

The Update



June 2022

Serving the Counties of Cass, Fremont, Harrison, Montgomery, Mills, Page, Pottawattamie, and Shelby

SWIPCO is Robert D. Ray Center 2022 Organization of Character

Since its founding in 1975, Southwest Iowa Planning Council has earned a reputation for being an outstanding community partner and transit provider in the region. Now, the organization’s efforts are being recognized statewide.

SWIPCO will be recognized as the 2022 Organization of Character by the Robert D. and Billie Ray Center at Drake University, which annually recognizes Iowans who show the Six Pillars of Character Counts: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and good citizenship. Since 2005, the Ray Center has recognized more than 150 Iowans for showing good character.

“The Ray Center is proud to recognize SWIPCO with a 2022 Iowa Character Award,” said Hilary Ortmann, Associate Director for The Ray Center. “SWIPCO’s commitment to improve the lives of southwest Iowans through innovation and collaborative partnerships demonstrates their commitment to showing good character.”

In honoring SWIPCO, the Ray Center noted SWITA transit professionals’ support of volunteers and stakeholders including Cass County Wellness Program Coordinator Brigham Hoegh, the City of Atlantic, and the local Food Policy Council to deliver meals to homebound community members at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—all while continuing to operate as the sole public transit provider in southwest Iowa. Over a period of 40 weeks between spring 2020 and summer 2021, SWITA drivers and volunteers supplied food approximately 2,800 times. “When the rest of the world shut down, SWITA buses kept running,” said Transit Director Mark Lander. “Our drivers stepped up and helped get the job done.”

SWIPCO was also recognized based on its support for the southwest Iowa towns devastated by 2019 floods, which caused billions of dollars in property damage. SWIPCO’s efforts brought a combined \$90 million grant package to the region, resulting in the largest investment in new rural homebuilding in at least a generation.

“I do not know of a more caring and devoted staff who work hard every day as a team to help our neighbors in southwest Iowa,” said SWIPCO Executive Director John McCurdy. “This award is a wonderful recognition of that shared spirit of service, and we’re humbled to be recognized in this way.”

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The Robert D. and Billie Ray Center provides character and leadership development strategies to improve civility and develop ethical leaders throughout the world. As the global home to Character Counts, The Ray Center utilizes public awareness and programming grounded in research to advance two programs, Character Counts and Excellence with Integrity.

The 2022 Iowans of Character awards will be presented at a ceremony on July 29th.

Mayors and City Councils Proclaim June 13-17 'Ride Transit Week'

7.5 trips to the moon may seem like a lot of distance to travel, but for SWITA, that's just an average year. In fiscal year 2021, SWITA provided over 377,000 rides and traveled more than 1.8 million miles in southwest Iowa.

That's just one reason the cities of Atlantic, Harlan, Glenwood, Missouri Valley, Council Bluffs, and Red Oak each proclaimed June 13-17 'Ride Transit Week' this year.

"The City of Atlantic contributes \$8,000 per year to help provide SWITA transit services to our residents," said Atlantic Mayor Grace Garrett at the Atlantic City Council meeting June 1st. "Every time I learn more about what SWIPCO does, I am even more glad that we have them here."

Resolutions recognizing the proclamations were passed during the first two weeks of June, with SWITA drivers in attendance. The celebratory week coincides with the Federal Transit Administration's 'Dump the Pump Day', which this year will be June 17. It is a day set to recognize public transit professionals and celebrate the options available to consumers to use public transit to get where they need to go.

The support for SWITA of SWIPCO's member cities and counties cannot be understated. Southwest Iowans have long supported their public transit system, and our ability to deliver this service depends upon that continued support, for which we are grateful.



Kristen Templeton
Transit Coordinator

TRANSIT TALK

Transit Fun Day at SWITA

Pizza. Shaved ice. Bubbles. Buses. That sets the scene for SWITA's planned Transit Fun Day in celebration of Ride Transit Week on June 15th.

Community members are invited to join in the fun and celebrate public transit. Starting at 11 am until 1pm, the Hungry Spartan Pizza truck will be onsite at SWITA selling "Colossal Slices" for \$5 to celebrate our outstanding transit professionals. Louie's Shaved Ice will have a pop-up stand, and SWITA will provide a free shaved ice to all who attend.

Children from the community are invited to play yard games, color on a SWITA bus with washable markers, make giant bubbles, and can even take home a coloring book sponsored by the Iowa Department of Transportation!

The event is both a celebration of the SWITA service and a functioning sign-up for this fall's student transportation in our member communities.

One other thing: community members can sign up to win a SWITA Date Night for 2, or a SWITA Family Activity Night for up to 8.

The SWITA Date Night package includes two tickets to the Atlantic 1&2 Theater and a \$40 gift certificate to Rancho Grande in Atlantic. Transportation will be provided by SWITA to the night out. The SWITA Family Activity Night will include 4 tickets to Sunnyside Putt-Em-Up in Atlantic and buffet for 8 at Pizza Ranch in Atlantic.

The event will be held at SWIPCO's office at 1501 SW 7th Street in Atlantic, IA 50022.

We hope you can make it out on the 15th!

Birthdays & Anniversaries



Matthew Lee
Building Inspector II
3 Years of Service on June 3

Rhonda Oliphant
Finance Manager
5 Years of Service on June 19



Kersten Abild
Transit Dispatcher
Birthday on June 23

In Cass County, Trails (and a Plan) Lead to Better Living

On an often-overlooked piece of rural infrastructure, bicyclists come into view as they traverse the abandoned rail route that runs between Atlantic and Audubon. Seeing cyclists here is commonplace now—but it didn't happen by accident.

"The increased relevance of trail networks is a longstanding project, with a goal of connecting folks to nature and giving them more recreational opportunities right here at home," said Dave Chase, president of Nishna Valley Trails, a nonprofit organization that engages in advocacy of the development of recreational trails, including promoting development of the T-Bone Trail that will connect Atlantic and Cass County to national and state networks of recreational throughways. "It's hard to understate how the development of these trails brings people together and makes our communities more desirable," Chase added.

With any desire to expand recreational opportunities comes the need for money, says Chase. And with the influx of federal dollars via COVID-19 relief and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the potential for increased investment energizes conversations about the way forward for communities seeking to boost safe outdoor recreation.

Last month, with the help of SWIPCO planning professionals, Cass County adopted its 2022 Recreational Trails Plan, a document that lays out plans for trails across the county and in each community—including multi-use pedestrian and bike trails (both paved and un-paved), as well as water trails and equestrian trails. The trail plan provides important context for individuals, government entities, and non-governmental organizations who have an interest in outdoor recreation and non-motorized transportation in the region. No financial obligations for Cass County are attached to the plan—but the document itself is a crucial piece of a funding puzzle when it comes to state and federal grant opportunities.

"While this document is largely non-binding and serves as a framework, many grants for trails and recreational development require counties to have an updated trail plan," said Dani Briggs, a planning technician with SWIPCO who worked to develop the plan with community stakeholders. "The Recreational Trails Plan lets folks know where your community wants to go as they decide whether to fund your proposed projects." Briggs also notes that the group tasked with writing the Recreational Trails Plan solicited community input in an outdoor recreation survey of Cass County residents, which showed recreational trails among the top-desired amenities by respondents.

Stakeholders involved in the plan's creation include municipal and county leaders, Cass County Iowa State University Extension, Atlantic Parks and Recreation, Cass County Conservation, Healthy Cass County, Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development, Nishna Valley Trails, and community members who are committed to the development of recreational trails in the region. Over many months, they worked together to identify strengths and opportunities inherent in recreational trail development, seeking community input and, finally, approval from Cass County supervisors—who adopted the plan unanimously.

"This is really a project aimed at bringing people together in a way that's fair, equitable, and accessible to anyone who wants to experience all of Cass County and southwest Iowa," Chase said. "That's what it's all about—taking this wonderful place and making it an even more attractive place to live, work, and raise a family."

"It's hard to understate how the development of these trails brings people together and makes our communities more desirable."

- Dave Chase, Nishna Valley Trails President

Director's Note

by John McCurdy

Change is inevitable and I am sad to share (but excited for her) that Alexis Fleener is leaving us for an outstanding opportunity in the private sector helping with disaster mitigation and recovery across the country. This is sad news for us, but a great move for her and I am glad that she will still be an active member of the Atlantic community since her position is remote. She will continue her non-profit work her with Shift ATL and I think we have only seen the beginning of her contributions to this community.

Alexis's 7 years at SWIPCO have been exceptional. Her work has brought in literally hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in our communities. Her ideas have sparked great change. I think that it is fair to say every person in Southwest Iowa has seen their life improved in some way by her work. Beyond that impact, she has also been a consummate professional and has always represented SWIPCO in an outstanding manner. She's also a joy to have in the office and is just a great person. She will be sorely missed.

She will leave a void, but it is common knowledge that nature abhors a vacuum. Alexis is a leader, and leaders build up their teams, and the team that is here is more than ready for the challenge of the weeks and months to come. Similarly, we are looking to add to that team and I think that the best way that we can thank Alexis for her incredible work here is to build on it and take it even further. Thank you, Alexis!

SWIPCO is Hiring!

Community Development Specialist:

Do you like to be out in the community helping local leaders and stakeholders solve complex problems? Do you want a career that is diverse and challenging? Do you have a background in local government, planning, or economic development? Are you organized and get excited about seeing a project you helped start become a reality? If these things interest you, consider becoming a community development specialist at SWIPCO. Our community development staff are both planners and doers—meaning that where many traditional planning jobs leave the implementation to someone else, our staff not only identify issues and develop solutions, but are there to help get it funded and built. Diverse backgrounds can meet this role and typical candidates come into these positions with either a planning, public policy, political science, or related degree. SWIPCO is open to hiring at a variety of levels from entry level (0-2 years' experience) in the \$40k's to higher levels of responsibility and compensation for those coming in with relevant experience.

Grants Specialist:

The backbone of SWIPCO's successful programs is our ability to manage large and complex grant programs. The way we do this is by having smart, dedicated staff who specialize in making sure that we and the communities we serve are doing what needs to be done per grant regulations. Grants specialists learn the ins and outs of programs and help our members navigate through some complex rules and procedures. They also help individuals who are working with us to have their homes repaired or accessing other services navigate application paperwork. Often behind the scenes, grants specialists need to be detail oriented, organized, and focused on how we can best help others while staying in compliance with multiple programs. Experience with grants is a major plus, but not a set in stone requirement. A background in a paralegal position, administrative assistance, bookkeeping, or social services are common to these positions. Wage is DOQ but starting wage is from \$17-\$20 per hour.

Look for the full job post on www.swipco.org. SWIPCO offers a generous wage and benefits package including IPERS retirement. These positions may be eligible for hybrid remote work after an initial training period.

SWIPCO STAFF ROSTER

John McCurdy, AICP
Executive Director

Rhonda Oliphant
Finance Manager

Michael Ballinger
Maintenance Assistant

Mark Hansen
Fleet Maintenance Specialist

Christy Pederson
Transit Assistant

Phil Richter
Building Inspector I

Mark Lander
Transit Director

Kersten Abild
Transit Dispatcher

Dani Briggs
Planning Technician II

Sandy Hansen
Grants Specialist III

C.J. Petersen
Communications Coordinator

Kristen Templeton
Transit Coordinator

Alexis Fleener, AICP
Community Development Director

Ann Anstey
Grants Specialist II

Tracy Clark
Transit Assistant - Operations

Dee Holtz
Administrative Assistant

Daurine Petersen
Human Resources Coordinator

Kristine Stokes, AICP
Community Development Specialist

Karen Mauer
Administrative Services Director
Mackenzie Bandow
Community Development Specialist

Tammy DeBord
Grants Specialist II

Cindy Johnson
Transit Dispatcher

Matthew Lee
Building Inspector II

Nicole Rhodes
Grants Specialist II

Leslie Wright
Community Development Specialist

Teresa Wright
Finance Specialist