



BRIEFcase

STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

SOUTH BEND

Nominees needed for Spirit of Women award

Memorial Hospital of South Bend is accepting nominations for the regional Spirit of Women awards, which recognize three Michiana-area women who have made an impact in their communities and in the lives of others.

Awards will be presented in three categories: youth, for women ages 14 to 21; community, for women 22 and over; and health care provider, for women who are or have been affiliated with Memorial Hospital or Memorial Health System.

Winners will be honored in May at the Expo for Women and at a luncheon for the award recipients.

Nomination forms are available at Memorial or its Web site at www.qualityoflife.org. The deadline is May 1 to Spirit of Women, Marketing Communications Department, Memorial Hospital, 615 N. Michigan St., South Bend, IN 46601 or faxed to (574) 647-3674.

LANSING

Regional jobless rates increase in February

Seasonally unadjusted unemployment rates increased in 13 of Michigan's 17 regional labor markets in February.

In the Niles-Benton Harbor area, the jobless rate was 7.9 percent, up from 7.6 percent.

State officials say the largest increases in unemployment rates came in the northeast and northwest portions of the Lower Peninsula.

Regional unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted. But national and state unemployment rates are adjusted to remove seasonal influences.

Michigan's seasonally adjusted jobless rate in February was the highest in the nation at 7.2 percent.

BLOOMINGTON, IND.

County plans study of GE factory uses

An economic development group wants to see whether a General Electric refrigerator plant slated to close could be run through an employee stock ownership plan.

The Monroe County Economic Development Commission on Monday approved plans to send out a request for proposals to study that question and determine, among other things, whether the factory can be retrofitted to make another product.

Commission members have said the study could cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and they hope to ask GE to fund it.

GE announced earlier this year that its Bloomington plant, which builds side-by-side refrigerators, will close by the end of 2009. It said the factory lost about \$45 million last year, and the company expected similar losses this year. Officials cited declining sales of the product and rising costs of materials and labor.

The plant employs nearly 900 people, and GE has said about 60 percent will retire with benefits. Last week, employees were told GE had rejected their cost-cutting proposals to save the factory.

DAYTON, OHIO

Food pantries busy due to strike layoffs

United Way officials in Dayton, Ohio, say record numbers of families are seeking emergency food assistance because of layoffs caused by the strike at Detroit-based American Axle and Manufacturing Holdings Inc.

Dayton-area labor officials estimate the work stoppage has caused the layoffs of more than 3,300 employees at the Moraine General Motors truck plant, Johnson Controls in West Carrollton, Plastech Industries and DMAX Ltd.

Food pantry officials say more than 900 individuals have sought help this year, about three times as many as by this time a year ago.

CHICAGO

United grounds 777s for inspections

U.S. air travelers have endured longer lines, more delays and the loss of amenities like meals and blankets. Now they are getting hit with a wave of schedule disruptions caused by airlines scrambling amid increased regulatory scrutiny to ensure that the expanding air transport system stays safe.

The latest complication came Wednesday, when United Airlines temporarily grounded dozens of Boeing 777s to test their cargo fire-suppression systems.

United said it canceled more than 30 flights and delayed dozens of others as it carried out work on the long-haul jets after a review of maintenance records showed that a test on a bottle in the fire suppression system hadn't been performed.

The move affected thousands of passengers around the world, as United's 777s mostly fly international routes from its major hubs.

FRAMINGHAM, MASS.

TJX may pay \$24 million in data breach case

Discount retailer TJX Cos. could pay as much as \$24 million in a settlement with MasterCard International Inc. over a massive breach of customers' card data.

An agreement hinges on banks that issue MasterCards agreeing to participate. Framingham-based TJX says issuers of at least 90 percent of eligible MasterCards must approve the agreement by May 2 for the settlement to take effect.

The \$24 million would help MasterCard issuers recover breach-related expenses such as replacing customers' cards. A similar \$41 million deal was reached in December with Visa.

The settlements follow a breach involving at least 45 million card numbers belonging to customers of TJX-owned stores including T.J. Maxx and Marshalls.



Jim Bartel, president of ARBOC Mobility, is inventor of an ADA-compliant bus being produced by Coachmen Industries Inc., of Middlebury.

ARBOC Mobility, Coachmen team up to produce buses with better access.

By JIM MEENAN
Tribune Staff Writer

MIDDLEBURY — The paralyzed man was lowered from the airplane, onto a bus and taken to a hotel, where he asked to be unloaded on a loading dock far away from the main entrance.

The heavy apparatus that was used to hold him was too bulky and embarrassing. He did not like to make a spectacle out of himself.

But that was the way he did things before Jim Bartel and his prototype bus Spirit of Mobility came along.

The bus that requires no lift and no steps and quickly gets special needs passengers aboard via a ramp dropped the man off at the loading dock.

But the next day, there was a surprise. The man asked Bartel's bus to pick him up out in front of the Dearborn, Mich., hotel.

"We had him ready to move out of the building and onto the bus in a minute," recalled Bartel, "when usually it took five to 10 minutes."

It made all the difference then to even a man as famous as actor Christopher Reeve.

That was in the early days of the bus now called Spirit of Mobility.

ARBOC Mobility recently entered into an agreement with Coachmen Industries, Inc. of Middlebury to have the manufacturer begin producing the Americans with Disabilities Act compliant buses in March.

The first two buses are now making the rounds to shows and potential

Spirit of Mobility

The ARBOC Mobility bus, which will be manufactured at Coachmen Industries in Middlebury has:

- no lifts and no steps.
- a 42-inch wide entrance.
- a 32-inch wide ramp
- costs about \$75,000.

buyers.

Its main feature — a 32-inch wide ramp that can be lowered either manually or electronically — is aided by the fact that the low-floor bus drops another four inches as the door opens, thanks to its air-ride suspension.

Bartel noted the bus door width is 42 inches compared to the standard 28 inches on models with steps.

Unlike most current buses which seat 19 people, everyone goes in the same door. Most buses equipped for people in wheelchairs require lifts, Bartel said, which are costly to repair.

"When we got down to the manufacturing, the thing we were strong on the chassis end of things but we did not have the experience in the body building end of it," Bartel said. "Coachmen, with the RV industry in a downward trend, had excess capacity and the means to build the body end of the components that we could not do on our own."

And so an agreement was reached. "We are excited to produce this unique, accessible bus for ARBOC Mobility," said Richard M. Lavers, chief executive with Coachmen, in a press release. "Our relationship with ARBOC will allow us to expand our business into new market segments where we can profitably leverage our core engineering and manufacturing capabilities."

No new employees are expected to be added to the work force of 1,300 at the

Middlebury complex, Jeffery Tryka, chief financial officer at the plant, said.

"It certainly is a first step in a new business," Tryka said. "And we are fairly excited about it. We will see how the business develops."

The bus makes it not only easier for people in wheelchairs but also parents with strollers and travelers with luggage to board.

"There are no steps anywhere in the passenger compartment," Bartel said. "Everybody enters through the same door. We do not discriminate with people who have mobility needs."

"There is accessibility for anybody with special needs wheel chairs or walkers."

Bartel is expecting first year sales of 200 buses.

"Because of it being a commercial product, it is not like a personal product," he said. "In the commercial end of the business, people want to be sure of it. We have orders for two with an option for 20, so you tend to have a much slower start."

"We expect much more acceleration in the volume next year, and that it will grow significantly."

Bartel is a former Ford Motor Co. engineer who was responsible for the design and release of the cutaway type chassis Ford has produced since 1975 with the body-on-frame construction.

But he always had an interest in helping the less fortunate, he said.

"I worked on various mobility items when I left Ford. And I always saw the need for providing better access for transporting people." The agreement has some definite potential for his company, Lavers indicated.

"With limited initial investment, we have been able to utilize vacant production facilities to transform them into revenue- and profit-enhancing assets," he said.

The agreement is long-term, added Bartel.

Bartel said the bus and its loading ability have been tested on about 100 people. But a surprise came along while testing.

"A woman with twins in a stroller walked by," Bartel said. And she rolled the twins up in the 39-inch wide entrance.

"You realize the freedom you have just given me," Bartel recalled her saying. "I used to have to hand them over to strangers on the bus whom I had never met. Now I can just roll them on."

Bartel sees great promise for the bus, partially because of an aging population.

"The para transit needs will double in the next 20 years," he said, growing to 35 million people.



Coachmen is producing a new small bus that is ADA compliant and features wide entry ramps rather than lifts, aiding not only people in wheelchairs, but travelers of many needs.

Staff writer Jim Meenan:
jmeenan@sbtinfo.com
(574) 235-6342

National City may choose to sell itself to KeyCorp

Struggling bank reported to be considering deal with competitor.

CLEVELAND (AP) — A day after National City Corp. said it was considering strategic options, a report said the struggling bank, hurt by the worsening mortgage and housing market, could sell itself to another Cleveland-based bank.

The Wall Street Journal, citing people familiar with the matter, reported Wednesday that National City is consid-

ering an outright sale to KeyCorp. Analysts said a KeyCorp buyout might lead to large cost reductions.

National City said Tuesday that New York investment bank Goldman Sachs has been hired to look into strategic alternatives. National City has not confirmed that it is seeking a buyer and did not elaborate on what alternatives are being considered.

National City spokeswoman Kristen Baird Adams on Wednesday declined to comment on the report. The bank said Tuesday that it will not talk publicly un-

til its board makes a decision about what National City will do.

KeyCorp spokeswoman Lynne Woodman also declined to comment.

Analysts say a sale is a possibility. Other options include selling part of its business, raising money or reducing or eliminating its dividend, analysts said.

National City is expected to announce its dividend Tuesday. It cut its dividend almost by half in January, and closed its wholesale mortgage division. It has slashed about 3,400 jobs in recent months.

The company's stock has plummeted

in the past year amid the problems, closing at \$9.99 Tuesday, 74 percent off its high of \$38.32 last April. Its shares fell 77 cents to close at \$9.22 Wednesday. Key shares rose 85 cents, or 3.6 percent, to \$24.34.

Lehman Brothers analyst Jason Goldberg said other potential buyers include Wells Fargo & Co., JPMorgan Chase & Co. and PNC Financial Services Group Inc. He noted that the company has sold a few divisions in recent years, including its National Processing unit.

Gerard Cassidy of RBC said an out-

right sale is unlikely because of National City's high exposure to risky loans. But a sale of some assets is likely, he wrote, and the company could try to find a way to get more money from a \$1 billion stake in Visa Inc., although it cannot sell those shares outright.

National City operates about 1,400 bank branches spread mostly across Ohio, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

National City and KeyCorp's KeyBank both have operations in Michiana.