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Corruption bad for business

Jim Nowlan

Illinois is the third most corrupt state in the nation, and Chicagoland is the worst corruption offender among all federal district courts in the nation, based on an analysis of federal convictions for public corruption over a 35-year period. And corruption is bad for business in Illinois, as we will see.

Only the District of Columbia and Louisiana have recorded more corruption convictions than Illinois, when adjusted for population differences.

Fellow political Dick Simpson at the University of Illinois in Chicago and I found that 1,800 persons in Illinois have been found guilty of public corruption over the three-plus decades of U.S. Department of Justice data studied.

And a recent poll I had taken of 1,000 respondents across the country found that Americans confirm the data. One-third of those surveyed identified Illinois as one of the most corrupt states in the nation, following only New York and California. Other Midwestern neighbor states were rarely mentioned as among the most corrupt, which means that Illinois sticks out like a sore thumb in the heartland region.

And that represents only the illegal corruption. Illinois officials have become masters of milking our governments and taxpayers through legal corruption. I am still sickened by the recent investigation of the Chicago Tribune that found Chicago alderman Edward Burke doubled the annual pension, to \$120,000, of his buddy former state representative Bob Molaro. Burke had Molaro work for just one-month at \$12,000, which

high annual salary rate qualified him for the doubling of his legislative pension. What did Molaro do to “earn” the \$12,000—he write a paper on how bad off our public pension systems are. Talk about laughing at us poor suckers who will pay up to \$3 million in extra pension benefits for Molaro!

For too many public officials in Illinois “doing well” in office comes before “doing good” for the public.

Revelations like this are also bad for business in Illinois. In the national poll I took, 60 percent of the respondents said knowing about corruption in a state would have a negative or strongly negative effect on their decisions to locate in such a state.

Possibly even more important, in a survey I took of 70 economic development professionals in Illinois (the people who work to attract business to a community), three out of four surveyed said corruption in Illinois had a negative impact on their job recruiting.

Fortunately, in yet another poll I have taken, this time of Illinois 1,200 residents, three out of four respondents disagreed (most of these strongly disagreed) with the statement that “nothing can be done about corruption in or state.”

So what can those who feel something can be done in fact do about corruption?

Former governor Jim Edgar and I are leading an Illinois Integrity Initiative, which is exploring ways to dampen corruption in Illinois. Referring again to the recent poll of Illinois residents, three of four felt that reducing the role of money in elections would reduce corruption. Unfortunately, recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions make that difficult to do.

Almost as many respondents felt that more public education on ethics could reduce corruption over time. And many thought that keeping the issue frequently before the public and elected officials would be beneficial.

Positive change can be accomplished. According to my colleague Simpson, major cities such as Hong Kong and Sydney, Australia have gone from corrupt to clean.

Citizens can, indeed must, participate in the process of cleaning up the state. For example, when you go to a candidate meeting, make sure the question of “What would you do about corruption in Illinois?” is asked of the candidates. Raise their consciousness about behaving with integrity.

After all, as I have said before, rare is the person who enters politics planning to be corrupt. Yet at least 1,800 have been found guilty of public corruption over the years, which besmirches our state.