

Let's hear it for Chicagoland

By Jim Nowlan

If I have heard it once, I have heard it a hundred times from my Downstate friends—"We should make Chicago a separate state!" Wrong-o. Instead, we should embrace the great Chicago region and collaborate with all the talent and energy that is drawn there.

First, we need to assay the demographic situation in Illinois. The state continues to hemorrhage people. In its recent migration study, United Van Lines found that the huge national company made 62 percent of its Illinois household moves out of the state and only 38 percent were into the state from elsewhere. Only New Jersey had a worse ratio of outbound to inbound moves.

Illinois would not have increased a bit in population this past decade if not for the high birth rates of its Hispanic population. We lost white population. The metropolitan Chicago region grew and rural Illinois declined in population.

Second, in economic terms, metropolitan Chicago area contributes more to the state in revenues than it receives back; Downstate is a significant net beneficiary in school funding, highway dollars and social services. This was found to be so in a 1989 study done by the state legislature, which has not been updated for political reasons.

Nevertheless, it can be worrisome to see Downstate resources sucked into the central city. For example, for all practical purposes the state capital long ago moved from Springfield to Chicago. Governors and state agency directors and legislative leaders operate from downtown

Chicago except when the legislature is in session. Then Springfield is seen simply as a distant, bothersome trip by most participants.

Recently, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign announced that it was, with help from Chicago financiers, creating a major research center in downtown Chicago, which would be staffed by its world-class engineering and computer science professors. The Urbana-Champaign campus, set in the cornfields of east-central Illinois, was viewed as too removed from the action for research collaborators who will be drawn from around the world.

I am on a state commission, which meets monthly. We hold 11 of our meetings in Chicago, and just one each year in Springfield. The same is true for many other statewide groups.

All roads seem to lead to and from Chicago, like arteries from a pulsing heart. We have interstates and trains that connect us. The Quad-Cities is looking forward to passenger train service directly from Moline, as is Rockford.

And big cities matter. The Chicago region actually stretches from Milwaukee (don't tell them this) around to northwest Indiana, and encompasses 12 million people. This makes the region a player globally; its gross economic product as a metropolitan area ranks sixth in the world and third in the U.S.

We operate in the penumbra (I like that word) or shadow of the metro-region. Or do we?

Historian William Cronon wrote a marvelous book about the 19th Century Midwest called "Nature's Metropolis." Cronon showed how the interaction between the hardy, productive farmers, as well as lumbermen up north, fed product to the factories, traders and merchants in Chicago, to the benefit of all.

We still do interact, if in different ways. Janet Mathis, executive director of Renew Moline, says her community has great synergies with Chicago. “They are the economic engine for the region. We like to think of ourselves as a far western suburb of Chicago.”

Mike Van Mill heads the Economic Alliance of Kankakee County. “We use Chicago to our advantage. A lot of our businesses are here because they market to the Chicago region. And we are developing a partnership with Chicago’s Field Museum on ecotourism.”

A writer named Richard Longworth, a small-town Iowa boy originally now in Chicago, who wrote in “Caught in the Middle” that we have been thinking too small, fighting among ourselves for economic development scraps.

Longworth proposes that Illinois become the leader in creating a multi-state Global Midwest Forum, in which the great region would think and plan collaboratively as to how to take its natural and intellectual resources to the world.

There is a precedent for this in the Southern Growth Policy Board, headquartered at the “research triangle” in North Carolina, where southern governors put resources together to study and promote the region’s strengths.

Such a Global Midwest Forum could put our cities within, rather than in the penumbra of, major economic development thinking. We have lots to offer, and we must be included.