

Cancel Friday night football to force budget action

By Jim Nowlan

The only way to force action on a comprehensive state budget for this year and next is for schools statewide to announce cancellation of Friday night football for this fall unless a budget—and not just for education—is inked this spring, so that educators and others can plan for the coming year.

The prospect of no high school football this fall would indeed generate riots in the streets across the Prairie State, to paraphrase a presidential candidate.

I am serious. Nothing else has worked. The state is going down the tubes, in case the governor and House speaker haven't noticed.

I am prompted to this brilliant idea, which is, alas, not mine, by two events:

First, a press conference I attended this past week in Henry County (western Illinois) where area school superintendents said they couldn't keep their doors open throughout the whole school year unless a budget is enacted in timely fashion and,

Second, the idea for cancelling football season, voiced by fellow Toulon Lions Club member Tom Boudreau as we spread Easter eggs out on the local football field recently (which the little tykes vacuumed up in about three nanoseconds).

At the press conference, Geneseo school superintendent Scott Kuffel declared: "With only a few months of reserves on hand, any delay in state and federal funding (the latter comes to local schools through state appropriations) creates nearly impossible conditions to keep our doors open for an entire school year."

Kuffel said that waiting until the May 31 end of the regular legislative session would put schools in the position of making financial decisions months before they know what resources the schools will have later.

Unfortunately, many savvy political observers now think a May 31 budget is pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking. They predict the state may not have a budget until after the November elections, that is, 18 months without a budget! This disgraces all elected officials, of course, and seems almost criminal.

If there is anything more important to many Illinois families than education, it is Friday night football, a hallowed ritual each fall that rivals ancient Roman sanctification of the Vestal Virgins, keepers of the eternal flame.

Football programs at most high schools lose money and require support from the school budget. If there is no state budget in place, how can school officials and board members justify continued funding for this non-education activity?

And school officials should not hold out solely for an education budget, which they alone have had this past year, while higher education and many people service programs have gone without a sou.

After all, many of this year's high school graduates will need MAP grants (monetary award program scholarships for needy students), which have been unfunded, in order to continue their education.

In addition, a lack of social services affects families and their school-age students. The lack of a state budget is also driving up the costs of long-term borrowing by schools.

This is the time for the Illinois Association of School Boards and their superintendents as well as the Illinois High School Association, which runs sports programs statewide, to show some backbone if they really feel strongly about the need for a state budget.

Acting in concert across the state, educators and school board members could play a signal role in pulling Illinois politicians out of the embarrassing, damaging morass they have created.

Rah, rah, rah, sis boom bah! Let's hear it for some courage that will force the pols to take action on a budget.