Welcome to The Clean Mile, our new semi-annual newsletter for those involved in Illinois’ Adopt-A-Highway program. Each April and October, we will feature stories that recognize the valuable contributions of Adopt-A-Highway volunteers who contribute countless hours to keep our roadways free from litter. We are proud of the Adopt-A-Highway program, and we value our volunteers. This newsletter is just one small way for us to let you know that your efforts do not go unnoticed.

The Clean Mile will feature stories from the road, focusing on people and places along the highways where Adopt-A-Highway volunteers are actively working to keep the roadway clean. We also will publish the latest updates on the program and profiles on Adopt-A-Highway volunteers who make the program work and contribute to the quality of life in their communities.

We want The Clean Mile to be your newsletter, and we want to be responsive to the things you want and would like to see. If your group is doing something extraordinary, let us know and you could be the “Featured Adopter” in our next issue. We also would love to see photos from your group’s clean-up days to publish in the newsletter and on IDOT’s social media sites.

We’d love to hear your comments about the first issue. Send your comments to DOT.AAH@illinois.gov.

The Adopt-A-Highway program has been going strong in Illinois since 1996 with the help of 1,100 volunteer groups, 126 of which have been cleaning the roads for at least 20 years.

“Our vision for the Adopt-A-Highway program is to provide a great first impression of Illinois, keep roadways safe from debris and help alleviate the high costs of maintaining our state highways,” said Illinois Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn. “As we go into the 21st year of the Adopt-A-Highway program, we extend a special thank-you to the 126 groups that have continued cleaning their adopted miles for more than two decades. Their commitment is inspiring and truly valued.”

This April, the Illinois Department of Transportation will recognize the volunteer groups who have participated in Adopt-A-Highway for 20 and 21 years. Photos recognizing these dedicated volunteers will be shared on IDOT’s Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn sites, and press releases will be distributed statewide.

No matter if you have been volunteering for Adopt-A-Highway for 20 minutes or 20 years, the State of Illinois sincerely appreciates the time you contribute to helping our state highways stay clean! Thank you!

AAH FAST FACT:
If each Adopt-A-Highway group spends six hours cleaning their stretch of highway every year, that would result in our 20- and 21-year honorees devoting more than 15,000 hours of service to the State of Illinois!
Retiring from Caterpillar nine years ago as a design engineer, Robert Roley didn’t want to sit around and do nothing. But staying busy proved to be a problem.

“I knew I wanted to keep busy, but I didn’t want to take anyone else’s job away from them,” Bob said.

So Bob became District 7’s leading Adopt-A-Highway (AAH) volunteer. In his time as a volunteer, he’s come across some good stories to share.

One of his best stories occurred three years ago.

“I was picking up trash along the highway one afternoon when I saw a wad of cash lying under some leaves,” Bob said. “A $50 bill was wrapped around the outside, so I knew there was some serious money involved.”

After counting the money, Bob had $717 in his pocket and spent the rest of his clean-up time pondering how he could find the owner.

He went to talk with his pastor, who suggested he get in touch with the sheriff’s office, tell them what he’d found and see if they’d had any calls about it.

“I didn’t tell them the amount as a way to make sure it was the money I had if the sheriff had any information,” Bob said.

The sheriff checked his logs, and sure enough, a lady had made a statement with the sheriff’s office several weeks earlier that she’d lost that exact amount of cash while moving her mother into an assisted living facility.

“She was a local lady who worked at the insurance office in Sullivan, so I went to see her and gave her the money,” Bob said. “She was really appreciative and sent me a thank-you card. That was really nice.”

Volunteers of the Adopt-A-Highway program are assigned a two-mile stretch of highway for their clean-up efforts, but according to Cling Bergbower, D7 Permit and Safety Unit Chief, Bob kept coming back and asking for more roadsides to clean.

“I enjoy finding stuff along the highway,” Bob said. Now keeping 3.4 miles of roadside clean, Bob said about 10 percent of the trash he picks up is aluminum cans. What surprises him most is the number of empty cigarette packages.

“I’m astounded by how much trash people toss out,” he said.

Although it’s not part of the AAH program, Bob also walks along the country roads to pick up broken bottles and other trash. He recycles what he can.

In addition to helping keep Illinois roadways clean, Bob is an usher and trustee at his church, the caretaker for the Shawsburg cemetery, does some consulting, helps his brother-in-law on his farm and has become the audio person for a lot of local benefits.

His original fear of not staying busy post-retirement? It’s no longer a concern.
Illinois’ Adopt-A-Highway program has been in existence for more than 20 years, so we thought it was time to update how we interact with our volunteer groups. We’ve taken steps to bring the program into the digital age to make it easier to apply for or renew a permit and to access our safety tips. Here’s a quick breakdown of these important updates:

SAFETY VIDEO
The most crucial thing you can do when you’re working along Illinois highway is BE SAFE! Our safety video can be accessed via our Adopt-a-Highway page on the IDOT website. If you can’t access the video online, please request a CD at DOT.AAH@illinois.gov. We encourage you to watch the video before each clean-up day to make sure any new members are aware of necessary safety precautions and also as a reminder of how some items found along the highway need to be disposed or reported.

VOLUNTEER CONTACT INFO
We’re working to improve our database, specifically by adding email addresses and correcting any changes in contact information. You can help with this by making sure we have the most up-to-date information from your organization. Email any updates to DOT.AAH@illinois.gov.

Looking toward 2018, our goal is to start sending out renewal notices via email. We hope these changes will make your volunteer effort easier and offer you better ways to communicate with us.

And remember — be safe out there!