

SNG-Nowlan-2013 in Illinois

2013 will bring more of the same

By Jim Nowlan

The New Year will see Illinois continue to struggle. Here are my predictions for the coming year. If any of them turn out right, you can say you saw it here first.

Politics. Candidates for office in 2014 must circulate and file petitions in the September-December 2013 period.

U.S. Senator Dick Durbin will not run for re-election, even though he would be a shoo-in for another term. He's tired, and exasperated with the grid-lock in D.C.

A raft of Democrats in our Blue State will evaluate whether to run for the Senate or against Gov. Pat Quinn in the primary.

Leading candidates will be Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan; Cook County Board president Toni Preckwinkle; Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart; state senate stars such as Don Harmon (D-Oak Park) and Heather Steans (D-Chicago) plus unnamed hedge fund millionaires seeking another rush of adrenalin.

Speaker of the Illinois House Mike Madigan will retire during the year, after 42 years in his chamber, to pave the way for his daughter to run for higher office.

On the Republican side, state Treasurer Dan Rutherford, state senators Kirk Dillard (R-DuPage County) and Bill Brady (R-Bloomington) and jillionaire venture capitalist Bruce Rauner of Chicagoland will run for their party's gubernatorial nomination.

Rising star congressman Aaron Schock (R-Peoria) will not run for governor, as earlier strongly hinted. The job is not that attractive, with the state deep in debt and Dems with huge majorities in the legislature.

One of the above may run for the U.S. Senate nomination, but that race is also unattractive for GOP candidates because the state is so strongly Democratic. Even suburban DuPage County, soul of the Illinois GOP, went for Obama in 2012.

State budget. Unpaid bills will top \$10 billion, and the state will decide to borrow \$4-5 billion to shorten bill payment delay to less than 500 days.

State services will continue to decline. Hours at state parks will shorten further. And funding for higher education will decline further, which means higher tuition charges for college students. This will make our public university tuition rates among the highest in the nation.

Nevertheless, candidates for state office will continue to pledge they can reduce the budget by cutting out waste and corruption (even though most of the budget goes for education, health care and mental health services).

Legislators will pass “pension reform lite,” that is, increases in health care premiums and co-pays for state employees and retirees and slight increases in pension payments by employees. This will not be enough to bend the future curve of unfunded liabilities much and ratings agencies will reduce our bond ratings to junk bond status.

State employees will not go on strike over a new contract. In the past decade they have had a 34 percent boost in their pay plus “step increases” for longevity. The public won’t stand for a strike.

Chicago. The City will continue to shine in the national media as a “happening place” yet the gleam will be blemished some by the same media for continuing high rates of murder in the ganglands of the African-American and Hispanic communities.

The gangs in the city are out of control, and the police apparently lack the savvy to infiltrate and compromise the gangs. A lack of education, jobs and parenting among the youth in the ghettos compound the problem.

Downstate. Rural areas will continue to lose population because of lack of jobs as well as increased farm efficiencies. Many downstate cities will continue to see population decline as well, as whites flee urban schools for the rapidly growing suburbs.

Education. New, more intensive evaluations will stress teachers and principals, but most will come through with flying colors. As a teacher friend of mine says, “Everyone in the school knows who the few bad teachers are.” Maybe they will be counseled out of teaching by the new evaluations.

As noted above, college tuitions will go up more than inflation, making the traditional four-year college experience out of range for many families. This will continue the trend of increased enrollment at community colleges, where tuition charges of about \$3,000 per year plus living at home make the costs bearable.

Look for more four-year colleges to offer a third year on the campus of the big community colleges, so that students would only have to attend college away from home for only a year. On-line education will also expand.

On the farm. Illinois will have another dry year, but new drought-resistant hybrids will bring the crops through with decent yields and very high prices. Even if the crops fail, farmers

will cash in their revenue risk-free crop insurance, which we non-farm taxpayers will subsidize heavily.

Illinois is in an economic and psychological malaise. It will take a number of years of highly visible, positive yet unvarnished leadership to pull us out of the doldrums.