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No reason anymore for most rural towns

(Alternate title: Midwest needs to get its act together)

By Jim Nowlan

Many rural Midwest towns have become like my stereotype of Appalachia— main streets of mostly empty storefronts; lots of unskilled folks left behind, yearning for jobs “on the line” that are gone forever; too many single mothers struggling to make it on low-wage work, or welfare, lacking the time or know-how to nurture high educational expectations in their children.

Small town decline began at least a century ago, when farm families exchanged horse and wagon for the Model T. They could thus bypass the nearby village and its tiny general store, and head for farm-market towns of 1,000-3,000 or so folks, with their greater offerings.

Old duffers like me remember growing up in these towns post-WWII, when parking was hard to find on Saturday evenings. Farm wives bustled in and out of the long row of main street shops, buying, and maybe even bartering fresh eggs for some credit. The municipal band tootled in the park. A great time and place to grow up.

My town, and hundreds like it, have now themselves been bypassed for small cities like Princeton, Illinois, with 7,000 or more folks. These places tend to have a hospital, a good grocery, a couple of big box stores, and maybe better schools than the rural towns.

Some small towns, maybe mine, will make it, as hopeless romantics like me work to fashion a new kind of multi-service café-market to replace the shuttered grocery. But most will fade away, as the villages did earlier.

I also worry about the mid-size cities like Peoria and Decatur. They have lost their robust manufacturing cachet, and struggle to find, like my small town, a *raison d'être*. Peoria's leadership has been decimated, as CAT's C-Suite has departed for Chicagoland, and the city's once-prominent department stores and banks have all been shuttered or gobbled up by out-of-towners.

Population is rapidly being sucked toward global city regions, on the West Coast and that from D.C. to Boston. Those regions have reasons for being, whether technology in the West or finance/business/research/government in the East.

Even metropolitan Chicago, with its 10 million people across three states, will struggle to be counted among the truly global urban regions, competing with the Shanghais, and others with their energetic populations of 25-30 million.

As with Peoria and Decatur, the Windy City is no longer the robust producer of goods it used to be. And it doesn't yet really compete with the coasts on either technology or the venture capital that spawns more enterprise.

Are there still synergies to be exploited between agriculture and Chicago, as there were in the 19th and 20th centuries? Such might give Chicagoland and the Midwest a place at the table of global biggies.

Since I write mostly about state issues, what role is there for the State of Illinois in all this? Not much, probably. Yes, the state can help leverage Illinois' fabulous strengths of location and transportation infrastructure; our highway network, rail, water and air transportation are possibly unmatched. And we can create a more positive, stable business climate

Maybe equally important in the long run, the state could lead us in some long-term thinking. Sure, you say, another report for the bottom shelf. But not always. A century ago, Daniel Burnham and the Commercial Club of Chicago created the Chicago Plan. Yes, only half was implemented, but what a half—the City’s fabulous, open-to-the-public lakefront, great parks, wide boulevards.

Amazing to report, Illinois has never—never—done any looking ahead. Our state “planning” is basically the sum of the mish-mash of 6,000 bills introduced each biennium in the legislature. Sad.

Gov. Pritzker sees himself as a Big Ideas guy. So, Governor, pull together the brightest minds and the deepest pockets from across the Midwest—this is a regional, not a state-limited matter—to look ahead, clarify our reason for being, focus resources. A decade ago, the veteran international reporter Richard Longworth called for as much in “Caught in the Middle.” Time’s a wastin’.

Our great Heartland has been falling behind the coasts and much of the world. Do we know where we are going, how we can leverage our strengths? Are there synergies to be developed between our mid-size cities and Chicago, to the benefit of all? At the least, we need to think about it. We may not save my rural town, but we might perk up the Midwest.

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