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Authorities grapple with warehouse building safety

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

One of the thorniest construction issues in recent years is getting high-level scrutiny after the tornado that toppled an Edwardsville warehouse facility in December, killing six.

Key to the investigation is the answer to this question: How safe are the standards behind such construction and what can be done to improve them?

Several figures gathered last month for a joint state hearing held by the House Labor & Commerce Committee, the Senate Commerce Committee, and the Senate Labor Committee.

State Rep. Katie Stuart, D-Edwardsville, and Chairman Marcus C. Evans, D-Chicago, led the session, in concert with other Metro East state representatives.

“Employees should not have to worry about losing their lives while on the job,” Stuart said afterward, reflecting on the testimony. “The Amazon warehouse was built to the highest state safety standards, but our highest standards may not be enough.”

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The devastated Amazon fulfillment center after it was struck by the Dec. 10 tornado, killing six.

Farmers prevailing despite cost battles

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Supply chain issues have Illinois farmers in a field to themselves as they stave off extraordinary, rising costs.

But the bottom line is, two good years of crops are helping offset the price of doing business.

“The increase in costs have been the biggest impact on corn and soybean farmers here. It’s going to narrow profit margins. However, they’ve had a couple of good years.” said Mike Doherty, senior economist of the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Illinois dominates agricultural on the U.S. front. It’s first in soybean production and second in corn, behind only Iowa.

Much is at stake as farmers contemplate the seed that goes into the ground in the next month.

“Going into this crop year, the farmers are looking very closely at their costs,” Doherty said. “But they are also looking at a situation where corn and soybeans are looking profitable, thanks to the strength of the export markets.”

Illinois competes agriculturally and has lately had advantage over places like South America, where weather has been severe, with Ukraine, where war is being waged, and with South Africa, which fights a variety of conditions.

“That has helped elevate the prices. Overall, the prices are compensating for the increase in fertilizer and input costs,” he said.

On a per-ton basis, the chief fertilizer, anhydrous ammonia, has been running \$1,200 to \$1,500 a ton, more than double previous years, he said.



Illinois is first in the nation in soybean production and second in corn.

Liquid nitrogen fertilizer had an average price of \$661/ton, which was an all-time high. Urea fertilizer was 7 percent more expensive from November to December. UAN-32, a nitrogen fertilizer solution composed of urea and ammonium nitrate, had an average price of \$887/ton in December, an all-time high.

Key to profit is whether farmers have already locked in nitrogen fertilizer contracts, which most sign the fall before planting season. If lower prices

aren’t locked in, farmers are constrained by access and availability, as well as price increases, Doherty said.

As of mid-month, fertilizer appears to be available for the planting season.

Some farmers put fertilizer down before they plant, others afterward. The process can be spread out over a period of time, making locked-in contracts that much more important.

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MidAmerica sees growth as continuing

By RANDY PIERCE

MidAmerica St. Louis Airport’s impact and growth both continue upward, says a consultant hired to look at the future of the facility.

“I think it’s important to understand our position and my position for what this airport can become. It’s a lot bigger than what a lot of people think,” said Jack Penning, managing partner of Volaire Aviation Consulting, based in Portland, Ore.

Volaire has a contractual agreement with the airport, and Penning presented his conclusions during a meeting last month of the St. Clair County Public Building Commission.

While the coronavirus pandemic may still have effects, Penning said the airport is one of only about 10 of the 360 airports in the United States which had a record year concerning its usage in 2021, adding, “That’s pretty remarkable.”

“The thing that really impresses me is our share of passengers in the St. Louis market. We’ve had about 1 percent of passengers for a very long time going back to 2012.”

“We boosted that up to about 2 to 3 percent of passengers in ’18, ’19. Look at this year: almost 5 percent of the St. Louis market uses our airport.”

With 30 percent of the metropolitan population on the Illinois side, “we’re still just scratching the surface,” he said.

“We’ve done a great job,” Penning went on, “really establishing ourselves as the low-cost airport for St. Louis.”

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