

SNG-Make no little plans-8-6-18

Make no little plans—Daniel Burnham

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois could sure use a couple of big thinkers and doers like Daniel Burnham and William Stratton. Based on what I see of political TV ads, we may have to wait another four years. But we can dream, can't we?

Architect and city planner, Burnham was the driving force behind the creation of the fabulous “white city” that was the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, which put Chicago prominently on the world map.

Overcoming earlier false starts by others, a national economic panic, and almost impossibly tight deadlines, Burnham triumphed. The fair drew 27 million people to Chicago (the Illinois State Fair each year draws maybe half a million).

In 1906, Burnham went on to develop his namesake plan for Chicago—the glistening public lakefront, extensive park system and wide boulevards that symbolize the city today. He became famous for the line: “Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood.”

In 1952 at age 39, Republican William G. Stratton was elected governor of Illinois. Over two terms, the slight-of-build state chief executive with the squeaky voice transformed the Prairie State.

At great political cost to his career, in 1955 Stratton reapportioned the state for the first time since 1901 (ahead of the one man-one vote U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1962). He gave more House seats to the under-represented suburbs at the expense of Downstate.

Stratton created tollways, cleared the way for Chicago expressways, sold bonds to build universities and mental health facilities, and initiated judicial reform. He even spoke out against segregation and for civil rights, long before those positions took hold nationally.

All this cost him politically, as he knew it would, and he lost his bid for a third term. It was more important to Bill Stratton to think and do big things.

We don't think big today in Illinois. Indeed, we seem to avoid big problems, to wit:

- Public higher education is a shambles. Several century-old public campuses appear to be dying.
- The state hasn't since 2010 had a major investment plan for our rich but crumbling transportation infrastructure.
- Illinois can't take care of its children, and when we try to send them to other states for care, the kids are rejected because of worry of when our state might pay their state.
- Our state revenue system is antiquated, too reliant on property taxes and characterized by narrow-base state sales and income taxes.
- The gargantuan public employee pension funding shortfall at the state and local levels, decades in the making, is overwhelming the state fisc and badly needs fresh thinking.

Illinois has never done any systematic, comprehensive long-term, big picture thinking. [(On specific issues such as transportation and higher education, there has been effective "master planning" in decades past.)]

[Even if we were to do so, there is no guarantee of total success. The grand Burnham Plan, for example, was only partially implemented.]

The problem with big thinking and big plans is that they generally require big money. And we know Illinois doesn't have two nickels to rub together.

Second, big plans are accompanied by big political costs to the elected officials who try to bring them off.

Third, Illinois is one of the most diverse states in the nation, different from, say, nearly all white Minnesota. So, it is maybe harder to reconcile varied ethnic, racial and upstate-downstate values and objectives in Illinois than elsewhere.

The present gubernatorial candidates appear to be preoccupied with toilet bowls and the spreading of one-third truths about the other. Not big picture stuff, to say the least.

What to do? This one is tough.

I think the last, best hope may lie in the Edgar Fellows Program, which I have written about in this space. For seven years, former governor Jim Edgar has annually been gathering a new crop of 40 youngish political, civic and business leaders from across the state for an intensive week of seminars and policy discussions at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

The Fellows learn that those of different geographic and political backgrounds have similar aspirations for our state. They hear from national leaders like former US senator Dick Lugar and state experts about how to approach big problems. And they stay in contact after the week-long retreat is over.

I have recently mentioned positively state senators Andy Manar (D) and Jason Barickman (R).

They are both Edgar alums. They and other Edgar Fellows should—and will—run for top

offices. Maybe whole classes of Edgar Fellows will collaborate to offer big thinking and big leadership on major problems.

We should all be admonished to make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood.