
'Berner Bus' expands to Rockford to fill dozens of jobs

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FREEPORT — The Berner Bus is adding a regular stop in Rockford.

Dakota-based Berner Food and Beverage is adding a Rockford location to its free employee transportation system. The hope is that it can help fill some of the 75 to 100 open jobs Berner has at any given time, said Jody Gowin, Berner's human resources director.

"As we grow, our job base comes from a wider radius," she said. "We also need to get more employees from the Rockford area simply because we're always hiring."

More than half of Berner's roughly 500 employees come from Freeport, while about 50 employees come from Rockford. Berner manufactures shelf stable dips, sauces, aerosol cheese, milk-based ready-to-drink coffee and other beverages.

The transportation system allows Berner employees to ride a bus to and from work every day from a designated pickup spot. Freeport's Berner Bus, which started in July 2016, has expanded from a 12-passenger bus to a 24-person bus.

Parking and riding the bus to work could save Rockford employees hundreds of dollars a month. One Freeport employee reported in September that he was saving about \$200 in gas each month by taking the bus for the 27-mile round trip instead of driving himself. Berner officials are renting a gated parking lot at 2602 17th Ave. in Rockford, which sits about 40 miles from the Dakota location.

"Because we do have employees from Rockford, we like to offer them equal benefit," Gowin said. "Many of the riders from Freeport do it simply because it saves them gas money and wear and tear on their car."

Transportation was one of the first topics that came up when Berner officials met with The Workforce Connection to come up with a strategy to fill more jobs, said Darcy Bucholz, executive director of the Workforce Investment Board. The Workforce Connection is a collection of about 14 federal- and state-funded programs in Stephenson, Winnebago and Boone counties. The organization helps job-seekers acquire skills and helps businesses search for employees, among other services.

“I do think it is probably one of the issues, especially with the number of employees they’re looking for,” Bucholz said. “It’s great that they’re providing this transportation because it can help us identify more that they can maybe take a look at. It at least gives us another tool in the toolbox.”

The company has grown by about 350 employees in the eight years Gowin has worked at Berner, she said. That’s due, in part, to a 195,000-square-foot-expansion the company started in January 2016.

Currently, Berner has about 90 hourly jobs available and 10 to 15 salaried positions. The company is always expanding, so employees have ample opportunities to work their way up, Gowin said.

“We expand, and that adds a need for more managers, directors and other positions,” Gowin said. “I started as a manager and I’m now a director.”

The first Rockford Berner Bus passengers will hit the road on Tuesday. CTS City Cab, owned by former Freeport grants coordinator Nick Jupin, provides the bussing for both locations.

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