

Quarry stench may be alleviated

MWRD working to expand reservoir's odor neutralization system

By Hank Sanders
Daily Southtown

The Thornton Reservoir is known far and wide for providing many locals, and some passersby, with a lingering smell of sewage.

"I can smell it going down I-80," said Thornton Village Administrator Doug Beckman of the Deep Tunnel reservoir, which has been online since late 2015.

But Beckman said the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago is now taking a proactive approach to address the

odor concerns.

"They've been talking to us about different operational procedures to try to control it, but I think they finally realized they have to do more than that," Beckman said. "They finally started investing some money."

The investment comes from an expanded budget and recently signed contracts with outside companies. By January 2024, the odor neutralization system will be expanded at a cost of \$1.05 million, said Alex Fore, the public and intergovernmental affairs officer for MWRD. This is on top of \$1.3 million that was spent on a similar expansion when the reservoir opened.

MWRD also entered into a

contract with Jacobs Engineering in June to have outside national odor experts evaluate its strategies to minimize odor complaints and address any identified gaps, Fore said.

MWRD executed another contract July 13, 2023, with OptimaBiome for \$936,400 to test a biological-based product to naturally mitigate odors in 2024 and

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Right: Vehicles travel on the Tri-State Tollway along an edge of the Thornton Reservoir on Tuesday. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Construction is ongoing along Old Western Avenue in Blue Island, where a project aims to make the area more pedestrian friendly. CAROL FLYNN/DAILY SOUTHTOWN PHOTOS



Organizers check in patrons during a recent fundraiser at Blue Island Beer Company on Old Western Avenue in Blue Island, which anchors the business district named for the street.

Blue Island eyes bright future



Larry Garetto welcomes families to the Lyric Theater for the recent children's carnival. "I love talking to people, here and at the bakery," said Garetto, who also is a co-owner of Iversen's bakery next door.

Business owners, city officials harness community spirit

By Carol Flynn
Daily Southtown

On a recent Sunday afternoon, families enjoyed a children's carnival at the Lyric Theater in Blue Island that included games, face painting, plenty of balloons and treats, and the movie "Dumbo."

The following Friday night, a few blocks away, adults enjoyed espresso, wine, and cheese and fruit at the Studios coffee house.

At the Blue Island Beer Company the next night, patrons of a "Christmas in July" fundraiser enjoyed craft beers, food from nearby D'Masti's catering, and entertainment.

During the daytime, the sound of hammers and saws continue to fill the air as the old Jebens hardware store undergoes renovation.

These endeavors are all part of the revitalization of Blue Island. Other new businesses include a banquet facility, several catering companies and restaurants, and retail shops.

While efforts to bring new life to a city

are nothing new, the Blue Island efforts stem from a grassroots movement motivated by community loyalty.

"It's an exciting time to be part of what is happening in Blue Island," said Sara Brown, who with her husband Kevin Brown runs the Blue Island Chamber of Commerce.

"Dedicated and visionary business owners who love the community, working in cooperation with the city government, have put in so much time and effort, have made an investment, and that breeds confidence. We have faith in each other that we're going in the right direction," said Brown.

The Garetto/Cantelo family, owners of Beggars Pizza, bought the Lyric Theater at 12952 S. Western Ave. in 2019 after it sat mostly unused and deteriorating for 25 years. On Aug. 4, the theater celebrated its first anniversary as a rejuvenated showplace for movies, concerts, and social events.

According to Amanda Garetto Melvin, a third-generation member in the family

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Richards, Naperville Central grads offer advice for success



Donna Vickroy

Because high school is such a formative part of the human experience, it's wise to shore up your chances for success. And how better to do that than by considering the advice of two highly successful recent graduates?

Both John Austin and Meghan McSweeney thrived in high school. It wasn't always easy but they quickly learned to adapt and to take advantage of resources, both at home and school.

Before they head off to college, they imparted some pearls of wisdom for incoming freshmen, but their words can be applied across the age spectrum.

John is a graduate of Naperville Central High School in Naperville. He'll study finance and Spanish at the University of Notre Dame. Meghan is a graduate of Richards High School in Oak Lawn. She will major in engineering physics at North Central College.

Academics

John: The curriculum can be quite challenging but the school system is set up for students to succeed if they want to. It's very capitalistic in that sense. The work you put in equals the

output. If you're struggling in classes, find help through teachers or friends. There are tons of ways to do that. If you don't have the answer, find someone who does. Knowing how to problem solve is crucial to success. Finding a way to get where you need to go is essential.

I had the luxury of having older sisters who attended the same school. Your parents are good people but the advice of people who've been there, done that, is crucial.

Meghan: Don't be afraid to challenge yourself. There will always be support systems through the school or outside of it. It's the best way to grow as student and person. Don't be so obsessed with grades or your

GPA. It's more important to learn the material than get a good grade.

I definitely had rough patches where I wasn't understanding something or needed help. My advice would be to reach out. There is all kinds of help.

Extracurriculars

Meghan: Join clubs or sports. It's a good way to meet people and make friends. I'm friends with a ton of people I've met through the tennis team. Don't be afraid to talk to people you might not know. People in activities are more open to meeting new people. And you get to meet people who might not be in your classes.

John: Kids who get into sports



Austin



McSweeney

or clubs easily transition. You're going to naturally find friends if you're slightly outgoing and willing to take chances on people. No one really knows who you were before you got there so you have an opportunity to start fresh.

I work at a local pizza place. It's been a big part of my high school career and part of my identity as a whole. I started freshman summer and have been there since. I learned a lot. It's a place

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BRIDGE

Both vulnerable, South deals

North
 ♠ 10 8 5 2
 ♥ A Q 10
 ♦ K Q 2
 ♣ Q 6 2

West
 ♠ A J 7 4 3
 ♥ 5
 ♦ 10 9 7
 ♣ 10 8 7 4

East
 ♠ Q 9 6
 ♥ 9 7 4 3
 ♦ J 8 4
 ♣ J 9 5

South
 ♠ K
 ♥ K J 8 6 2
 ♦ A 6 5 3
 ♣ A K 3

South ruffed the spade continuation at trick two and had to decide how to play this deal. He could just draw all the trumps, but he would then need a 3-3 split of the outstanding diamonds. Alternatively, he could cash two high hearts and then play on diamonds. He would make his slam if the diamonds split 3-3 or if the player short in diamonds was also out of trumps. He could then ruff his last diamond in dummy.

The bidding:

South	West	North	East
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♦	Pass	4♥	Pass
4NT	Pass	5♦	Pass
6♥	All pass		

Opening lead: Ace of ♠

He then saw something even better. A dummy reversal! He could ruff two more spades in his hand and then draw trumps using the trumps in dummy. This needed a 3-2 trump split, but that was almost twice as likely as a 3-3 split in diamonds. He led a heart to dummy's ace and ruffed a spade in hand. He crossed back to dummy with a trump and was crestfallen when West showed out. He ruffed another spade, as East shed a club, but eventually lost a trump trick for down one.

We empathize with declarer. It is frustrating when you find a good line of play and the "Gods of Distribution" sink it. Still, good declarer play is all about reacting to new information. Instead of surrendering, South should have tried cashing three top tricks in each minor suit. Should East follow to everything, South would have a high cross-ruff for the last three tricks. Never give up!

— Bob Jones
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The Daily Southtown is published by Tribune Publishing. Direct all inquiries to Tribune Publishing, 560 W. Grand Ave., Chicago, IL, 60654.



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Future

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business, "buying the theater was a personal more than a business decision. Our grandparents met each other at the Lyric. We did this to give back to the community, so people have a place to go. We love hearing the stories from people who used to come here, and now they are forming new memories."

The Garetto clan also purchased Iversen's Bakery next door to the theater, saving it from closing after 60 years of satisfying the community's sweet tooth. They plan to add ice cream and gourmet popcorn to the menu. This fall, the family will open Blue Island's first cannabis dispensary on Western Avenue, a project that took four years to become a reality.

Bryant Howe and Amy Thorne studied the entire metropolitan Chicago area before deciding to settle in Blue Island. They bought the building at 2421 Grove Street that had been vacant for decades, restored it, and opened Studios coffee house last October. They recently added wine and charcuterie offerings on Friday evenings that can be served on their new outdoor patio.

"I could see what Blue Island could be. It's just a really good community vibe, neighbors watching out for each other. We're all working together. My little piece is this coffee shop and wine bar. With everything I'm doing, I'm looking at how this makes Blue Island better," Howe said.

Alan Cromwell, co-owner of the Blue Island Beer Company, has always enjoyed craft breweries and tap rooms "because in many communities, they become the cultural epicenters for sharing a lot of different, eclectic ideas."

In business for eight years at 13357 Old Western Ave., the brewery has become the anchor for the Olde Western Business District, providing a venue for everything from weddings to the Witch-O-Rama Market.

Down the street, Tim Duckworth and Alex Lehman decided to become part of the revitalization effort "to help drive Blue Island forward" by purchasing and renovating the Jebens building, which dates to 1876. Lehman's yoga studio will open there next year, and the B*U*B Café, a restaurant owned by Geena Doherty and Amber Sullivan, plans a "soft opening" there in October.

Doherty said of the Olde Western businesses, "We're a small group building up each other. This is our home; we believe in this business community."

The city's cultural organizations are also important to the revitaliza-



Studios coffee shop, which becomes a wine bar on Friday evenings, has been in operation since October in a restored building. CAROL FLYNN/DAILY SOUTHTOWN

tion efforts.

The Blue Island Arts Alliance, headed by Joe Leamanczyk, established its signature event, the Mai Fest Arts and Crafts Fair, two years ago. Last spring, 100 artisans were set up along Old Western Avenue for the event.

On Maple Avenue, the Blue Island Historical Society, managed by Kevin and Sara Brown, is restoring its headquarters in the 19th-century Albee House. The house contains the society's vast historical collection and also is used for community events.

The Blue Island Public Library, under the direction of Anna Wassenaar since 2019, has made community outreach a strategic priority. The library will hold a Hispanic fest with music, crafts, food vendors, and, of course, books and stories, for Mexican Independence Day on Sept. 16.

The efforts wouldn't be possible without buy-in from the city's administration, and Mayor Fred Bilotto, elected in 2021, receives kudos from the business and cultural establishments for his cooperation and support.

The city was "absolutely fantastic" to work with, Howe said. "The mayor is working to get the city to the next level, and then to the next level."

According to Wassenaar, the library also enjoys a great relationship with the mayor. She noted that good cooperation and communication among the city units and with the businesses and other organizations has benefited everyone.

Previously as an alderman, Bilotto represented the Olde Western Business District, and his support for local businesses carried over to his new role as mayor.

"Wherever the city can help, we're doing that, with permits, contractors, grants. We've been very aggressive,

getting the 'best bang' with limited resources," said Bilotto.

Blue Island's streetscape beautification project recently broke ground, starting with Old Western Avenue. New sidewalks, lighting, benches, trees, and waste cans are being installed to make the entire length of Western Avenue more pedestrian friendly.

Safety has been a priority. According to Bilotto, increasing the police presence, looking beyond the traditional lines of law enforcement, and enforcing accountability for business owners and landlords for whom and what activities they allow on their premises, are all strategies for the city.

In the long term, Bilotto has a bigger plan to market the city itself.

"We've been isolated for a very long time, and I would like to change that. We've been here for 188 years. People came here for a reason, and we want to build upon that," said Bilotto.

"We are only fifteen minutes away from everything. No other town has Blue Island's access to transportation. We have two train lines, the Calumet River, and the I-294 and I-57 expressways," he noted.

That eye toward the future is fully supported by the business owners and cultural leaders.

"We hope our efforts will be a catalyst to bring other businesses to Blue Island, to make it a showplace," said Melvin.

Added Sara Brown, "We want to be great neighbors with other communities in Chicagoland. People are pleasantly surprised when they come to Blue Island. We honor the city's history, but we don't live in the past. Blue Island is a very different city now."

Carol Flynn is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.

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2025.

In 2020, the water reclamation district commissioned a study to investigate the reservoir's first several years of operation.

"Shortly after the reservoir went online, the MWRD immediately increased the number of solar aerators from seven to 20 to enlarge the oxygenated lens on the surface of the water in the reservoir to minimize odor releases," Fore said. "The MWRD installed a state-of-the-art odor neutralization system at its nearby shafts to address the release of odors."

The 2020 study found that "odor complaints appear to be trending downward." That trend seems to be continuing. There had been few complaints this year with no one expressing displeasure with the smell between March and June.

But then in July, historic storms drenched the state causing flooding in some areas. Wet weather can often serve to exacerbate sewage runoff problems and spread odor. The monthlong streak of silence from the noses of residents was broken, presumably from the heavy rains, and five complaints were registered last month, according to Fore.

Yet while the floods may have triggered an increase in the odor complaints, the reservoir's presence could have helped to avert heavy damage in the area.

"This reservoir was designed to minimize overbank flooding on



A view into the Thornton Reservoir on Tuesday. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

the Thorn Creek and to intercept combined sewage overflows; the captured sewage is properly cleaned and disinfected before it is released into the environment," Fore said.

Beckman says his office used to receive numerous complaints about odor when the reservoir first came online. Now the village redirects the community's qualms to MWRD.

Beckman says some residents have said they stopped complaining, despite the odor being so overwhelming it sometimes prevents them from being outside.

"When they started complaining two to three years ago about it, it just didn't seem like things were getting done so they just gave up," Beckman said, reflecting on a recent conversation with one resident.

In a written response, Fore said

MWRD has been committed since the groundbreaking of the reservoir to ensure that the smell is reduced each year.

"No, the MWRD was not slow when addressing this issue," she said. "After installation of the infrastructure as well as some operational changes, there was a significant decline in odor complaints — from 174 odor complaints in 2016 to fewer than 10 annually in 2020, 2021 and 2022."

Beckman said he believes there was a lack of action for many years, so "there are people who experience odors that just don't call anymore." But regardless of whether the decrease is because of tangible action from MWRD or a response to inaction by the water district, the future investments clarify the group's mission to reduce the nuisance.

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I relied on as a hobby and extracurricular. It's how I got through high school.

Friends

John: I'm lucky to have the same friend group forever. We all live in my neighborhood and have hung out since elementary school. I know for a fact that making friends and having friends has become more difficult and easier for different reasons. Social media can help you find groups and cliques. But because of COVID and technology, online interactions can make it difficult to really connect. It's the plus and minus of social media: More access to more people, but it's virtual.

Our group matured as time progressed. We all found different hobbies but we had a strong foundation. That helped us move together separately. You hear a lot about cliques. It's cliché but don't judge

people. Find out for yourself. Don't believe everything you hear. And remember, people can change.

Meghan: Communication is a big thing I stress with my friends. Whenever there's a fight or issue, I say, "Talk it out." A lot of times girls push problems aside and wait for them to fade but the best advice I can give is to communicate your feelings with your friends. Talk about it in a calm way. "How can we fix this?"

Social media

Meghan: Use it as a positive platform. Don't get involved in drama. It's all stupid and at the end of the day; it's only going to cause more problems. Use social media for talking with friends and having fun, but nothing negative.

John: Kids are getting phones at an early age today. Parents need to be educated on the effects of social media, because they're the ones allowing kids to have phones. My mom works in a school, and sees how bad things can happen. She did a really good job of creating an open

environment. I wasn't afraid to tell her anything that was going on. That trust is crucial — having a parent you can go to.

I know peer pressure is prevalent but I didn't struggle with that. I credit that to knowing myself. I set limits for myself.

Stress

John: It all starts with a good mindset. Everything in life starts with that. If you have that and balance, if you think you can do it, you can do it.

Meghan: I talk about it with parents or friends. It's important to express how you're feeling but also to find solutions. Exercise helps me relieve stress. And I'm very big into art, so drawing helps. Do things that you know will help you decompress. If I could have done anything differently, I would have dealt with my stress a lot better. Initially, I felt freshman year was not supposed to be hard but sometimes it was. I's OK to reach out and tell people you're struggling and need help.