingham Daily News*. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2016. Before joining the *EDN*, he was the sports editor at the *Standard-Democrat* in Sikeston, Missouri for three years. He resides in Effingham.



Dylan Barbee is a general assignment reporter for the *Effingham Daily News*. He graduated from the University of Missouri in 2026 with a Bachelor in Arts in Journalism and a minor in Sociology. A Chicago-land area native, he enjoys traveling, reading and listening to music or podcasts.



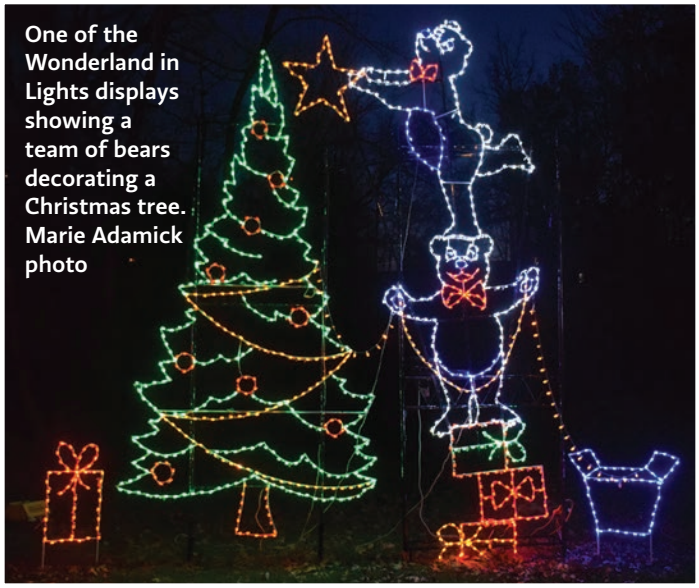
Bringing Effingham's 'Wonderland in Lights' to life

Visitors walk through different light displays — that are only accessible via car on other nights of the season — in Effingham City Park during Walking through Wonderland. Marie Adamick photo

Dylan Barbee
Effingham Magazine

In Effingham's Community Park, a glowing archway and animated displays pull families in cars through a tunnel of lights during the holiday season. Radios play holiday songs that are in-sync with the moving array of bulbs as children's faces are pressed up against glass windows.

A few miles away, the downtown area is also immersed in holiday spirit, with light displays representing a giant hot cocoa mug, a gingerbread house and a Christmas tree, attracting families to take pictures together next to them.



One of the Wonderland in Lights displays showing a team of bears decorating a Christmas tree. Marie Adamick photo

Each year from Thanksgiving through the New Year, the annual "Wonderland in Lights" draws families and out-of-town travelers to the city's lit-up spaces. While the collection of winter light displays may mark the beginning of the holiday season for some, for the city of Effingham it's the finish line. The work starts long before the first display of lights turns on.

"Planning never ends," Nick Hartke, Effingham's public properties foreman and sexton, said in a statement relayed through the city's tourism office.

This is not an exaggeration, according to Jodi Thoele, Director of Tourism for the City of Effingham. She said bringing the tradition to life is a year-long process and planning for the next year's celebration of the holidays begins as soon as the current "Wonderland in Lights" comes to an end.

The work behind the 'wonderland'

In January, Thoele meets with Hartke to talk through the displays of lights that need to be replaced or refurbished and whether there is enough room in Community Park and the downtown area for more. At the end of February, Thoele places the city's orders for the lights to get a discounted rate on new displays for the following year.

In the spring and summer months that lead up to the fall season, the calendar fills with calls and check-ins between Thoele's office, Hartke's public works team and a company that they choose to buy the light displays from. Effingham's

city Tourism Department and its Public Works Department often discuss whether the orders are on schedule or not before its firm November deadline.

Installation of the displays and the lights in Community Park begins in October and everything must be finished before the annual "Walking Through Wonderland" kickoff event on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

"We chose the night before Thanksgiving because it's one of the busiest travel and homecoming nights of the year," Thoele said. "A lot of people are already in Effingham visiting family or just passing through."

The displays themselves are built by a third-party vendor, but once they are shipped to the city, the Effingham Public Works Department assembles and maintains them. Thoele's office and Hartke's crew then work out the layout together.

"The layout reflects what worked the years before and what may need to change due to additions and replacements of displays," Hartke said. "Ultimately, Jodi and her team in tourism have the last word on layout. Sometimes space, construction, and power needs can drive some of those decisions."

While the Tourism Department may have final say, some practicalities can overrule its wish-list.

"Sometimes Nick basically tells us, 'You can't do that,'" Thoele said before laughing. "'There's not enough electricity for what you want.' So we go back to the drawing board."

The price for the annual Effingham tradition is a moving target for the city every year. City council and the city administration set the budget, depending on other ordinances the city has to pay for. Money for "Wonderland in Lights" comes from the Hotel-Motel Tax and donations, according to Thoele.

She added that donations bring in about $20,000 each season and businesses and families can sponsor a light display through a two-year contract with money that goes back into new lights.

The funding model for "Wonderland in Lights" has had to keep pace with a layout of displays that has grown steadily since it began in the early 2000s.

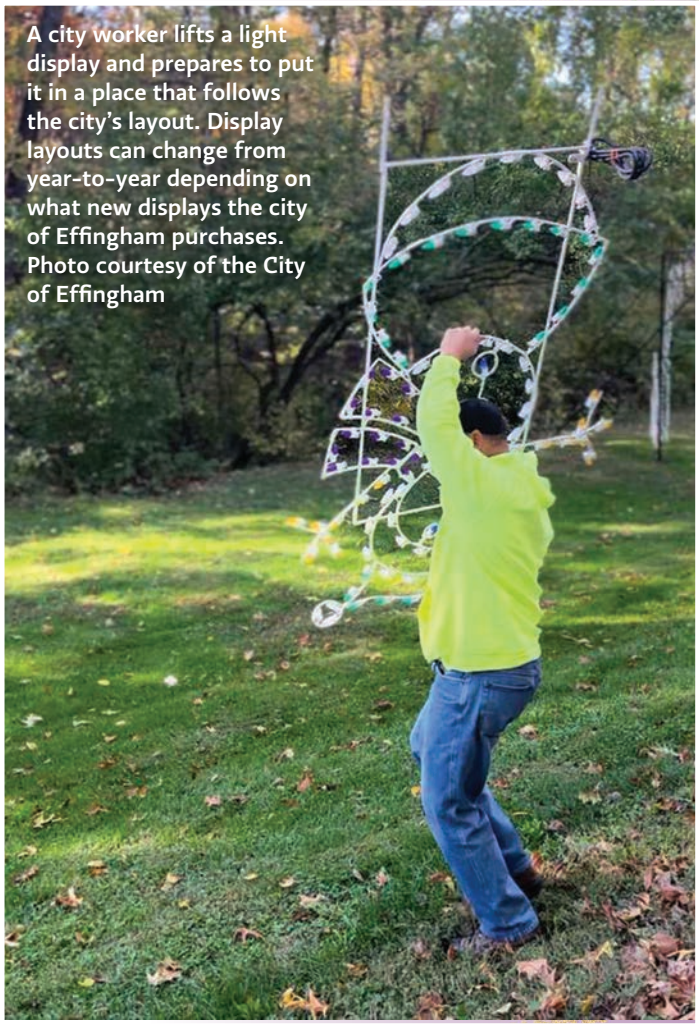
Decades of lights

Back then, the celebration of the holiday season started off with just a few light displays, and no one was sure if the city could afford to do it every year, according to Thoele. However, the lights were an instant hit in Effingham, and city leaders decided to keep the tradition going, giving the Department of Tourism and Public Works Department the opportunity to expand on it.

Thoele started working for the city in 2011. Since then, the display of lights in Community Park and in downtown Effingham has gone from a handful of scenes to roughly 80 scenes and well over 100 individual displays, according to Thoele.

She said that when the city started collecting more bulbs each year, the tunnels of lights grew as more displays stretched the perimeter of the route required to see all of the lights while driving.

The first year the city counted cars using a ticker, about 2,500 cars came through the drive-through display of lights. The count now tops over 10,000 cars every season, counting only the hours between 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. when volunteer staff



A city worker lifts a light display and prepares to put it in a place that follows the city's layout. Display layouts can change from year-to-year depending on what new displays the city of Effingham purchases. Photo courtesy of the City of Effingham



City of Effingham Public Works builds a light display in October for the annual "Wonderland in Lights" celebration. Photo courtesy of the City of Effingham

are on-site seven days a week. Visitors who drive through after those hours aren't included in the counting, according to Thoele.

Alyssa Robinson, marketing assistant for the city of Effingham, said through the years the city has focused on getting its hands on more advanced light displays, keeping pace with modern-day technology.

"In the last 20 years for sure, the companies building the displays have made them more interesting and more exciting and bigger and more dynamic," Robinson said. "So, we want to bring that newer technology to our drive-through display as well. We try to keep up with the tech."

The most monumental change to the annual tradition came six years ago, with the integration of "Walking Through Wonderland." On the night before Thanksgiving, the park opens to visitors on foot, and the drive-through becomes an on-the-ground walk-through.

The event is set to kickoff Nov. 25 and has drawn in more than 4,000 visitors each of the past two years, according to Thoele. Live Christmas music plays while visitors walk to stands giving out free hot cocoa and cookies. Patches of fake snow hang from vendors selling extra treats for residents or travelers to indulge in, while "Santa's House" conducts free visits and pictures with Santa Claus.

Thoele says the night occurs once a year and gives community members a chance to see each other before the holidays, compared to the drive-through event which is designated more to spending time with family.

"It's almost like a private moment when you're driving through the lights with your family, whereas when you get out and you're literally walking through the lights you run into your neighbors, friends and co-workers," Thoele said. "Everyone kind of comes together on the night before Thanksgiving, and it just gives you a warm feeling."



Families line up at the Effingham Police Department's station to exchange their golden tickets for toys at the end of the Walking through Wonderland trail. Marie Adamick photo

A free Hallmark moment

While there is a year-long series of logistics that occur behind the scenes for the city to bring the "Wonderland in Lights" celebration to life every holiday season, Thoele said Effingham keeps doing it because of how accessible the event is.

"There's no cost to enjoy the display so it's accessible to every family regardless of income," Thoele said. "I think that's rare for holiday entertainment and because of that, it has become such a well-loved community activity for over 20 years now."

She added that for many local families, it has become part of how they start off their holiday season in Effingham. For visitors, it can turn a weekend-long hotel stay into a memory or give a family driving through the community a moment of "holiday warmth," that requires no cost or planning.

For Robinson, the annual Effingham tradition is about nostalgia and how the holiday lights bring everyone together during the holidays.

"I think holiday lights are recognizable across generations, across cultures, and across just different walks of life," Robinson said. "When everyone sees the lights, it's like a moment of nostalgia and holiday spirit and tradition. It resonates with both residents and visitors."

For the city, the reward comes in the reactions of the people who walk and drive through the lights on display that took a year to bring together behind the scenes.

"We do hear a lot of 'Oh, it's just like a Hallmark movie,' which we absolutely love because that's what we're trying to achieve," Thoele said.


Friends of Frosty sing and play Christmas songs throughout Walking through Wonderland in Effingham's Community Park. Marie Adamick photo

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STRASBURG COUPLE MAKES THE *Holidays* SHINE



Sheila and Joe Stratton pose in front of their Strasburg home recently with one of their snowmen. Behind them is a 25-foot Christmas cone tree that lights up for the holidays. Cathy Griffith photo

Cathy Griffith
Effingham Magazine

Joe and Sheila Stratton have been lighting up their yard for the holidays ever since they moved to Strasburg in 1993. But they didn't know the village had a Christmas light contest until they won a couple of years later.

"A lady came walking up with a 22-pound turkey and goes, 'You guys won the lighting contest,'" recalled Joe, to which he replied, "What lighting contest?"

For 30 years, the couple either won or placed in the top three of the village contest. They missed only one year: 2019, when Sheila was in the hospital.

They don't do it for the recognition, though Sheila likes seeing how many vehicles drive by to look at their display.

"It's something we like to do," she said.

When someone moved into the village last year with a lot of Halloween decorations, Joe said Mayor Cinda Held jokingly messaged him, saying they'd better step up their game for Christmas that year. Joe and Sheila weren't worried. They aren't competitive about the display, but they do like it when people enjoy it.

"They'll pull up and stop, and they'll just take it all in," said Joe.

Strasburg resident John Cress makes a point of driving around the village every year and enjoys seeing the Strattons' display.

"They do a nice display," said Cress.

As the display draws people to it, Held notes the joy it brings to Strasburg.

"I like that they keep the festive spirit alive in town," she said.

Sheila got her love of holiday decorating from her father.

"I can remember Christmas being the best time of year. He didn't put out a whole lot, but he put out enough that for us it was something," she said.

The Strattons' display covers three-quarters of their corner yard. They began their collection by hitting after-Christmas sales at Rural King, Menards, Walmart and Kmart, filling a pickup truck with their finds.

"You could get it for nothing, you know. And nowadays nobody does it," said Joe.

Although some items may be marked



The Strattons' home and yard is lit up for the holidays in this 2023 photo. Submitted photo.

down 20 or 30%, Joe said stores now wrap up leftover Christmas décor.

"They don't clearance it like they used to," he added.

The Strattons have amassed such a large collection that they have to store it in a shed they built, as well as in their garage. Their collection includes vintage décor and a 10-foot Christmas tree Joe made with rebar and lighted garland. Joe made other trees and stars and started selling them.

"We sold the heck out of it," he said, adding he no longer makes them.

Their display has become more interactive over the years as they have incorporated music that syncs with their lights, including those on their 25-foot Christmas cone tree. They also have a giant inflatable Hammacher Schlemmer Frosty the Snowman with a projector that plays clips from the classic 1969 cartoon on its belly.

The couple divides the display into themes. One theme features Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer with all the misfit toys. Another showcases a life-size stuffed Grinch, his dog, Max, and Cindy Lou Who.



Classic blow molds fill the display, too.

They don't put much forethought into setting up the display every year, making it up as they go.

"We just fly by the seat of our pants," said Joe.

"We just say, OK, let's put this here," added Sheila.

They do follow one guideline: they don't put the display out until after Thanksgiving. Setup usually takes one weekend, and wiring takes the next. For wiring, Joe has six 27-gallon totes full of extension cords in their living room. He says keeping them there helps keep them warm.

"That way you can lay them flat. But if they're cold, you can't get them to lie straight," he said.

A puck-shaped extension-cord outlet that runs on a single cord streamlined the web of cords he had to navigate through in their yard.

"It's got like six outlets that you can go out in six different directions and that saved the day," said Joe.

They've come a long way from the display's early days, when they had to hook up everything and turn it on manually every day. The couple now has battery-backed digital timers and year-round lights they control with an app, including Govee curtain lights that generate customizable colors and animated images that sync to music.

"Once it's wired, we don't touch it; it comes on automatically, goes off automatically," said Joe.

The Strattons' display covers three-quarters of their corner yard.

That is, except when a squirrel interferes and gnaws on the wiring, which Joe then has to splice.

"I just got to watch and make sure they all are still lighting up," said Joe. "They'll eat the plugs off the end of the lights."

But the couple has found a solution.

"I'll go out three or four times a season and spray vinegar and water around all the lights, and they won't bother them," said Joe.

Joe and Sheila always buy something new to display every year. However, Joe said they don't have room anymore because they keep most of what they buy.

"We are actually full," he said.

Still, he recently bought a few "little ones" at Hobby Lobby.

"He had to have them. He wanted some other ones, but we didn't go back and get them," said Sheila.

Joe was eyeing 3-D copper-pressed reindeer.

"I wanted to get eight of them and put them on posts out here at different levels, like they're flying up to the roof," he said.

Although Sheila handles most of the buying, Joe has also purchased some larger items, such as a dozen 6 1/2-foot artificial trees. The trees lined their yard and were set to music. But they took up too much storage space, so he sold them.

Joe claims the display is more Sheila's thing, but she says that's just an act.

"He tells everybody it's me. It's him too," she said.



The Strattons store most of their outdoor Christmas décor in their shed. Cathy Griffith photo

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First CCM Therapy Procedure performed at SBL

Sarah Bush Lincoln Electrophysiologist Abraham Kocheril, MD, recently performed the first Cardiac Contractility Modulation (CCM) therapy procedure at Sarah Bush Lincoln. SBL is the first organization in the area to perform this procedure.

Chronic heart failure is when the heart muscle weakens and has difficulty pumping blood well enough to meet the body's needs. It is a very common and growing public health issue. Currently, most heart failure patients are prescribed medication to slow the progression of the disease and manage the symptoms.

The procedure involves implanting a device called the Optimizer, which helps induce CCM therapy. Though the procedure is very similar to pacemaker implantation, the intent is not to assist with the heart's rhythm; instead, the device helps the heart's contractions, allowing it to deliver more oxygen-rich blood throughout the body.

"This procedure is a great option for people suffering from heart failure," Dr. Kocheril said. "This has not been previously offered in our region, so this gives people a local option that saves them from traveling."

Previously, cardiac resynchronization therapy or other treatments were the main options for heart failure. Many people do not meet the criteria for those other options, but they can meet the criteria for CCM therapy, allowing a broader group of people to receive this care.

Chronic heart failure affects an estimated 6.5 million Americans, and by 2030, more than 8 million Americans are expected to suffer from heart failure.

People suffering from heart failure can experience shortness of breath, fatigue and swelling in the legs, but CCM therapy is proven to alleviate those issues.

"Those who have undergone the procedure in other centers have seen significant improvement. They feel better overall, they don't get as fatigued and their heart pumps better," Dr. Kocheril said.

The procedure only takes about an hour to perform, and people usually go home the same day, Dr. Kocheril added. After the surgery, people cannot raise their arms over their head for the first two weeks, but after the first two days, they can resume other normal activity, and after two weeks they have no physical restrictions.



Dr. Abraham Kocheril (middle) is pictured with the team that assisted him with the procedure. Submitted photo

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Nov 25

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Nov 26

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Visit our drive-thru light display in Community Park, seven days a week, from 5 to 9 p.m. through Jan 1. Free; donations welcome.

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Snapshots

Photos by Marie Adamick
Here's a look back at the 2025 Hometown Christmas in Effingham. The 2026 event is Saturday, Nov. 28 from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.



Deputy City Administrator Dennis Presley throws out candy while one of the City of Effingham's trucks blows snow from the back of it during the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade.



Santa Claus rides into downtown Effingham on a Caledonia Fire Truck to endcap the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade.



Diana (in red) and Bill Tighe (far right), from Stewardson, sip on peppermint hot chocolate from Joe Sippers with their six-year-old dog, Chewy, during their first Hometown Christmas.



The Lucky Dog Grooming Salon owners Richard Vahling (center) and Nikki Vahling (right) walk with their daughter, Aubrey Vahling (center, right), and dog, Ellie during the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade.



Russ Braunecker Cadillac Buick GMC's float with large candy, lighted arches and a blown up gingerbread house during the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade.



Kids reach for and play in the bubbles that Wild Foam Adventures shoot off in downtown Effingham for Hometown Christmas 2025.



Heart Theatre's float during the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade has a recreation of a mini theater showing "It's a Wonderful Life" on a projection screen.



Dan Hecht Chevrolet Toyota Dealership's float with lit up candy canes, a gingerbread house and snow during the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade.



2025 Jr. Miss Effingham County Fair Queen Leah Ring (left) and 2025 Miss Effingham County Fair Queen Krista Phillips (right) ride in the back of a pickup truck during the 2025 Hometown Christmas' Lighted Christmas Parade.





Families wait in line to see Santa Claus in his house on the courthouse lawn during the 2025 Hometown Christmas.





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Effingham Unit 40 rolls out district-wide AI plan

Dylan Barbee
Effingham Magazine

Effingham High School students huddle around classroom computers in a gaming design class, drafting prompts they give Artificial Intelligence that in return implement code for their personally customized computer games.

The semester started with students learning the coding of classic games like PAC-MAN, Super Mario and Donkey Kong and putting those game's code through a ChatGPT chatbot to learn how to make games of their own.

The computer science based course is offered to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and taught by self-described "guinea pig of AI," for the Unit 40 school district, Jeremy Rinkel. He has been using the technology in his classes since 2022.

"Most of these guys and girls come in with very little computer knowledge and background, so it's hard to totally just go in and just jump into understanding the basic programming of things," Rinkel said. "Whenever I give them source code, I challenge them."

"AI can help with a class of 12 people if there's a syntax error in a line of code that would've taken 10 minutes combing through 600 lines of code," he added.

The roll-out

Now, other teachers and students have begun using Artificial Intelligence throughout Unit 40 classrooms.

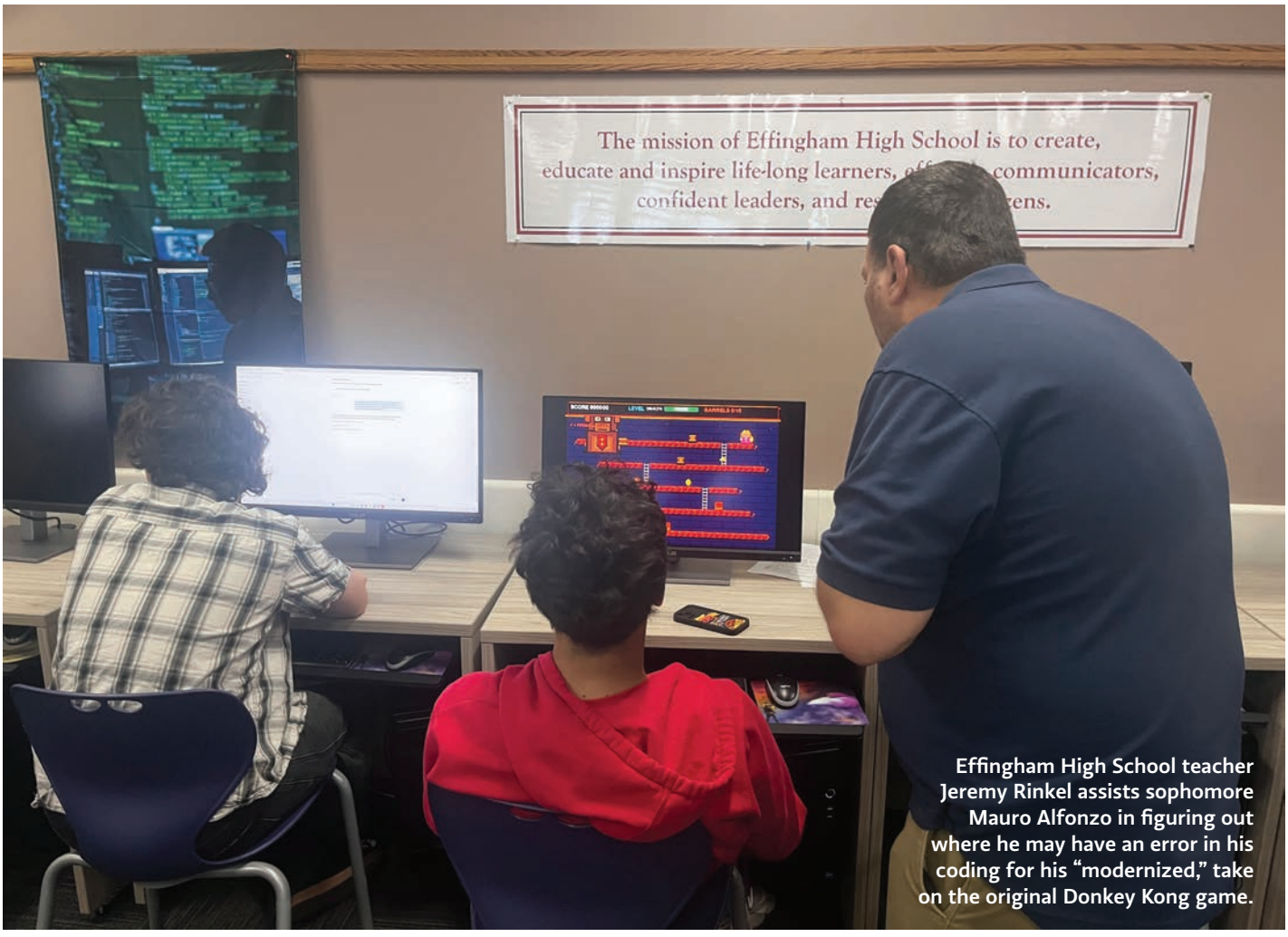
The recent trend comes after the Unit 40 board approved an AI plan in January, implementing Google Gemini across its schools at the start of the school year to enhance learning and promote AI literacy for its students and staff.

The AI plan has been in the works for over a year, with Unit 40 Director of Innovation and Instructional Technology Stephanie Mitchell being at the forefront of making sure AI is used responsibly in classrooms.

"It's a new thing that we know our students are going to be exposed to one way or another," Mitchell said. "So if we can get a hold of it and kind of teach them the right way, the ethical way to use it, that makes it better for everybody in the end."

At Effingham High School, students are independently using the technology for review, to research for class assignments or to complete projects in their elective classes.

Students in Effingham Junior High and Central Grade School are only using AI in the classroom when it's administered by teachers. For example, for fifth grade and below, any use of the technology involves a teacher using it as a learning tool



Effingham High School teacher Jeremy Rinkel assists sophomore Mauro Alfonzo in figuring out where he may have an error in his coding for his "modernized," take on the original Donkey Kong game.

during small group lectures, feeding it prompts or having it create slideshow presentations. Mitchell said there are no plans in the school district for young children to use it by themselves.

Given that Unit 40 schools were already "Google-centric," according to Mitchell, choosing Google Gemini as the provider of AI tools for its students and staff was an easy transition. She added that Google platforms like Gemini for Education have safety measures in place when it comes to monitoring how the technology is being used in classrooms.

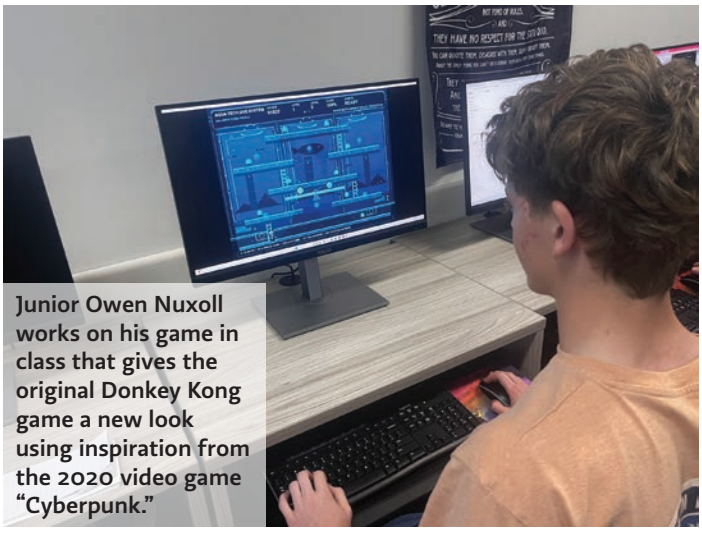
Unit 40 also has access to a Google AI resource called Gemini Notebook that lets teachers put in class notes into a closed-source system for just the class. The tool allows students to create practice quizzes or flashcards for themselves while studying at home with the information their teacher taught in class.

On the safety side, Mitchell said Gemini has built-in guard-rails that try to steer students in a better direction if they use key words. Teachers can also monitor their students when using Lightspeed Systems, a web filtering program that uses AI to alert staff when restricted words or phrases are being used while students navigate Google AI tools.

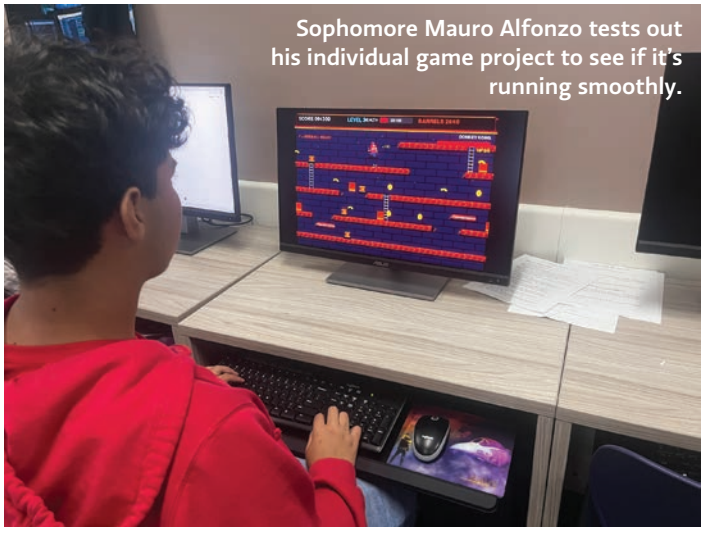
Feedback from teachers and students

So far, Mitchell said she has received positive feedback from both students and teachers who have used these AI platforms inside and outside of the classroom. She said a survey the district conducted before the roll-out showed many students were already aware of the issues and controversies surrounding AI.

In Rinkel's class, students said they only use AI in his class to develop their computer games, but have not used the technology as much in other courses. They say it has helped them tackle coding hurdles that they might not have attempted otherwise.



Junior Owen Nuxoll works on his game in class that gives the original Donkey Kong game a new look using inspiration from the 2020 video game "Cyberpunk."

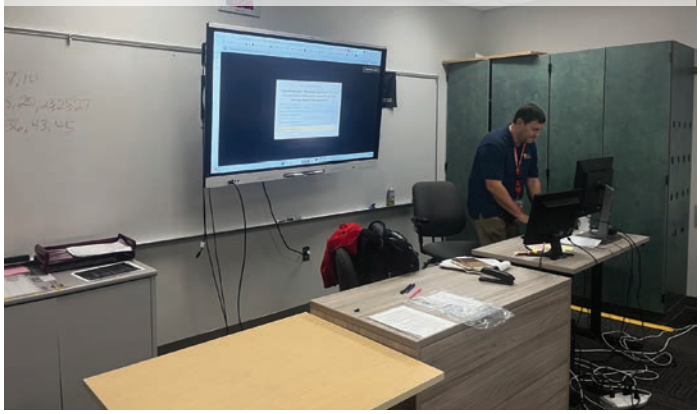


Sophomore Mauro Alfonzo tests out his individual game project to see if it's running smoothly.

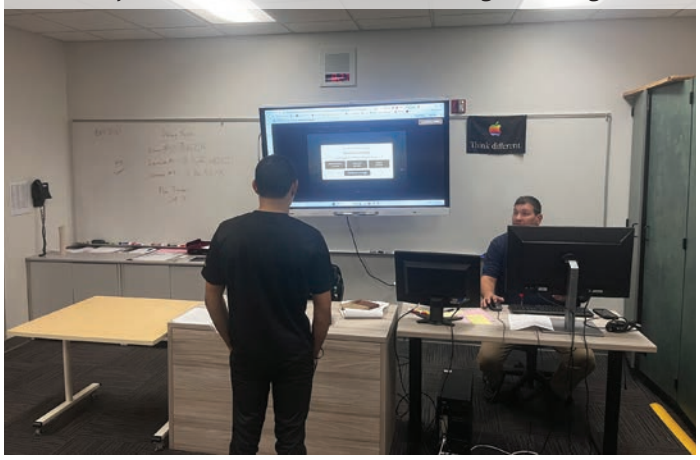


A group of Effingham High School students in Mr. Rinkel's gaming design class work on their individual games.

Jeremy Rinkel demonstrates a computer game he created using AI and coding to students in his gaming design class on Oct. 7, 2026.



Junior Jordan Jackson goes to the front of the class to ask Mr. Rinkel a question about how he created his game using AI.



Effingham High School junior Owen Nuxoll is using AI to build a Cyberpunk-themed spin-off of the original Donkey King game with three levels so far. He said it takes a long time to build a computer game, with a single animation taking him sometimes a day to get right.

Despite this, Nuxoll added that having AI in the class has helped him complete his project and with the available tools he has as resources, his "imagination is limitless."

Another junior in Rinkel's class, Jordan Jackson, is building a game with four levels, a blaster and a final boss fight. He plans to add sound to the game next. He said his experience with AI in the gaming design class has been "up and down," with the AI platforms being reliable on some days and others "not very helpful." Jackson noted that he never uses AI outside of Rinkel's classes and said other students shouldn't use the technology to replace their critical thinking skills.

"Don't rely too much on AI," Jackson said. "Your brain helps you a lot more than you think."

Sophomore Mauro Alfonzo wants to be a graphic designer and has used Rinkel's class to learn how to design digitalized games. He decided to recreate the original Donkey Kong game with the help of AI by giving it a "modernized" look and mechanics.

"AI is really useful, but you have to know how to use it," Alfonzo said. "It's very helpful for your ideas or things like that. If I'm honest, I wouldn't get a game like this without AI."

Alfonzo added that teachers at Effingham High School have a "strict" policy on using the technology in classes. He said that in his English class his teacher goes over their papers with them in-person to make sure they can explain and elaborate on their own ideas in their papers. Teachers can also check to see if students are copying and pasting information generated from AI into their essays, according to Alfonzo.

Rinkel has also brought AI into his English classes, discussing with his students that the technology can be used as a tool for generating ideas rather than a way to cheat through the curriculum.

In one class exercise, students hand-write a paragraph, type it verbatim and then ask AI to only correct their grammar before asking it to improve the flow of the writing. He said these steps help students see the difference between using AI as a tool for learning and having it do the work for them.

For a class project on the short story "The Gift of Magi" Rinkel had students write their own song lyrics related to the book, then use AI music tool Suno to generate vocals to sing the song they wrote.

Since Suno was blocked on student's devices due to privacy laws, Rinkel said his students brought their lyrics to him to generate their songs for the class. He recently learned that Google Gemini can do the same, so students can now do it themselves.

A learning tool

Rinkel said that other teachers across Unit 40 "are cautious, not skeptical" about the technology. He compared it to earlier technologies like the cellphone and Grammarly, which also drew concern when they first arrived in the tech world.

"You've got some teachers that are just like 'I don't want this,'" Rinkel said. "But I think overall, teachers see the value and see the importance of teaching kids to use it correctly,"

Not every AI-related course has taken off for this school year in Unit 40. Art teacher Charlie Huber was set to teach a multimedia course this school year that planned on using AI tools in the classroom, but no Effingham High School students signed up.

However, Huber said he still supports the district in its decision to implement AI in classrooms for students and teachers to use.

"AI is here," Huber said. "So it's a matter of learning how to manage it correctly and using it responsibly, and really understand that it's a tool. It's really not a takeover."

"I've used these platforms in the past, and I can tell you that they are very good, especially at helping you at getting ideas and brainstorming things," he added.

Looking ahead, Mitchell said the district wants to build on what it has started. The goal, she said, is for students to continue treating AI like any other educational tool, similar to "a calculator or their computer," while also giving students "digital citizenship skills," for the new career paths on the horizon.

"We're training kids for careers that are going to use these things," Mitchell said. "We honestly don't know some of the careers that they are going to have, they aren't even in existence yet. So, I think when we can give them skills that will translate into those careers, it's really important to do so."

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Father Carmen hugs Coco before the blessing of animals at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Teutopolis. Coco was one of many rescue dogs attending the blessings in Teutopolis and Effingham.

BLESSING THE ANIMALS

By loving animals as St. Francis did, we humans receive God's blessing

Herb Meeker
For Effingham Magazine

"All creatures are created from the same paternal heartbeat of God. Not to hurt our humble brethren [the animals] is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it. God requires that we assist the animals when they need our help. Each being (human or creature) has the same right of protection. If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men."

– St. Francis of Assisi

Dogs of all sizes, a pair of horses and a bearded dragon lizard gathered for the blessing of animals Oct. 4 outside St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Teutopolis.

The Rev. Carmen Schuderi, the pastor at St. Francis, was delighted with the turnout. He's a dog lover himself. He embraced Coco, a small dog with fluffy ears and tail, to help calm her as bigger dogs arrived before the ceremony. The event recognized the date when St. Francis died 800 years ago, referred to in the Catholic Church as the Transitus, when he went to Heaven.

"She's a rescue dog and was in bad shape when we got her," Jane Ordner said.

Caring for abandoned animals is based on the outlook the saint had on the divine fingerprint across the world. Father Carmen explained St. Francis believed all animals, birds and other wildlife were created by God. Therefore, he looked upon them as his brothers and sisters.

"The universality of his vision was indeed radical for that time," the pastor said.

St. Francis declared it was a sin



These Aussiedoodle puppies drew plenty of attention during the blessing ceremony at St. Francis Church. Holding the pups are, from left, Annabelle, Kate and Jolena Habing.

to mistreat animals in a strong statement on this philosophy that led to Oct. 4 being declared World Animals Day long after the saint's death on that day in 1226.

Today, we realize animals, large and small, are part of God's plan. Whipping out a species for profit or sport can upset the natural order of things. And that can have a detrimental effect on humans.

St. Francis today is the patron saint of ecology, showing his global influence on saving wildlife.



Murphy, a year-old Golden Retriever, appears to be shy about getting blessed with holy water by Father Carmen. But he took it in stride like the other dogs that Sunday afternoon.

Many people today consider their pets as family members. Maggie, a 3-year-old black and white Cocker Spaniel mix, was another rescue dog ready to get her first blessing. Nearby was Murphy, a year-old Golden Retriever, the joy of Joey and Audrey Runde. Even though Murphy was highly curious that Sunday afternoon about the other dogs, including eight Aussiedoodle puppies.

The pups drew plenty of attention from other dog owners wanting to hold them or pet them. One of the puppies was whimpering when separated from its siblings. The pups were given names from the Bible by the Runde family long before the blessing ceremony. Annabelle, Kate and Jolena Habing had their hands full with the furry cuties. Seven of the pups will go to other families, while one with a coat of gray and black will remain with the Habings.

Bobby Chungus, the name for a tan-colored lizard with a row of spikes under its chin resembling a beard, was a little shy with all the furry creatures around, including a hulking White Pyrenees dog. Or maybe it was nervous about being photographed.

LJ, a 7-year-old Basset Hound, had no problem being photographed. John Burford kept a good grip on the leash to keep LJ in line.

"He's been blessed here a few times. He gets excited around







Father Boniface sprinkles holy water for blessing dogs gathered in the Healing Garden at HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital in Effingham.

other dogs. He's a bad boy and needs a lot of blessing," Burford said.

Father Carmen recalled how St. Francis was fearless even toward animals hostile to humans. The Italian village of Gubbio was being terrorized by a huge wolf, killing cattle and attacking people. As told in the book Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi, the priest approached the wolf and through faith and the power of God convinced it to obey him and stop its ravaging ways. In exchange, Francis had the people of Gubbio feed the wolf as long as it lived, providing protection to the village from other predators. This account is one of the many miracles that led to Francis being named a saint by the Catholic Church.

"An archaeological dig by Gubbio revealed the skeleton of a large canine, possibly a wolf. It showed signs of being a grave dug for the animal. That could be the Wolf of Gubbio, showing it kept its promise to St. Francis," Father Carmen said.

> **"The universality of [St. Francis'] vision was indeed radical for that time."**
>
> **— Rev. Carmen Schuderi**

Many paintings or images of St. Francis show him surrounded by animals and birds. There are accounts that he preached the gospel to birds when they would not fly away. The colorful windows in the church at Teutopolis follow the many deeds and triumphs of St. Francis. He is depicted in a woods with animals and birds around him, including the Wolf of Gubbio.

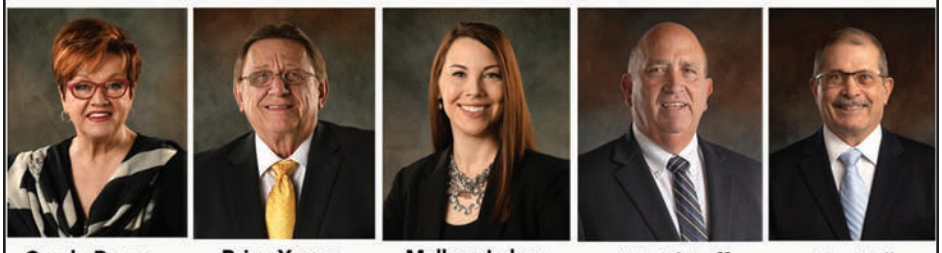
Animals that worked for humans could be mistreated by humans during the lifetime of Francis. Today, there are laws protecting such animals. Under the shade of a tree, Gregg Goeckner and Cutter Roepke were holding the reins of Nugget and Blue, both healthy horses. They weren't bothered by the mini kennel near them.

The time came for Father Carmen to offer a prayer and walk around lightly sprinkling the animals with holy water. Most took the blessing in stride though Murphy appeared a little shy when the water hit his fur.

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HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital pet blessing

On Oct. 6, HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital offered a blessing for animals in the Healing Garden, a sanctuary for offering a peaceful space for meditation and rest.

At times it was not that peaceful that Tuesday with some dogs barking, whining or tugging at their leashes as they and their owners formed a circle around the statue of St. Francis. It is fitting the hospital celebrates a tradition of St. Francis because St. Anthony of Padua, though he started with the Augustinian order, later became a follower of Francis' ideals. Anthony is the patron saint of the lower order of animals.

The Rev. Boniface, dressed in a white vestment, led the prayer honoring St. Francis for love of all creatures. His calm voice appeared to calm down the dogs.

Jacob, a 4-year-old Beagle and Aussie Shepherd mix, wearing a bandana around his neck, seemed happy as he wagged his tail before his first blessing. A rescue dog, Jacob has proved a blessing to his owner Karen Reeves and the dog's unofficial "grandma" Ann Fasig.

"I just feel he needs to be blessed. He's a rescue dog, and he really adopted me," Reeves said.

Indy Jones and Boogie were ready for the holy water. The rescue dogs are both 4-years-old, Brenda Avery said. She is facing health issues with one of her dogs.



Brandi Biggs, left, holds Lilly, a Pomeranian, and Selena Biggs hugs Lainey, a mini Poodle, before the blessing starts at HSHS St. Anthony's Memorial Hospital. Though tiny, Lilly had a bark that carried, while Lainey wasn't sure about being photographed or being surrounded by some bigger dogs.

A pair of the tiniest dogs at HSHS St. Anthony's that afternoon were Lilly, a white Pomeranian, and Lainey, a mini Poodle the color of chocolate. Lilly was offering a few quiet barks, while Lainey seemed in awe with the group of dogs gathered in the Healing Garden. Brandi and Selena Biggs held the small ones close through the ceremony.

Mindy Taphorn brought Suzy, an 11-year-old Beagle, and Whiskey, a 13-year-old Scottish Terry mix, to the blessing. Suzy was adopted after the death of another Beagle, Taphorn said.

"She's very much a Beagle. They make great companions," she said.

Dogs and other pets can help with personal loss. It could be a departed spouse's favorite dog transferring its love and loyalty in subtle ways. The same can be said of cats when they snuggle and purr in one's lap after a tough day.

After sprinkling the holy water to the animals, Father Boniface, chaplain at the hospital, talked about the benefits of the occasion for the pet owners.

"Yes, this is for the remembrance of St. Francis 800 years after his death. But this brings extra joy to everyone coming out. With the animals it brings together an emotional circle," he said.

"I think the dogs are sent from up above to us. And we pray they have a long and healthy life," Avery said.

And pets can help their owners enjoy a fuller life as well even if those morning walks in subzero temperatures or downpours can be a challenge.



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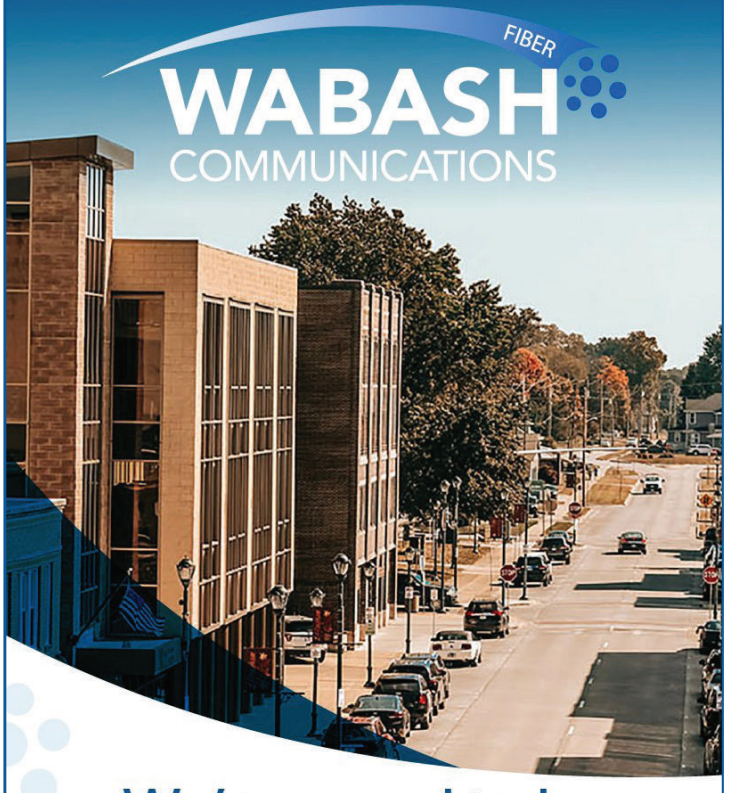
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The Teutopolis Wooden Shoes boys' basketball players, coaches, staff and cheerleaders pose for a portrait after Teutopolis defeated Tolono Unity in the championship game of the Effingham/Teutopolis Christmas Classic at Effingham High School, Wednesday, Dec. 31, 2025. Photo by Alex Wallner

CHRISTMAS CLASSIC OFFERS HOLIDAY EXCITEMENT

'We keep putting forward a good product'

Alex Wallner
Effingham Magazine

High-level basketball over three days, paired with two great venues, creates a post-Christmas tradition that everyone looks forward to each year.

That is the Effingham/Teutopolis Christmas Classic.

But it isn't just great for locals.

Teams and patrons from out of the area have also agreed.

"We've had some very good feedback from the coaches and the schools that have been here," said Dave Woltman, a Christmas Classic committee member and former Effingham athletic director. "We're always trying to create a better atmosphere and have always done our best to give a good product to the competitors as well as the fans."

Woltman has been on the tournament's committee since the start.

This December marks the 13th year and each year has only enhanced its reputation.

"From what we hear from coaches, officials and a lot of fans, is that it's one of the better tournaments around," Woltman said.

Woltman said that in the early 2000s, he and others originally planned to introduce a Christmas tournament to the area. That fell flat.

Then, when Andy Johnson – who is now the superintendent at Effingham – was athletic director at Teutopolis, conversations started again.

"He and I met and decided we needed to get something going," Woltman said. "The first year, we had five teams. Then we had six, then eight. Then, we went from eight to 16.

"It's been an excellent opportunity for our communities to all work together."

The championship games have delivered since the beginning, with the champion winning by an average of 8.2 points in the title game.

Last season, Teutopolis won its fifth tournament title, beating Tolono (Unity) by one point.

Woltman said the tournament is typically seeded in early December, though that comes with its own challenges, as teams usually don't have many games played by that time.

"We do our best," Woltman said. "We're trying to seed [the tournament] in early December, but that's hard when teams have only played four games or less.

"We try to get information from returning players about their role on the team, but if it's a new team, sometimes it's hard to get that information."

Veteran official Mike Bell has been blowing a whistle for 24

years. Bell oversees official scheduling and said his job has gotten trickier over the years.

"I've been scheduling for the past seven years in the Apollo Conference and took over varsity scheduling three years ago," Bell said. "It's getting harder and harder to fill games because we don't have enough officials."

Bell said he officiates five to six Christmas tournaments per year.

To him, Effingham's is at the top of his list.

"The camaraderie between officials and the schools is one of a kind," he said.

All of that comes from the hard work that has made the event what it's become.

> **"It's been an excellent opportunity for our communities to all work together."**
>
> **— Effingham High School superintendent Andy Johnson**

It also goes back to the initial vision from 10 individuals: Woltman, Johnson, Mike Wilson, Steve Bone, Chris Koester, Mike McCollum, Charlie White, Rich Probst, Mike Horn and Tony Will.

"They had the connections and were deeply rooted in the community," committee member Morgan Wilson said.

Morgan is Mike's daughter. She said she's grown up around this tournament.

"It's brought our whole family together," she said. "We've been involved since the beginning. I was always big on social media, the website and getting the statkeepers' stats into spreadsheets to share with the media and coaches.

"Then, my dad went through some health issues and I tagged along to meetings with him to help him. My role in the last few years has also changed to running the hospitality room at Effingham and getting workers scheduled."

This tournament has attracted teams from St. Louis and Chicago over the years, as well as other areas that are hours away. Hotels are provided to those teams.

"That is a cool perk of coming down here," Morgan said.

Morgan added that "host families" are also provided to teams that want a break after games and don't want to spend that time in a restaurant or gym.

"For teams that don't stay the night, we provide 'host families,' if they prefer. That's a cool aspect of it, too," Morgan said. "That goes back to when my dad was coaching at T-Town and they had a tournament in Pinckneyville."

Morgan said that these families open their homes to teams

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and provide snacks and drinks.

One year, Morgan said that several PlayStation consoles were even set up for gaming.

"We've had so many gracious families open up their homes for a few hours where there's a big break and these kids don't have to sit in a gym," she said.

Woltman said the tournament's growth directly reflects that kind of hospitality.

That is something he always hoped for.

"We keep putting forward a good product," he said. "We're going in the right direction."

Teutopolis senior Landyn Thoele, right, knocks the ball away from Tolono Unity's Coleton Langendorf, left, during the championship game of the Effingham/Teutopolis Christmas Classic at Effingham High School, Wednesday, Dec. 31, 2026. Photo by Alex Wallner

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Nov. 12

Mitchell Tenpenny. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Nov. 13

Sarah Bush Lincoln Public Open House & Pop-Up Holiday Boutique 11 a.m–7 p.m. at the Lumpkin Education Center. Includes "Cookies with Claus" 3 p.m.–7 p.m. for kids (treats, face painting, wish list with Santa) and browsing of online and in-person auction items.

Nov. 13 & 14

Holiday Market Boutique Blvd at The Foxmore, 222 E. Main St., Shelbyville IL Nov. 13 from 4–8 p.m. and Nov. 14 from 10 a.m–4 p.m. Over 40 vendors under one roof. Shop, sip and sample.

Olde Tyme Christmas. A free, community holiday celebration that attracts surrounding communities, encourages the shop local movement and showcases Vandalia and local Vandalia businesses. A kickoff to the holiday season! This year's theme: Stars, Stripes & Holiday Lights. Nov. 13, 5 p.m.–9 p.m. & Nov. 14, 10 a.m.–2 p.m. in downtown Vandalia.

Nov. 14

20th Annual Chris Thies Sr. Veterans Day Golf Scramble at Foreway Golf Course in Effingham starting at 11:11 a.m. Honoring all who served. Proceeds donated to the Effingham County Veterans Memorial. Call 217-868-5418 to play. Call Manny at 217-821-9557 with any questions.

Little River Band. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Nov. 14–Dec. 19 (Each Saturday)

Pathway of Lights at Aikman Wildlife, 125 N. Co. Rd. 425E, Arthur IL, features a variety of activities including lighted walk-through displays, lighted wagon rides, the Museum of Prehistoric Life, up-close animal encounters and guided barn tours.

Nov. 15

Annual Hog Roast and Silent Auction at Trinity Lutheran Church and School, 113 S. Walnut St., Stewardson IL 62463. Call (217) 682-5722 for more information.

Turkey Bingo at Teutopolis Banquet Hall. Doors open 5 p.m. Bingo starts 6 p.m. Concessions & raffle items will be available. Event by St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Teutopolis.

Community Thanksgiving Dinner 11 a.m–1 p.m. at the Mason Civic Center in Mason IL. Free will donation. Menu includes turkey, ham, dressing, noodles, mashed potatoes & gravy, corn, green beans, rolls, tea & lemonade and dessert. Everyone welcome!

Tolka Brothers Christmas Auction & Meal. Meal served noon-3 p.m. To-go dinners available. Auction begins at 2:00 p.m. Christmas shopping, toys, household items, seasonal décor and more! Event held at Beecher City Area Kluthe Center, 100 Park St., Beecher City, IL. Call 217-821-9621 or follow us on Facebook at beechercityilevents. Fundraiser for Beecher City Corn Fest.

Turkey Supper 4:00-6:30 p.m. at St. Peter's Lutheran Church Gym in St. Peter IL. Dine in or carry out. Free will donation. Menu: turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, turnips, cranberry sauce, desserts.

Nov. 19

Mattoon Lightworks Walk-Through. Check the City of Mattoon Illinois Lightworks page for exact time.

Home Free Christmas: Coming Home for the Holidays. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Shelbyville Festival of Lights Walk-Through and Festival of Trees 5–8 p.m. at Forest Park in Shelbyville.

Nov. 20

Pink Friday in Downtown Effingham. Small business version of Black Friday.

Hairball: A Tribute to Arena Rock. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 8 p.m. www.theepc.org

Guess Who's Dying for Dinner? Murder Myster Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. The world's best celebrity chefs are locked in a life-or-death reality TV cooking contest! Doors open 6 p.m. Show at 7 p.m.

Nov. 20–Jan. 2

Shelbyville Festival of Lights & Festival of Trees Sunday-Thursday 5–9 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5–10 p.m. A massive display featuring themed areas like Candy Cane Lane, the North Pole, Victorian Village, Santa's Shop, Bethlehem and a carousel display at the historic Chautauqua Auditorium. Shelbyville Festival of Trees, housed inside the Chautauqua Auditorium at Forest Park with over 30 uniquely decorated Christmas trees, is also open during the Festival of Lights hours.

Nov. 20–Dec. 27

Mattoon Lightworks open

November 20 & 21

Midwest Market Holiday Market at Effingham Event Center in Effingham 4–8 p.m. on Nov. 20 and 9 a.m–4 p.m. on Nov. 21.

Nov. 21

Holiday in Herrick 8:30 a.m.–1 p.m. at the Herrick Community Building in Herrick IL.

Harvest Day Market. shopping, festive food, seasonal treats and family fun 9 a.m–1 p.m. at Thelma Keller Convention Center in Effingham.

Dailey & Vincent Candy Canes & Coal Tour. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Nov. 22

Dieterich Women's Club Holiday Artisan & Vendor Market noon–4 p.m. at Wright Family Center, 206B South Pine Street, Dieterich IL 62424.



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All I Want For Christmas Craft & Vendor Show 10 a.m.–4 p.m. at Thelma Keller Convention Center in Effingham IL includes 80+ crafters & vendors. No admission. Gift card giveaways.

Nov. 25

Walking Through Wonderland. For one night only, Wonderland In Lights will close to all vehicles and offer visitors an opportunity to get up close and personal with our larger-than-life light displays. This event is free to the public, but donations are welcome. View the displays at your own leisure, listen and sing along to your favorite Christmas music, and wave hello to Santa Claus when you reach the end of the walk. Enjoy complimentary hot cocoa and cookies, fireside, as well as an array of food trucks and vendors to satisfy you're craving. Stop by the Visit Effingham tent to pick up your free holiday souvenir while supplies last. Parking is limited at Community Park, so please consider using our free shuttle that will run continuously from 5–8 p.m. and will pick up and drop off at the Courthouse Museum parking lot. To extend your festivities, visit Light up the Lawn and Experience Downtown Effingham to view our larger-than-life, 3-D holiday light displays.

Nov. 26

Turkey Trot 5K & 1 Mile Fun Run at Dieterich Wright Family Center in Dieterich. Event registration 6:15–6:45 a.m., 5K Run / Walk starts at 7 a.m. 1 Mile Fun Run / Walk starts at 7:15 a.m. Call/text 217-690-5371 with any questions. Register online at www.kinetictiming.com Proceeds benefit the Dieterich Community Education Foundation.

Effingham County Thanksgiving Day Dinner presented by the Effingham County FISH Organization. Congregate meal begins 12:30 p.m. at Cornerstone Christian Church, 3600 S. Banker Street, Effingham. Delivered meals delivered after 10 a.m. Curbside pickup will be between 11 a.m. and noon at Cornerstone Christian Church. Meals are free. Donations are always welcome, especially for large orders. Event is open to all Effingham County residents and their families. Donations greatly appreciated and may be given to the delivery driver, left in a donation bucket at the church or sent to: FISH, PO Box 473, Effingham IL 62401. Reservations may be made through Nov. 23 by calling 217-994-1350. Volunteers also needed to help package and deliver meals. To volunteer call 217-994-1350.

Nov. 27

Black Friday in downtown Effingham

Nov. 28

Small Business Saturday in downtown Effingham

Herman German Market 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. at 810 E. Fayette Ave., Effingham. Local vendors and crafts, family-friendly fun, indoor & outdoor booths (weather permitting). Free admission. Call (217)857-6190 for more Information.

Downtown Effingham Hometown Christmas. Step into the glow of the season and enjoy an evening filled with lights, laughter and hometown holiday magic. Hop aboard a festive tractor train ride, visit Santa, snap photos with favorite Christmas and Disney characters and get creative inside Santa's Workshop with hands-on holiday crafts. Stroll through the twinkle-lit streets with hot chocolate in hand, grab a bag of warm kettle corn, and soak in the joy that only a small-town Christmas can bring. Additional activities include Wild Foam Adventures and story time with Mrs. Claus. Enjoy the sparkling style of the lighted Christmas parade at 5 p.m. beginning at Baseball Card Connection, heading down Jefferson Avenue to The Heart Theatre and ending at 3rd Street. Santa's house will be open 5:45–8 p.m. Live music at the Old Courthouse at 6:15 p.m. with the FACE Christmas Concert and 6:45 p.m. with the FACE Community Orchestra.

Come Home For Christmas 4–8 p.m. on the square in Greenville IL.

Whoville Christmas Celebration in Sainte Marie IL. 10 a.m.–4 p.m.

Small Business Saturday & Downtown Ornament Walk in downtown Shelbyville IL. 10 a.m.–2 p.m.

Bosses Birthday Bash 7 p.m. at West End Reception and Events, Newton IL. Theresa is turning 60 and Doug is turning 50. Free admission. Live music by Flight Fifty band. Doors open 6 p.m. Finger foods and snacks.

Nov. 29

Coffee & Donuts: Bring your Nativity Set to be blessed. 10:15–11 a.m. at St. Anthony of Padua Church in Effingham.

Christmas in the Village 3–8 p.m. Magical tree lighting, beautiful Christmas lights, delicious food trucks, fun family activities, Christmas cheer around every corner and so much more! A night full of Hallmark-worthy family memories. Follow our Facebook page at Christmas in the Village Louisville IL.

December 4, 5 and 6

10 Ways to Survive the Holidays. Presented by Three Chicks & A Stage at Effingham Elks Lodge # 1016, 2102 S. Banker St., Effingham IL. Friday, December 4: Doors open 5 :30 p.m. Dinner starts 6 p.m. Curtain at 7 p.m. Can buy show-only tickets with doors opening at 6:30 p.m. Tickets must be purchased in advance. Menu includes angel chicken and roast beef, gourmet carrots and green beans, twice baked potato casserole, tossed salad, fruit cobbler crisp, tea and lemonade. Sat. Dec. 5 and Sun. Dec. 6 show only with doors opening Sat. Dec. 5 at 6:30 p.m. and curtain at 7 p.m. and Sun. Dec. 6 doors open at 1:30 p.m. with curtain at 2 p.m. This year's holiday donation will go to the Effingham County Humane Society.

Dec. 4

Celebrate Mattoon Downtown Christmas 5–8 p.m. in downtown Mattoon.

Dec. 5

Breakfast with Santa. Hosted by the Unit 40 Education Foundation at Effingham High School 7 a.m–11 a.m. Enjoy a pancake breakfast served with a side of rope sausage, coffee, orange juice or milk. Kids can create a Snowman Pancake! There will be a Santa Shoppe for kids to purchase goodies. Enjoy taking family pictures at our photo booth. Games and crafts. The Effingham High School Chorus will treat you with sounds of holiday cheer. Pet the Falallamas! Santa will be there! All proceeds benefit



the Unit 40 Education Foundation's mission to provide teacher grants and continuing education scholarships for seniors.

Christmas in the 'Burg noon–8 p.m. at Strasburg IL.

Christmas Around the Square starting at 3 p.m. in Toledo. Food, games, vendors, fun for all ages and a lighted parade at 6 p.m.

Christmas in a One-Cow Town on Main Street in Stewardson. Starts 4 p.m. and culminates with a 7 p.m. lighted parade.

Old Fashioned Downtown Christmas on Main in downtown Shelbyville IL 10 a.m.–3 p.m. Holiday characters downtown. Free movie at The Roxy at 10 a.m.

Arthur's Candy Cane Wonderland at Knights Court in downtown Arthur IL.

Christmas Concert & Choir. 5:30 p.m. Hometown Christmas Choir and 6 p.m. FACE Christmas Orchestra both at the Effingham County Museum, 100 E. Jefferson in Effingham IL.

The Wizards of Winter: Music of Trans-Siberian Orchestra. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Windsor Wonderland. Festive lighted golf cart parade followed by the lighting of the city Christmas tree. Enjoy visits with Santa, meet a live reindeer, play games and activities and warm up with hot chocolate, chili and hot dogs. Event in downtown Windsor IL.

Dec. 6

Christmas in the Village 1–3 p.m. Santa, Mrs. Claus and The Grinch will be escorted by the Teutopolis Fire Department at 12:45 p.m. to the Teutopolis Grade School gym! Enjoy hot chocolate, water and cookies, Christmas music, coloring sheets and ornaments for the kids to decorate, Write letters to Santa and more! Free event but donations are accepted.

Danny's Sunday Funday Cookie Exchange 2–4 p.m. at Danny's Bar & Grill, South Rt. 45, Effingham. Bring 2 dozen cookies and a platter to build your own Christmas cookie tray.

Coles County Chorus Christmas Concert 3 p.m. at Lake Land College's Luther Student Union.

Altamont Garden Club Christmas Walk 12:30–5 p.m. Tour 5 beautiful homes: Ryan and Katy Huntley, Terry and Erica Magelitz, Randy and Rosa Milleville, Charles Siebert and Lisa Miller, and Faye Winter. Walk concludes at Altamont First United Methodist Church with a mini concert by Altamont Community Choir. Proceeds go towards beautifying Altamont.

Christmas Open House at Effingham County Museum, 110 E. Jefferson St. in Effingham 2–4 p.m. Light refreshments will be served.

Neoga Hometown Christmas 1–6 p.m. in downtown Neoga IL in the Kurbside Coffee parking lot. This year's lineup includes a gingerbread bounce house, bumper cars, live music by Tanner Romine, Disney characters, food, treats and hot cocoa, kids activities, Santa, photo ops, tree lighting, and a lighted parade.



Old-Fashioned Christmas On the Prairie at Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site in Lerna IL. Visit the decorated visitor center, children's craft stations, hearth-baked Gingerbread at the Lincoln Farm, and a horse and carriage ride. Gift shop open with locally sourced and handcrafted items.

Dec. 11 & 12

Christmas Store / Cookie Walk at the Community Center in Strasburg IL. Santa arrives Saturday 9:30–11 a.m.

KrisKindle Market in Flora IL includes vendors, Santa, carriage rides, elf driving school, reindeer, Breakfast with Santa and more! Friday 5–8 p.m. and Saturday 9 a.m–2 p.m.

Dec. 12

Dr. Seuss' The Grinch Interactive Movie. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 3 p.m. www.theepc.org

Dec. 13

Annual Lutheran Churches Christmas Cantata. Visit St. Paul's Lutheran Church / Strasburg IL for more information on location and time of event.

National Trail Farm Toy Show at Effingham Event Center 9 a.m.–3 p.m. For more info, contact Robert Spencer at 217-254-6178 or Greg Warner at 217-821-7124.

Dec. 18

Chris Young: "Holiday & The Hits." Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Dec. 19

Stocking Stuffer Saturday in downtown Effingham. Shop local for those last-minute stocking stuffers!

Don't Stomp Believin' Santa Stomp 5K at Teutopolis Banquet Hall in Teutopolis starting at 9 a.m. For more information, email Kristi19692000@hotmal.com. All proceeds benefit Land of Lincoln Honor Flight.

Christmas with Elvis Featuring Scott Wattles & The Blue Suede Crew. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Dec. 19 & 20

Christmas Cantata at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Altamont. Visit immanuelaltamont.org/calendar for more information.

Dec. 20

Jingle Bell Jam. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 2 p.m. www.theepc.org

Dec. 21–23

Late-Night Shopping in downtown Effingham.

Dec. 31

I'll Be Homicidal for Christmas Murder Mystery Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. Doors open 6 p.m. Show at 7 p.m.

New Year's Party. Live music by Decade of Decadence band at The Foxmore in downtown Shelbyville IL. Rock in the new year with an 80's rock party! Doors open at 8 p.m. Music 9 p.m.–12:30 a.m.

2027

Jan. 16

Beauty & The Beast Interactive Movie. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 3 p.m. www.theepc.org

Jan. 21

Ty Pennington. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Jan. 23

Howl at the Moon Dueling Pianos 6 p.m. at West End Reception and Events, Newton.

Jan. 30

Sebastian Bach – Original Voice of Skid Row. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Feb. 5

The Bellamy Brothers. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Feb. 6

Comedian Charlie Berens. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center www.theepc.org

Feb. 13

Toast: The Best of Bread. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Feb. 19

Who Whacked Willy Wonka? Murder Mystery Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. Doors open 6 p.m. Show at 7 p.m.

Vicki Lawrence & Mama. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Feb. 21

Annual Sausage Supper at St. Peter Lutheran Church in St. Peter IL starting at 5 p.m.

Feb. 27

Six String Summit. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Comedy Night with Copenhagen Bandit and Friends 7 p.m. at West End Reception and Events, Newton.

March 4

Josh Turner. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

March 5

Ultimate Johnny Cash. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

March 6

Dirty Deeds: The AC/DC Experience. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

March 7

Annual Pork Loin Dinner at lunchtime at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Altamont IL. Visit immanuelaltamont.org/calendar for more information.

March 9

Bachman Turner Overdrive: No Speed Limit Tour 2027. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

March 12

Artrageous. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

March 13

St. Pat's Bash beginning at 5 p.m. at Effingham Event Center. Event by Sacred Heart Catholic Church of Effingham.

March 14

Dr. Seuss' The Cat in the Hat LIVE on Stage! Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 3 p.m. www.theepc.org

March 19

Glenn Miller Orchestra. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

Ain't Nothin' But A Homicide Murder Mystery Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. Doors open 6 p.m. Show at 7 p.m.

April 2

Lee Rocker of the Stray Cats. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 9

The Kentucky Headhunters & Confederate Railroad. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 10

Under the Streetlamp: Music of Frankie Valli & The Jersey Boys. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 18

Puppy Pals Live! Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 3 p.m. www.theepc.org

April 23

SCOOBY DOOM Murder Mystery Dinner at Tuscan Hills Winery. Doors open 6 p.m. Show at 7 p.m.

April 24

GenX Comedy Tour. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

May 16

Carrot Top. Tickets online now! Effingham Performance Center 7 p.m. www.theepc.org

June 18

Teutopolis Cruise Car Show starting at 5 p.m. in Teutopolis IL.

June 26 & 27

Sacred Heart Picnic at Sacred Heart Catholic Church grounds in Effingham. Saturday 5–11 p.m. and Sunday noon–10 p.m.

July 31–Aug. 7

Effingham County Fair at the fairgrounds in Altamont IL.

Aug. 7 & 8

Parish Picnic at St. Anthony of Padua Church in Effingham. Saturday, August 7, 5 p.m.–midnight with 4:30 p.m. Mass on the soccer field at St. Anthony High School and Sunday, August 8, noon–midnight

Have an event you want to promote? Send to jody.hardiek@effinghamdailynews.com



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