

Local Environmental Advocate Explains Madison County Adopt-a-Highway Program, Money Toward Clean-Up Efforts, More

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ROXANA - Rusty Wheat is a [one-man “chain gang”](#), but because of him, more people are talking about ways to keep the roads clean.

Wheat’s environmental advocacy work has been a big push toward litter cleanup in the area. In the past year, Madison County introduced an Adopt-a-Highway program and allocated \$200,000 towards environmental clean-up efforts. Madison County and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) have also installed signs that warn of penalties for littering, and the Roxana Police Department has already issued two citations following the signs’ installation.

“I will do anything and everything I can,” Wheat said. “I get out there and pick up trash on the hottest days. When it’s snowing out there, I’ll be out there picking up trash so people can see me and say, ‘Man, that guy’s an idiot. What’s he doing?’ But it draws attention to the issue.”

[Madison County’s Adopt-a-Highway program](#) is similar to IDOT’s program of the same name. This initiative encourages organizations or individuals to “adopt” a stretch of county road and keep it clean by picking up litter every few weeks. For more information about how to get involved in the program, you can contact Madison County.

Wheat hopes to see more people adopt roads under the Madison County program, and he noted that it’s a great volunteer opportunity and a chance to get younger people involved in environmental activism.

“If you have an organization that would like to adopt a road or maybe your church would like to adopt a road or something, that’s the way to go,” Wheat said. “I encourage the high schools. Like I said, I know it’s not my place to do it, but I’m hoping that once the election’s all over I can sit down and talk to whoever’s going to be running the show and say, ‘Look, let’s really get organized and let’s put some emphasis on training the kids early or at least let them acknowledge what the problems are.’”

Wheat himself picks up trash along Highway 143, Wanda Road and Moreland Road in the Roxana/Wood River area. His “chain gang” signs grab attention from passersby. He picks up a lot of litter from both private citizens and companies like Mr. Bult’s, Inc. (MBI), a trucking company that transports trash to the landfill. Trash often spills out of the MBI trucks, which spurred Wheat to begin picking up litter in the first place.

Wheat has worked closely with the Madison County Board and Madison County Chairman Kurt Prenzler to push for more action on the county level. He has been pleased with the response so far, particularly a recent \$200,000 push for environmental clean-ups that was approved by the Madison County Board.

“I’m not for certain that would have happened unless I had written all the letters. And I’m not just taking all the credit, there are other people doing it, but I am rock solid on this. I am not going to let up,” Wheat said. “And for them to do that, I think it’s good. And people say, ‘Well, that was our taxpayers’ money. And that’s fine, but I would rather — I mean, at least we know what our taxpayers’ money is doing, at any rate.’”

Looking forward, Wheat hopes to see more changes at the city, county and state levels. He is pleased with the work that has been done so far, and he will continue to pick up trash as long as it’s necessary.

“I always tell my kid, there’s no reward for being normal,” he added. “If you think you’re going to get some type of reward in this life by going through being normal, you’re going to be mistaken. So you’ve got to figure out another way to get some things done. And do it peaceably, do it law-abiding, but do it any way you can.”