



Connections



NEW HIRES HAVE RIGHT STUFF

Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe views the Belt's nine new hires as an investment in BRC's future and appreciates the opportunity to instruct them at the beginning of their railroad careers.

Labbe said this clean slate allows the conductor trainees to learn the BRC way from the start. The group, which includes individuals from the Chicago area and Indiana, who range in age from 18 to 38, quickly gelled, according to Labbe.

"They had instant camaraderie; they fed off each other and worked well together," he said.

From a training standpoint, the class is progressing well.

"Everyone is right where they should be or a little ahead," Labbe said. "For a group this size, that's pretty good."

The trainees are expected to make their debut as conductors this spring.

From left are Designated Supervisor of Remote Control Operations Paul Hesla and new-hire Conductors Benjamin McCain, Scott Humes, Calloway Snyder, Trevor Julien, James Dela Cruz, Preston Miranda, Chris Ramirez, Shaun Pierson and Max Baer.

Locomotive joins fleet

BRC 381 represents a significant addition to the Belt's locomotive fleet.

The EMD SD62 was purchased from Union Pacific, brought out of storage and sent to Metro East Industries (MEI) for refurbishment before entering service. General Foreman of Special Projects and Training Rob Soltys managed the project, which also involved MEI painting the unit and outfitting it with a locomotive remote control system.

Prior to being placed into storage by Union Pacific, the main generator, prime mover and air compressor had

been rebuilt. That work provided a solid foundation for the refurbishment and allowed MEI to focus on details.

On Dec. 1, 2025, Soltys traveled to MEI's headquarters in East St. Louis for a final walkthrough and release-to-service testing. BRC 381 was delivered to the Belt the following week via a Union Pacific train.

Soltys said he appreciated the opportunity to see the project's technical and business sides and is pleased with



the strong working relationship it established between the Belt and MEI.

Chacon, Clunie work with community members

When two BRC dispatchers noticed children walking around the lowered gate arms at a highway-rail grade crossing near Mariano Azuela Elementary School last October, the observation set off a coordinated safety effort in Chicago's Clearing East and West Lawn neighborhoods.

After reviewing the footage, Digital Media Coordinator Joe Chacon met with the school's principal and vice principal to show them the recording and discuss a plan based on education, visibility and collaboration.

On Nov. 10, 2025, Chacon and Patrolperson Andrea Clunie presented Operation Lifesaver Inc. (OLI) material to more than 700 students and faculty members at the school, emphasizing the importance of heeding active warning devices and being safe near crossings.

The outreach expanded in December after Principal Gloria Taylor contacted Chacon, which led to a safety blitz on Dec. 17 involving the Belt and Chicago police departments. Officers were present near the crossing to reinforce safe behavior and increase awareness during arrival and dismissal times.

A presentation also was organized for parents that day, and a Coffee with the Principal get-together was held the next morning to share information and continue the conversation. Clunie played a key role in translating the presentation into Spanish.



A member of the Southwest Organizing Project hands a BRC safety visor card to a parent.

Additional support came from Magali Gomez, a parent mentor with the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), who helped connect families and organize next steps. After noticing a few potential issues, the group wants to help enhance safety.

Gomez also expressed appreciation for the OLI presentation, noting, "It was important for the parents to see it."

A parent-led initiative called Walking Safe also began in November and focused on community support while advocating for safety enhancements. Gomez has spoken with legislators and



Chicago Police Officer Maria De La Torre, left, and Patrolperson Andrea Clunie, right, are pictured with members of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP).

gathered about 200 signatures on a petition seeking positive changes.

"We seek practical solutions and policy changes, sustainable safety practices and the promotion of rail safety to boost awareness and prevent incidents," she said.



Clunie dedicated to savings lives

Patrolperson Andrea Clunie joined the Belt on Nov. 3, 2025, bringing a background that blends law enforcement, health care and a deep commitment to public safety.

Clunie, who grew up in the Logan Square neighborhood, previously worked for the Chicago and Metra police departments and other municipalities. In September 2022, she received

The "Life Saving Ward" Certificate of Recognition from the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police.

Railroad safety is important to Clunie as she's seen how the disregard for active warning devices can affect families.

"I've made it my mission to educate people about railroad safety," she

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April 22, 1930, at Forest Hill



An Erie Lackawanna Railway train runs through Forest Hill.



The Forest Hill Flyover project in progress.

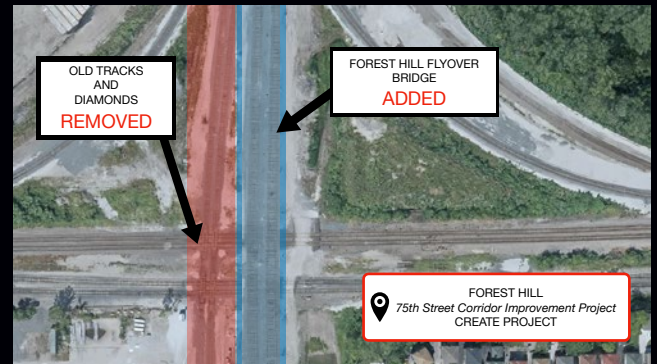
Flyover project complete

After completion of CREATE Project P3 — Forest Hill Flyover, trains are now moving faster through Chicago’s South Side.

Part of the 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project, the flyover eliminates two sets of diamonds that had been at the site since the 1800s, allowing BRC, Metra and Norfolk Southern trains to fluidly operate underneath while CSX traffic moves above.

Assistant Chief Engineer Tom Lyons has been crucial to the BRC’s involvement in CREATE projects and emphasized the flyover’s importance for current and future operations within the corridor.

Digital Media Coordinator Joe Chacon was on hand for the Nov. 14, 2025, ribbon-cutting ceremony. However, the flyover has been in use since Oct. 15, 2025.



Project diagrams courtesy of CREATE



The first train crosses the new bridge without impeding traffic below.

Clunie dedicated to savings lives

Continued from Page 2

said. “I’m passionate about it. If I’m able to help at least one person, I feel I’ve made a difference.”

Clunie has been an Operation Lifesaver Inc. (OLI) member since 2021 and has given numerous presentations to K-12 students, which recently included the Mariano Azuela Elementary School.

“I felt proud to cooperate with those parents who have the same mission to keep their kids safe,” Clunie said.

She’s also participated in various railroad safety events to engage and share information with the public.

Joining the Belt also gave her the opportunity to expand her railroad experience to include freight.

“The Belt is growing and evolving, and I want to be part of that,” Clunie said, adding that her mission is to protect the Belt’s employees and property.

She describes her department as a small, tight-knit family and notes her

co-workers have been welcoming.

Her background also includes 18 years in the medical field as she was a licensed practical nurse.

Aiding the safety and well-being of her teammates at the Belt, she ensures that the yard’s automated external defibrillators are functioning properly and first aid kits are properly stocked.

Outside of work, she enjoys exercising, dancing, listening to music and spending time outdoors.

Hesla emphasizes awareness, teamwork

Designated Supervisor of Remote Control Operations (RCO) Paul Hesla began instructing nine new-hire conductors on Dec. 16, 2025. He then oversaw their on-the-job RCO coursework, coordinating closely with 34 craft professionals who serve as peer trainers. A representative from the FRA recently observed the program and later sent an email that noted they were impressed.

Hesla said BRC’s approach stands apart from other railroads that rely heavily on automated instruction for RCO.

“The Belt’s training method is more personal and helps people on the fly,” he said, emphasizing the value of direct engagement and real-time instruction.

Hesla’s tenure began when Jim Scarsellato officially retired. A key focus of his work is safety, particularly for employees new to the craft. Hesla stresses that even small missteps can carry significant consequences. One of his primary messages centers on acting with awareness and discipline, which includes always confirming that a track is clear.

Hesla actively seeks feedback from leadership, peers and the trainees, viewing that exchange as essential to further strengthening training and safety outcomes.



Designated Supervisor of Remote Control Operations Jim Scarsellato recently retired.

Scarsellato retires in style

Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe says he considered it important to properly recognize Designated Supervisor of Remote Control Operations Jim Scarsellato, who recently concluded his 31-year railroad career. A gathering organized by Labbe was held at the Belt on Dec. 16, 2025.

“He’s adjusting well to retired life,” Labbe said.

The event assembled Belt employees who noted Scarsellato’s impact on activities such as rules training and communications with individuals in the field. He influenced multiple generations of railroaders and helped reinforce safe work practices across the Belt.

“Everyone wanted to honor Jim,” Labbe said.

Labbe credited Executive Assistant Cindy Homan and Manager of Human Resources and Labor Relations Caitlin Kerney for their help coordinating the event, including arranging lunch and refreshments.

For Labbe, the gathering was an opportunity to recognize Scarsellato’s legacy and give employees a chance to thank him for his years of service and commitment to the railroad.

“
Everyone wanted to honor Jim.
— Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe
”

Billingsley: Transportation ready for 2026

Director of Car Operations Kevin Billingsley is committed to meeting the Belt's current and future operational needs. We recently drew from a pool of internal and external candidates to strengthen the Transportation Department, adding to its craft and management teams.

"We were selective in who we brought on; we knew their work habits and personalities," Billingsley said, pointing to an extensive interview process designed to ensure the right fit.

We also worked to bolster the Belt's training and development pipeline for conductors, trainmasters and the broader workforce. Billingsley emphasized that the Belt's

"We were selective in who we brought on; we knew their work habits and personalities."
— Director of Car Operations
Kevin Billingsley

seasoned employees play a vital role in mentoring the next generation of railroaders and teaching them the importance of adhering to rules and regulations.

He commends Designated Supervisor of Remote Control Operations Paul Hesla for using his work ethic and experience as a conductor and locomotive engineer to teach newer employees.

Billingsley says his goals align with President Jerry Peck's operational objectives and touts the company's efforts to expand the business. The Belt recently has added two new customers and is evaluating new storage agreements.

"There's a lot of opportunity for growth," he said.

Hydraulic switches aid operations in east receiving yard

The Belt's Maintenance of Way (MofW) and Signal departments continue to upgrade the east receiving yard's switches, which allows Transportation team members to align them remotely or with the push of a button. The hydraulic upgrades reduce the potential risk associated with manual operations while saving time on one of the busiest segments of the Belt's network.

"The main benefit is yarding trains faster," Signal Foreman Mike Golich said.

The east end interlocking is particularly congested, with nine yard tracks feeding into two mainlines, making efficiency crucial.

The project, which began in the fall of 2024, is about 50% complete. Golich

and Assistant Signal Foreman Kyle Jane have balanced upgrades with other jobs along the Belt.

"It's labor-intensive work," Jane said, noting challenges such as frozen ground and flooding.

Manager of Signal Jorge Guerrero describes Golich and Jane as go-getters, adding, "I can always rely on them to get work done no matter the obstacle."

While MofW employees are responsible for changing out the switch panels, Golich, Jane and Signalman Joseph Gurgone are replacing the switches and trenching in cables for each unit. Setting up track protection to keep traffic moving has been a time-consuming but vital step.

Daily tasks for Golich are diverse as he manages projects, measures for cable and operates machinery. Jane, who started as an assistant signalman with the Belt in 2019, works alongside Golich while gaining experience



Assistant Signal Foreman Kyle Jane

from on-the-job training.

"We make sure we're on the same page," Golich said, crediting thorough job briefings for keeping the crew aligned and reducing potential risks.

West approach crossing reopens

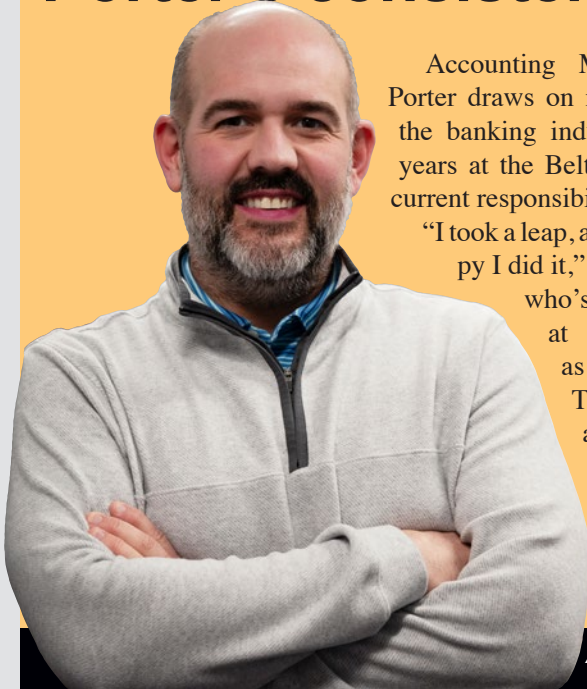
A grade crossing on the Belt's west approach tracks, which was closed for more than a year, reopened in January following a one-week project by Golich, Gurgone and Jane. The work included demolition and installing new gate arm mechanisms, along with new cables and a signal cabinet.

The updated crossing is expected to enhance vehicular traffic flow.



Signal Foreman Mike Golich

Porter's consistency an asset in role change



Accounting Manager Bob Porter draws on nine years in the banking industry and 11 years at the Belt to fulfill his current responsibilities.

"I took a leap, and I'm happy I did it," said Porter, who's worked at the Belt as a clerk in Transportation and Accounting.

The former senior accountant now works with Director of Revenue

"I took a leap, and I'm happy I did it."

—Accounting Manager
Bob Porter

Accounting Pete Sturgeon and leads a team of three clerks and one accountant.

Porter's previous responsibilities centered on payroll for union employees. His new scope has expanded to include oversight of accounts payable.

Porter said the transition represents a welcome professional challenge and an opportunity to grow while contributing at a higher level, particularly as the department streamlines and modernizes its processes.

Accounting Manager Bob Porter welcomes new professional challenges in his current role.

Milton-Davis ready to apply skills to PTC

Positive Train Control (PTC) Manager Christian Milton-Davis approaches his job with a clear focus on safety and collaboration.

He began his career in 2017 as an assistant signalman and later worked as a hump technician, a craft he's helped to standardize its knowledge base and build consistency.

Noting their similarities, Milton-Davis believes his previous efforts to refine operations with Trainyard Tech's hump yard control system have prepared him for his responsibilities with PTC.

Milton-Davis said both systems aim to ensure safe, efficient train movement and notes he's embraced the responsibilities associated with meeting the FRA's regulations.

"I took the ball and I'm running with it," said Milton-Davis, who notes the Belt

"The goal is to ensure everything safely gets to where it's supposed to be."

—Positive Train Control Manager
Christian Milton-Davis



PTC Manager Christian Milton-Davis

uses PTC at the 80th Street and Belt Junction interlockings.

"The goal is to ensure everything safely gets to where it's supposed to be."

Milton-Davis says he's excited to continue building relationships within the Belt and with other railroads and organizations.

Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe says he has confidence in Milton-Davis.

"Christian is a detail-oriented individual, a trait I observed during his previous role in the Signal Department," Labbe said. "Christian consistently ensures that no item goes unnoticed. When handling PTC functions and working with the FRA, this level of attention to detail is essential. From the onset, Christian has demonstrated the qualities necessary for this responsibility."

Cooperative effort supports preparedness

The Belt conducted an Emergency Responders 101 course Oct. 21-23, 2025, with the Bedford Park Fire Department.

Manager of Rules and Compliance Clint Jonas said the training gave firefighters a working understanding of the railroad environment. It combined classroom instruction with hands-on field training and focused on emergency response planning, on-property navigation, points of contact and fuel storage areas.

The classroom portion included an in-depth presentation about derailments led by John Day from Response Management

Services (RMS). The session discussed how first responders should handle

different situations.

Field training was led by Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe, who reviewed locomotive shutdown procedures and identified areas to focus on for fires. RMS also provided information about the different types of tank cars and various valves and safety devices.

Jonas said the fire department's personnel expressed appreciation for the opportunity to train on the Belt's property. He noted the course strengthened preparedness and reinforced the importance of coordination between the Belt and local first responders.



Manager of Rules and Compliance Clint Jonas speaks to Bedford Park Fire Department personnel.



Manager of Rules and Compliance Clint Jonas explains locomotive controls.

The Bedford Park Fire Department visits the BRC.





Vladimir Jauregui

Growing up with three older brothers who were diesel mechanics, along with a personal interest in the pastime, Vladimir Jauregui says he finds his job as a BRC carman to be a better fit. He previously worked in sales for an industrial supply company.

“I didn’t really see myself long-term working in sales,” he said. “I’m more of a hands-on person.”

While he considers himself to be mechanically inclined, Jauregui notes that work with large rail car components requires a different approach, including the safe use of tools, such as a forklift.

Jauregui said training at the Belt’s repair shop has been largely hands-on and peer-driven. He notes he’s gained knowledge about safe work practices by observing and heeding advice from various seasoned employees. This includes taking time to ensure switches are properly aligned and locked when performing rail car inspections or repairs.

Prior to railroading, Jauregui earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology with a minor in accounting from DePaul University. He said the school’s diverse student body allowed him to meet people from different backgrounds and broadened his perspective. He sees a similar diversity reflected in the Belt’s workforce



*Carman
Vladimir
Jauregui*

and appreciates its family-like environment.

“We’re always looking out for each other,” Jauregui said.

Outside of work, the Chicago native spends time at home with family, catches football games, especially the Bears, and details and wrenches on cars.

Julio Villarreal

Fixed Assets Accountant Julio Villarreal finds a sense of structure, variety and engagement while tracking progress and billable work related to the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) Program and other capital projects.

Villarreal’s work involves piecing together information about labor, vendors, contractors and material into a complete financial picture.

Born and raised in Chicago, Villarreal said he enjoys the

Belt’s tight-knit atmosphere, noting, “As it’s a smaller company, we get to know each other a little better. I feel comfortable and can communicate with anyone. I don’t feel like I’m just a number.”

Outside of work, Villarreal enjoys hiking, biking, attending summer festivals and spending time at Millennium Park and other outdoor attractions when the weather allows.

He recalls early memories of Chicago’s waterfront and the effect it had on him.



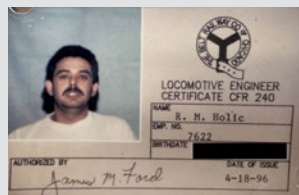
TO KNOW

Mike Holic

Locomotive Engineer Mike Holic's 30-plus-year career at the Belt has been defined by focus, adaptability and a deep appreciation for the railroad's technical and human sides.

Holic joined the Belt on March 11, 1994, as a conductor and became a locomotive engineer two years later.

"I knew that's the job I wanted to do," Holic said, recalling his early interest in train handling.



Locomotive Engineer Mike Holic's ID card from 1996.

Holic says his approach to the job has evolved over time and notes the importance of situational awareness as it enables him to see and address a potential issue before it becomes a problem. Holic relies on a mental checklist for troubleshooting when something isn't working properly and knowing when intervention is necessary.

Holic is from Chicago's West Side, and his family moved to Romeoville in 1978. He later played baseball, basketball and football in high school, which taught him the value of teamwork while showing how an individual's effort can make a difference.

Away from athletics, he gravitated toward creative writing and journalism as he enjoyed witnessing and documenting events. He noted, "My love of reading and writing never left."

Holic says he met his future wife, Lisa, at a dance club and learned more about her by striking up a conversation about her jewelry. The couple got married in 1992.



Locomotive Engineer Mike Holic

As his career involved working off of the extra board for several years, Holic said having the right partner mattered and notes he's always admired his wife's courage.

The couple has two adult children, Danielle and Marcus. The family also has a cat, a cairn terrier named Nala and a Chihuahua named Peaches.

Holic says his father taught him courage and notes his mother encouraged him to be himself. Those lessons, combined with decades of experience at the Belt, continue to guide him.

"I was fascinated with the lake and anything to do with nature," said Villarreal, whose bucket list includes traveling to Alaska and various countries in South America.

Director of Revenue Pete Sturgeon on Julio Villarreal:

"Julio brings clarity, diligence and dependable follow-through to every task — exactly the steady hand you want when accuracy and accountability matter most. He listens attentively, translates complex details into plain language and maintains momentum with timely, thoughtful updates. Across teams and timelines,

Julio anticipates what's needed, closes loops that others might miss and sets the tone with calm professionalism and respect. What truly sets Julio apart is the consistency of his character. He approaches every challenge with patience and thoughtful judgment. Whether he's navigating intricate accounting details or ensuring work reaches the finish line with precision, Julio brings a level of reliability that elevates everyone around him. He demonstrates that reliability is a craft — and he practices it with excellence, integrity and unwavering dedication."

Kucharski balances responsibilities

Chief Clerk Kim Kucharski has responsibilities at the center of the Belt's daily operations, where timing, accuracy and communication converge.

She handles inbound and outbound trains, crew calling and payroll for switchmen. Inbounding requires ensuring billing is correct. Outbounding focuses on confirming cars are on the proper track and headed to the right destinations.

"It's an important job," said Kucharski, who took this role in October 2025 and notes the overall goal is safe, efficient train movements.

The work involves constant coordination with dispatchers, hump foremen, managers of train operations and yardmasters, along with the use of the Belt's apps and CrewPro scheduling software.

Kucharski says she enjoys

interacting with crews and appreciates the Belt's fun, supportive atmosphere. She notes the importance of teamwork and employee engagement in maintaining a smooth operation.

Prior to joining the railroad, Kucharski worked as a medical assistant and a bank auditor, which both helped her develop her computer, time management and people skills.

“It’s an important job.”
— Chief Clerk Kim Kucharski

At the Belt, Kucharski seeks to continually learn more about the railroad and its software systems.

Outside of work, she enjoys time with her boyfriend and their blended family of six children. She also makes time to relax, go to the gym and practice yoga.



Labbe excited to innovate, engage

The Belt recently removed the word “assistant” from Mark Labbe’s job title, as he now serves as the director of safety and compliance. Labbe’s expanded role reflects his experience and the company’s evolving needs with federal compliance, reporting and safety oversight.

Labbe continues to oversee new-hire training while observing Transportation employees’ performance. This role provides him with a broader perspective on how safety policies, training and compliance intersect at the Belt.

“It’s always exciting to take on something new,” said the 28-year railroader.

Labbe began his 13-year career at the Belt as a trainmaster and says he appreciates the company’s opportunities for professional growth.

Superintendent Jason Charbonneau expresses confidence in Labbe’s ability to lead and help others.

Labbe values people and says the Belt’s size allows for meaningful engagement across departments and crafts, strengthening communication and accountability.



Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe

“I look forward to developing new ideas that keep people engaged and working safely, making the BRC even better,” Labbe said.

Keeping communication front and center

Director of Safety and Compliance Mark Labbe says the Belt will resume issuing the weekly safety bulletin to keep employees informed and close any communication gaps.

The bulletin will include safety statistics such as

reportable injuries, human-factor incidents and run-through switches. It also will feature a rule of the week along with general operational information, including weather forecasts.



**Higgins
blends
mechanical,
teaching
skills**



Car Department Trainer
Andrew Higgins



Andrew Higgins brings mechanical experience and an educator's mindset to the role of car department trainer.

Higgins joined the Belt in 2018 as a carman after Car Foreman Drew Rusch encouraged him to apply. He quickly found the workplace to be a good fit.

Prior to railroading, Higgins attended Aurora University, where he studied to become a high school math teacher.

"I always thought that I was going to grow up to be a teacher. It's the path I set myself on," he said.

While his career took a different route, that passion never faded, and he's

happy to incorporate teaching into his railroading career. He credits various

mentors for shaping his approach to training, noting a few individuals often described an issue and challenged him to find and fix it. By doing the work, he said it made the lesson stick.

Higgins, who was promoted to car foreman in 2024, assumed his current role in November

2025. He enjoys interacting with employees and showing them opportunities to improve.

Higgins says he tries to tailor instructions to meet each trainee's needs and takes satisfaction in helping them advance their skills and grow in confidence.

"I always thought that I was going to grow up to be a teacher. It's the path I set myself on."
— Car Department Trainer
Andrew Higgins

Safety is central to that approach.

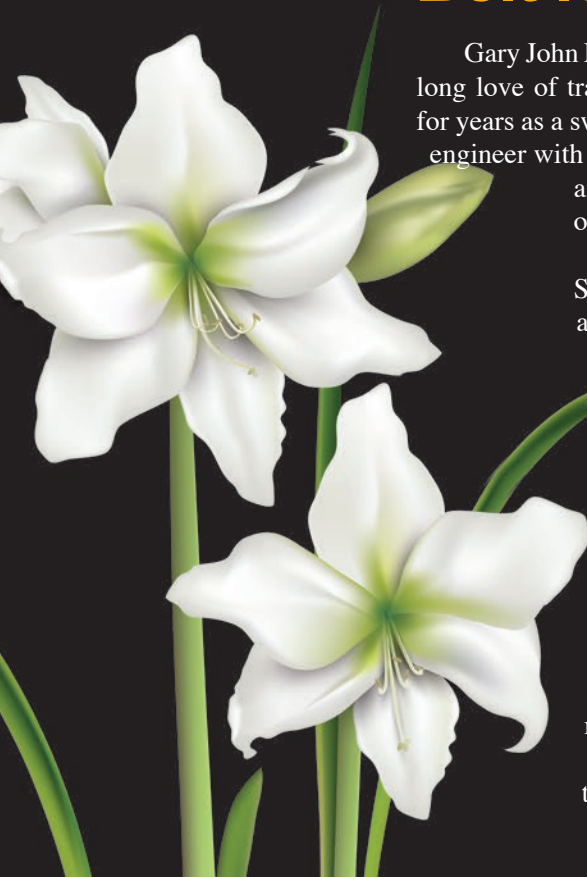
"It's absolutely paramount," Higgins said. "A huge part of my job is to ensure people have the right tools and knowledge to safely do their work."

Higgins said he's grateful for Chief Mechanical Officer Pat McCarron's trust in his abilities. He'll also lead two apprentice trainers as part of the Belt's ongoing investment in developing skilled, safety-focused Mechanical employees.

McCarron has high praise for Higgins, describing him as passionate, goal-oriented and driven.

"These qualities are precisely why we appointed Andrew to this role," McCarron said. "We're confident that these attributes will lead to a safer, more efficient year for the Mechanical Department."

Belt loses beloved mentor



Gary John McVicker, who had a life-long love of trains and proudly worked for years as a switchman and locomotive engineer with the Belt and Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway, died on Jan. 1 at the age of 74.

McVicker lived in South Bend, Indiana, and was active in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET).

He enjoyed many years flying his extensive collection of radio-controlled airplanes.

Teammates and friends described McVicker as quick-witted and regarded him as a natural mentor who added his real-life experience to training.

“People like Gary and my father taught me the tricks of the trade, adding a



Gary McVicker and his son, Bryan

problem-solving approach to help eliminate the chance of getting hurt,” Digital Media Coordinator Joe Chacon said. “If a book about the BRC’s greatest rail-roader existed, it would have an extensive chapter dedicated to Gary’s service in the industry. Gary, you’ll be deeply missed.”

FIT helped prepare Ferrin

Known for his dedication and desire to keep learning, Matt Ferrin began his new responsibility as a car foreman in November 2025. Ferrin brings nearly 19 years of experience and a steady leadership approach to the role, according to Chief Mechanical Officer Bob Perham.



Car Foreman Matt Ferrin

Ferrin previously worked as a carman and carman-mechanic before entering the Belt’s Foreman in-Training (FIT) program for more than a year. He said the curriculum helped him develop the knowledge to confidently step into the role.

Ferrin says he appreciates his hard-working teammates and believes his years in the craft have helped establish trust in his safety-first mindset.

“You can’t take safety too lightly,” he said, adding that there’s a high standard at the Belt.

As a foreman, Ferrin also focuses on employee development, including three new carmen who recently joined the team.

“We have the best people in the world to help these new hires succeed,” Ferrin said. “I’m proud of their work ethic. They’re diligent and try to do their best every day.”

“**We have the best people in the world to help these new hires succeed.**”
— Car Foreman
Matt Ferrin

Aftanas embraces new role

During his 30-year career with the Forest Park [Illinois] Police Department, Tom Aftanas served his community as a patrol officer, field training officer, evidence technician, tactical officer, sergeant, patrol sergeant detective sergeant, deputy chief and chief. He held the latter role from 2015 until he retired in 2021.

Aftanas' educational background includes earning his bachelor's degree in administration of justice from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and graduating from the Northwestern School of Police Staff & Command (SPSC) and the FBI National Academy.

Aftanas now shares insight from those experiences as a sergeant with BRC's Police Department. He oversees three officers along with related administrative responsibilities. Training is a central focus of the role and one that he views as critical to maintaining professional standards.

Aftanas works closely with Sergeant Mike Perry to develop and deliver training for the Belt's police officers. Together, they're building a curriculum that seeks to meet Illinois' requirements and receive state approval. Topics include de-escalation techniques and moral and ethical decision-making.



Sergeant Tom Aftanas

By offering in-house training, the department can improve access and flexibility, as state-led programs can fill up quickly. Aftanas says he's confident in the partnership, noting Perry's teaching experience at the Illinois State Police Academy.

Perry uses skills to have a positive influence

Sergeant Mike Perry brings decades of law enforcement experience and a strong interest in cross-departmental collaboration to his role, which he began in October 2025.

Perry helps guide officers while working closely with other Belt employees to support railroad safety and security.

"I enjoy being here with the Belt, and I appreciate the opportunity," Perry said.

Prior to joining the BRC eight years ago, Perry spent 27 years with the Cicero [Illinois] Police Department, where he worked in several divisions and served as a training officer. That background continues to shape his approach at the Belt.

Perry also served as an Illinois State Police Academy instructor in Springfield for a year, teaching the Metro class to suburban departments.

"It was fulfilling as I met officers from across the state with different backgrounds, techniques and skills," he said.

Perry is a certified instructor for CPR, high-intensity traffic stops and use of force too. Along with Sergeant Tom Aftanas, he's able to train officers outside of the Belt, which supports community building.



Sergeant Mike Perry

Plut shares insight as trainer

Weekend Foreman William Plut brings more than 15 years of field experience to the Belt's Engineering training program. He now prepares new hires and seasoned craft professionals to work safely and effectively.

"It gives me an opportunity to benefit my co-workers and keep them safe and educated on a deeper level," said Plut, who began the responsibility in December 2025. "I can use a lot of the skills I have in the trade."

Plut began his career with the Belt in October 2009 as a Maintenance of Way laborer and says he's learned from various mentors since then. He credits those co-workers with passing along the skills and standards he now emphasizes in training.

In his current role, Plut works closely with Engineering employees as they earn and maintain their job-related certifications. This includes FRA requirements as well as safety and HazMat training.

This past December, Plut led multiple sessions covering the General Code of Operating Rules (GCOR), crane operations and roadway worker protection, among others. Through a series of classes, he recently engaged with around 60 employees within the Engineering Department.

"Our people have a diverse background; working with them feels new and fresh every day," he said.



Engineering Trainer and Weekend Foreman William Plut

In addition to his training responsibilities, Plut serves as a weekend foreman and oversees maintenance and repair work from Wednesday through Sunday.

Arteaga challenges himself on new path

Since joining the Belt in April 2021, Miguel Arteaga has taken on various responsibilities as a laborer, welder helper and welder. On Jan. 1, Arteaga added communication foreman to that list.

"Change is good, and I'm learning a lot," said Arteaga, who notes his appreciation for individuals such as

Communications Technicians Richard Blackwell and Brandon Farley. "Since day one, they've been welcoming and helpful when I approach them with questions."

Blackwell says he's delighted to have Arteaga as part of the team.

"Besides being a great person, he's highly motivated and adaptive to

new responsibilities," Blackwell said. "Miguel has a sunny disposition and is respected by peers. He's a perfect fit as the new foreman due to his railroad knowledge and desire to continually improve our department."

Arteaga also thanks Manager of Signal Jorge Guerrero for sharing his expertise and notes he's fascinated by how fiber optic cables and other technologies interconnect across the Belt.

"Everything ties in one way or another to communications," he said. "It's the backbone."

Arteaga added that his background in network system administration and long-standing interest in technology have aided his development as his job involves public safety and working with the automatic equipment identification (AEI) system.

At home, Arteaga enjoys time with his wife, Vanessa, and their three children. He also likes renovating their house and recently added a patio, gazebo and a grill area.



Communication Foreman Miguel Arteaga

Above & beyond

The Belt recently recognized two more employees for going above and beyond by making a generous donation to their favorite charities.

Billy Lutz was honored for the second consecutive month.

“Knowing that my work can make a difference in the lives of families battling

serious illnesses fills me with immense joy and gratitude,” he said.

Bogdan Maksymkiv also was honored.

“I was surprised by the award and appreciate the gesture,” he said. “There’s nothing more important than safety. You need to stay super focused on what you’re doing when you’re doing it.”

This month's charities:



Assistant Chief Engineer Tom Lyons leads the tour at the Command Center.

Program continues as MSU class visits the Belt

The Belt recently hosted a group from Michigan State University’s Railway Management Certificate Program, which the school defines as “the only North American program that covers the breadth and depth of the very complex railway industry ecosystem from both a conceptual and practical business perspective.”

The 35 visitors toured the Belt to learn about infrastructure and operations, observing firsthand how the railroad manages traffic across the region.

Manager of Rules and Compliance Clint Jonas, Assistant Chief Engineer Tom Lyons and Car Foreman Lee Winfrey respectively led the tours of the Belt’s hump tower, Command Center and car shop. Digital Media Coordinator Joe Chacon gave a presentation about the Belt’s history and how it contributes to moving freight efficiently through the Windy City.

“BRC is a proud partner of the management program,” said Lyons, who notes several Belt team members have taken



Car Foreman Lee Winfrey talks about operations within the car shop.

and benefited from the course, as it gave them a broader understanding of operations and management principles.

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Franco on his way to becoming a journeyman

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Making a recent move from laborer to electrician apprentice, Alex Franco is charged up about the opportunity for growth at the Belt, noting, "This is my calling."

Franco is being mentored by Electricians Louis Cook and Jason Wiorek and leaders such as Assistant Superintendent Nate Smith, who are guiding him through various techniques, troubleshooting and blueprint reading.

Prior to joining the Belt three years ago, Franco worked as a diesel technician. While locomotives present different challenges than semitrucks, he said the overlap in systems such as air brakes and diesel engines allows many skills to translate.

"I'm seeing and learning new things every day," Franco said.

As part of his apprenticeship, Franco says he appreciates the Belt's safety culture where co-workers help and look out for one another.

Away from work, Franco enjoys spending time with his wife, JaVanna, and their sons, Santino, 2, and Marcio, 3 months old. He also likes fishing with his children and taking them to the park.



Electrician Apprentice Alex Franco