

SNG-Illinois and budget, again-2-22-16

Illinois adrift, spiraling downward

By Jim Nowlan

Here I go again.

I do so to exhort readers to contact your legislators to demand that action be taken to begin to right the ship of state.

Once-proud Illinois is badly wounded. The state is more distressed than at any time since the Great Depression, when teachers were paid in scrip, as they may again be in Chicago in the near future.

Much of the blame lies at the feet of two proud, bull-headed men in Gov. Bruce Rauner and Speaker of the House Mike Madigan. Like Neros fiddling while Illinois crashes, they are too obdurate to be the first to pick up the phone and say simply, "Let's sit down and address the big problems we face in Illinois and Chicago." That would show weakness, they think.

The saddest part of this is that only the "little people" are suffering. Those in need of mental health services; seniors who need help with household chores, and college students who have been denied tuition grants awarded a year ago.

Lutheran Social Services, a major deliverer of social services (most such state services are delivered not by the state but by groups such as LSS) has laid off 750 employees because of non-payment by the state for services provided.

All the while the state is paying 12 percent penalties to vendors for its late payments. What a way to run a railroad.

I should correct myself. Not only little people are hurt but also any of us affected by the long-term economic development of the state.

I return to an illustration I have used before, because I know a bit about it and because it is so pertinent to our state's long-term economic growth.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign college of engineering and computer sciences has long been one of the nation's biggest producers of engineers and among the best in the world, always ranked among the top three to five in the U.S., first in some sub-disciplines.

The college has begun collaborating with the towering University of Chicago, which lacks an engineering program, and has been setting up shop elsewhere in Chicago, which has belatedly been developing as a technology hub. The city covets the engineers Urbana produces and the research it leads.

Yet this year the state has abandoned the Urbana campus and all the public universities, most of which are located downstate. I doubt that private school-educated, Chicago-based Rauner (Dartmouth and Harvard business) and Madigan (Notre Dame and Loyola law) have much feel for our public universities and their contributions, such as the worldwide web browser, largely created at the U. of I. in Urbana-Champaign.

Indeed, as state support for higher ed has dwindled, tuitions have jumped, too much, prompting enrollment-needy neighboring public flagships in Indiana, Iowa and Wisconsin to cherry-pick Illinois students.

In 1978, the slice of the state budget going to higher education was 10 percent; last year it 3.3 percent (this does not include pension payments for higher ed, then or now, which are hefty).

Meanwhile, just returned from a sojourn in Austin, TX, I report that UT's main campus looks like a construction zone, with massive laboratories going up right behind the Bill and Melinda Gates Computer Science Center and the Michael Dell Center and elsewhere.

UT should change its mascot from the longhorn to the sky crane.

When it comes to supporting tech development, Texas gets it; Illinois doesn't.

Of course, Texas has a \$27 billion endowment (mostly oil money) while the University of Illinois has but \$2 billion and change. Illinois was, unfortunately, decades late to the serious fund-raising game, thinking state support would carry it along.

We just cannot abandon gems such as those in Urbana-Champaign, and others elsewhere at our public universities.

Oh, but this is just a one-year blip, some might say. But if you were a rising-star technology research professor, looking around to settle in, which state would appear more promising to you? One that has its act together, or one that doesn't?

And I'm afraid we have three more years of fruitless acrimony ahead of us. Disheartening, to say the least.