

8/21-15

Nobody's thinking about downstate Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

I attended a conference not long ago at the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank on economic competitiveness in the Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana region — yet downstate Illinois was never mentioned.

The focus was on that great, three-state metropolitan region of about 12 million people, centered in Chicago. In addition, four major economic development plans have been done solely for that region in just the past few years.

Unfortunately, nobody is thinking about the rest of Illinois. How can we change that?

The late, brilliant urban thinker Jane Jacobs said the unit for economic analysis should not be nations, and certainly not states, with their arbitrary, unnatural borders, but instead should be great city regions.

And that is how we think. Readers know of Shanghai and Beijing, yet how many of us can name even one state in China, which are often bigger than our whole Midwest.

The eminent historian William Cronon at the University of Wisconsin took a different view of city and hinterland in "Nature's Metropolis." He emphasized the vital interdependence of Chicago and the vast prairie beyond in building wealth during the late 1800s and early 20th Century.

The cornices of the old red brick buildings in my once-vibrant village of Toulon are dated from the 1890s and early 1900s. That is when hogs, cattle and corn flowed into the city, which processed them into food for the nation, benefiting everyone.

Since then, much of downstate Illinois (that 400 mile swath from north to south outside the Chicago region) has been declining.

A research unit at Western Illinois University noted that rural Illinois (not including our mid-size cities) lost an astounding 12 percent of its age 0 to 44 population in just the 2000-2010 decade. This loss was much greater than that seen in rural areas in neighboring states.

In part, the loss stems from lack of jobs in the hinterland, and the lure of the city, where dense populations, according to Jacobs, bring together creative people who interact and generate economic activity.

Recently, agricultural giant ADM moved its headquarters out of Decatur to Chicago. And the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is creating a research unit for downtown Chicago to be staffed by its distinguished science and engineering faculty from downstate.

No doubt about it, the city is a magnet.

Yet it adds insult to injury that no one is doing any long-term thinking about downstate Illinois.

Pockets downstate are doing well. Rochelle is having a major boom in manufacturing. Effingham and Mount Vernon in southern Illinois are prospering.

Fracking for oil and gas may bring a boomlet or even an economic boom to southeastern Illinois, yet we aren't thinking about how that could benefit the larger region once the gas plays out.

And water—we have copious amounts of the stuff. Are we building our thinking the role water might play in helping rebuild downstate Illinois.

We have strengths downstate, such as location in the middle of the country combined with a rich set of interstate highway arteries. It is not coincidental that the towns doing well that I mentioned just above are all at intersections of Interstates.

What to do? The really rural parts of the state should plan for the reality of further decline. This might mean cooperative high schools that join underlying, small school districts into decent-sized high schools in sparsely populated areas.

And further development of distance telemedicine for rural health clinics. And top-drawer, highly responsive emergency service units to get patients to regional hospitals rapidly.

Could branding of downstate Illinois through an intensive, multi-year marketing program increase the visibility of the region and its cities?

Years ago there was an advertising program called, "Just outside Chicago there's a place called Illinois," which I liked, but it was dropped. I have come up with, "Illinois — heart of the heartland," which we are.

And I have always wondered why downstate doesn't process more of our raw food into products for the table. Illinois produces much of the nation's basic food, yet most of what we eat is processed elsewhere.

I don't have the answers, yet I think we should apply our best thinking to downstate. After all, we are one-third of the population.

State senator Andy Manar, D-Bunker Hill, spurred legislation in 2013 that re-institutes statewide economic planning for Illinois.

I recommend that such efforts be focused primarily on downstate (and maybe the synergies between the region and Chicagoland). After all, metro Chicago is already up to its eyeballs in such planning — yet nobody has been thinking about the rest of Illinois.

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