

Will Illinois let a good bicentennial go to waste?

By Jim Nowlan

To paraphrase Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, we should not let a good bicentennial go to waste. But we may.

The Prairie State celebrates its 200th birthday in 2018, which is like the day before yesterday in planning terms, according to Perry Hammock, executive director of the Indiana Bicentennial Commission. The Hoosier State celebrates its milestone in 2016 and state leaders have been hard at work on it since 2011.

Almost two years ago, former Illinois governor Pat Quinn appointed a bicentennial commission that includes former governor Jim Thompson and other distinguished Illinoisans. But the group has never met, and with the ongoing budget stalemate and abundant political conflict affecting the state, any commission action and funding for its work are uncertain at best.

We have to get cracking on this, and it looks like it will require private efforts to get matters off the ground.

The Indiana commission has been meeting regularly for four years. The state has committed \$28 million for bicentennial projects, and a staff of four plus many college-graduate interns has stimulated upwards of 800 “legacy projects” across just about every city and hamlet in that state.

Every Indiana county has a volunteer coordinator. The commission’s website receives more than one million impressions a month and, says Hammock, “We’ve got the buzz going across the state.”

Illinois has much to celebrate and shout out to the world—from the leadership of political figures since Lincoln and Douglas to Reagan, to the inventiveness and entrepreneurship of John Deere, the hog butchers, and retailers like Marshall Field and Julius Rosenwald, to the scores of Nobelists at the universities of Chicago and Illinois, and to Chicago’s iconic architectural leadership.

As the most typically American of states in terms of people diversity, rural-suburban-urban mix, economic breadth, and location, Illinois has important stories to tell.

We should also use the opportunity to look to the future,

something our state's leaders have not done in decades.

The bold Burnham Plan of Chicago of the early 1900s gave the city its accessible lakefront, grand boulevards and magnificent parks. We should use the plan as a template for taking advantage of our state's unrivalled transportation infrastructure, copious water, and location in the center of the world's largest economy to craft a future to match our past contributions.

We should enlist the state's great eleemosynary (I love that word) foundations and civic, corporate and union funders for start-up resources.

The state's many historical societies as well as policy centers—such as David Axelrod's unit at the University of Chicago, the Paul Simon Institute at Southern Illinois University and those at our other public universities—can join the effort.

Groups that grew up with the state must pitch in as well, to include the Union League Club of Chicago and the city's Commercial Club as well as the state's 400 newspapers, many of which go back almost to our founding.

Leading thinkers and historians have to be involved, of course. Among the group would be Dick Longworth at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, eminent Lincoln scholars Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis at historic Knox College, Chicago civic activist Paula Wolff, and Barbara Mantz-Drake, the retired, still feisty editorial page editor at the *Peoria Journal-Star*.

Readers might start their own lists of who must be a part of this project. Indeed, all of us can be.

Illinois has been going through a rough patch in recent years. We all have stories of being asked, when traveling, where we hail from. The guffaws we get when we, often rather sheepishly, note our Illinois ties have to be, and can be, countered. The bicentennial is a perfect hook for doing so.

If we aren't ready, very shortly, to proclaim our state's place in the firmament, you can bet the media will do so, from the perspectives they have available when they write.

Will we be written up as basket case, or cornucopia?