

# Illinois Business Journal

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## Metro East captures national attention for regional unity

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Metro East community leaders have come together, developing a regional approach to economic development in such a uniquely impactful way that it has caught the attention of our nation's leaders.

So much so, in fact, that Assistant U.S. Secretary for Economic Development Alejandra Castillo came for a visit in person to see and hear more about what they were doing and how they were making it work. Afterward, she shared more details behind her June 12 visit in Alton:

"My hope was one, to meet the different stakeholders here in this community. Secondly, to understand their vision for economic development. And I will say that I am very pleasantly surprised, by actually knowing that the communities are coming together. That you have the university, the community college, the unions, the workforce boards, the nonprofits, and the communities' representatives all coming together, and pulling together their best assets to forge ahead. It looks like a very promising future for this area," said Castillo.

Castillo herself is the eldest child of immigrants from the Dominican Republic and the first woman of color to be appointed Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development. She has served in leadership positions under three presidents: Biden, Obama and Clinton.

In her current role, Castillo leads the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) and is responsible for fulfilling the bureau's mission of leading the federal economic development agenda.

Mayors and city administrators from throughout the Illinois Metro East region gathered with state and federal representatives including state Sen. Erica Harris (R-Glen Carbon), State Rep. Amy Elik (R-Alton), and State Rep. Kevin Schmidt (R-Millstadt), academic leaders, and other community leaders for a roundtable discussion moderated by U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski (D-Springfield) and held at Alton's Jacoby Arts Center.

When asked what the catalyst was for her to come for a visit in person, Castillo said, "I came by the invitation of the Congresswoman, and in large part, to not just see what the federal government is doing, but also to see what the state and local governments are doing here to spur economic development.

"At the Economic Development Administration, we work on issues that relate to regional economic development, so bringing together these many different communities with a shared vision to provide not just growth but also to support workforce development, and to help people stay in their communities as they look at new businesses flourishing... They're putting the building blocks to make sure that this all happens," Castillo said further.

"I always say, the mayors are where it's at," she added. "The federal government is pushing the state and local levels to cooperate together, and the name of the game is partnership, regional partnerships," Castillo noted.

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Assistant U.S. Secretary for Economic Development Alejandra Castillo, at the center of the photo and third from the left, came to Alton's Jacoby Arts Center on June 12 for a regional roundtable session moderated by U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski (D-Springfield), fourth from the left in the photo. Coming together for a conversation about how the region's unified approach toward economic development is positively impacting the region, the event had approximately 60 participants, including from the far left, SIUE Chancellor Dr. James Minor, Alton Mayor David Goins, Castillo, Budzinski, and Illinois Deputy Governor Andy Manar. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

## A new I-270, Mississippi River bridge will replace current Chain of Rocks expanse

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Officials from both sides of the Mississippi River gathered near the Chouteau Island fishing area in Granite City on a bright and comfortable sunny morning June 13 to break ground on a new bi-state, bipartisan, and commerce-crucial infrastructure project: A new Interstate 270 Chain of Rocks Bridge.

Departments of Transportation from Illinois and Missouri are working jointly on this \$531.6 million infrastructure project that will expand across the river, designed to improve safety and mobility along this major commuter travel and freight corridor and create jobs.

Illinois is funding \$306 million of that cost through Rebuild Illinois (RBI) funds, and the State of Missouri will provide nearly \$200 million more in funding.

This is good news for an area that is already experiencing strong industrial and commercial growth. But, as Illinois Governor JB Pritzker remarked, "This isn't just an investment for the Metro East region — it's an investment for our entire nation. This major freight corridor connects our ports and railways — essential to maintaining a steady supply chain for Illinoisans, Missourians, and all Americans alike.

"Up and down the Metro East region, we're restoring and rebuild-



Illinois Transportation Secretary Omer Osman addresses those gathered on June 13 to hear about a new Interstate 270 Chain of Rocks Bridge coming to Granite City with benefits for the entire St. Louis metro region. The project is a joint effort of the Illinois and Missouri Departments of Transportation. State Rep. Jay Hoffman (D-Swansea) is to the left in the photo, and Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker at the right. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

ing, creating good-paying jobs, and making sure working families have the opportunities and resources they need to build good lives for themselves," Gov. Pritzker added.

"This is job creation for our children, in the area where they grew up," noted Illinois Transportation Secretary Omer Osman.

On both sides of the Mississippi River, the I-270 loop connects many of the region's warehouses and distribution parks, ports, airports and rail yards. Nearly 70 percent of the region's industrial tenants that occupy large warehouse

spaces of more than 500,000 square feet are within 10 minutes of Interstate 270.

The existing bridge was built in 1966 and extends two traffic lanes in each direction with narrow, one-foot shoulders that post safety concerns for both first responders as well as for those who experience vehicle breakdowns on the bridge. Roughly 51,000 vehicles travel the bridge expanse each day, and about 20 percent of those are trucks. The existing structure requires frequent maintenance and repair, due to its age and the related load impact.

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