

## Downstate fading away

By Jim Nowlan

Like a lumbering ship about to slip beneath the far horizon, downstate Illinois is fading from the view of our state's urban residents and certainly from the sight of the larger world.

Does it matter? Yes, as out of sight is out of mind. Can we do anything to create and burnish a "brand" for downstate Illinois? It is possible.

"Downstate" is the deep swath of land outside metro-Chicago. The northern-most latitude of our state is equivalent to that of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, while Cairo in the south is on a line with Portsmouth, Virginia.

When A. Lincoln came to the presidency, his Springfield loomed large nationally as our state capital, and as a symbol of the city that nurtured Lincoln to greatness. Even in my childhood in the 1950s, downstate dominated state politics. That was before one-man one-vote districting and municipal home rule. This meant Chicago officials had to come hat in hand to beseech downstate support for legal change in how the city was run.

All that has changed. Downstate now has less than one-third of the state's population. Fewer Chicagoans and suburbanites have their parental roots downstate. When metro-Chicagoans vacation, it's most often to Wisconsin and Michigan, rather than downstate. The state lacks a rallying cry. There is no "the eyes of Illinois are upon us."

Springfield is really no longer the capital of the state. Governors and other statewide officials, agency directors and top staffers work primarily from the Thompson Center in Chicago. The media and the big money to run expensive campaigns are centered in Chicago. The Windy City is home to all the statewide elected officials and the two top leaders of the state legislature.

Chicago's population has slipped from half the state number to only one-fifth, yet it rules the roost politically. Any significant change for downstate must first be approved by Chicagoans.

Chicago has always had a brand known around much of the world. For decades the city has been trying to live down the gangster image of television re-runs. But it is known, and now more and more for its world-beating symphony and its cultural venues.

Illinois, which is a kind of default term for downstate, is not known the world around (although that may change with what will become the interminable trial of Rod Blagojevich, just underway).

A couple of efforts are trying to buck the tide. The highly effective "adopt a legislator" program of the Illinois Farm Bureau brings Chicago-area lawmakers into homes and onto farms throughout the state.

And downstate lawmakers have banded together into caucuses (closed meetings). For example, the House Democratic downstate caucus of 22 members (out of 70 Democrat members) meets weekly and also often for a mid-week dinner. According to Rep. Frank Mautino (D-Spring Valley), the former chair of the caucus and now assistant House majority leader, the four caucuses (one for each house and each party) have been successful in recent years in forcing utility company Ameren to provide \$1 billion in rate

relief to downstaters. The caucuses have also successfully, thus far, protected downstate's 55-45 percent majority split of highway funds over the metro-Chicago highway district.

Yet these and other caucus success stories are primarily defensive in nature and are not aimed at building a vision or brand for the region.

Downstate does have some important region-wide strengths. The state is rich in agriculture, underground water and coal, if ever it can be cleaned satisfactorily, and our network of Interstate highways is arguably better than that of any state.

Agriculture is doing fine and may become even more important if crops complementary to corn and beans can be developed into alcohol fuel.

Still, downstate is defensive politically and little known to the world, which is basically the opposite of much smaller Chicago.

What can be done to enlarge and enhance downstate's image? "Downstate" will never become a world-wide "brand." "Illinois" could; this is what people say when they are thinking of "outside Chicagoland."

Ideally, the downstate political caucuses could join across parties and chambers, to develop a positive agenda for downstate Illinois. This would be based, I think, upon agricultural research, infrastructure enhancement, an improved business climate, and relentless, long-term efforts to promote the name Illinois.

Newspaper editors from downstate could meet at their annual press confabs to shape and promote a common program and vision for the region.

Otherwise, we will fade from view, beyond the horizon.

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