

SNG-Nowlan-Few Profiles in Courage-1-16-12 (750 words)

Few profiles in courage in politics this year

By Jim Nowlan

The News Bureau at the University of Illinois, where I work, asked me several questions recently. I thought I would share my responses, thus getting a two-for-one out of the assignment.

**What do you foresee happening with Illinois politics this year? More gridlock and partisan bickering because of election year politics, or a concerted effort to tackle the state's many problems?**

Election years are dominated by candidate fear of 30-second commercials that often distort or magnify an official's vote on a controversial issue, so expect the state legislative leaders to keep such votes to a minimum.

Actually, the Democrats and Republicans in the House have begun cooperating on a number of issues, including the budget, which will be the overriding challenge of the spring session.

As now required, Gov. Pat Quinn has released a three-year budget projection, which is an exercise in creative writing. The projection shows, for example, that health care spending will be flat (no change) over the three years, which is not at all practicable.

And even after a 67 percent increase in the state income tax this past year, the optimistic budget projection foresees deficits this year as well as in the future. The deficits are driven primarily by sharp increases in the spending for pensions, required by present state law to begin to shore up the underfunded state pension systems.

**What does the future hold for the state's five pension systems? Is there a compromise solution out there that will pass constitutional muster and avoid a lengthy court battle?**

Pension benefits for new state employees were reduced a year ago. Business groups feel that pension benefits must also be reduced for current employees, and maybe in the health care benefits for employees and retirees as well. I also believe, unfair as it is to present employees, that further changes are required; otherwise, the costs of pensions will crowd out spending for education and human services.

But don't expect the legislature to move on any further changes until after the November elections, as too many voters would be affected.

Then there is the state constitutional issue. The state charter declares that "Membership in any pension or retirement system of the State (and its local governments) shall be an enforceable contractual relationship, the benefits of which shall not be diminished or impaired."

Does this apply to future benefits or just those already earned. There is disagreement on this. I believe the legislature will ultimately enact a law that does affect future benefits of current employees, which will then be challenged and resolved by the state Supreme Court.

**Will redistricting help or hurt Democrats in their efforts to retake the US House of Representatives in 2012?**

Democrats drew the Illinois congressional districts in 2011. As a result, that party may regain two or three of the five seats Republicans captured from the Dems in 2010.

Democrats took away one GOP seat when they forced Republican representatives Don Manzullo and Adam Kinzinger to duke it out for a single seat in central Illinois.

Dems are also pinning their hopes on unseating one-term GOP representative Bobby Schilling, of Colona in the Quad-Cities area, with Cheri Bustos of nearby Moline, who first has to win a primary contest.

This will not, however, be much help to Democrats in whittling down the 242-192 margin the Republicans hold in Congress, which would require a shift of 26 seats to regain control.

State legislatures did the redistricting last year, and 28 of the bodies are controlled by Republicans versus only 15 by Democrats, with the rest split between the parties, so there was a GOP bias in the process nationally. I think 26 seats represent a mountain to high to surmount for Democrats.

**Do you expect lawmakers to pursue gambling expansion in the spring session?**

This past year, Gov. Pat Quinn vetoed a bill that would have added five more casinos plus slot machines at tracks, calling it top heavy. Legislators were unable to override the veto.

Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel is determined to get a casino for Chicago, which he thinks would generate \$300 million or so each year for the cash-strapped city.

After World War II, Chicago alone represented 50 percent of the state's population. That share has shrunk to just 20 percent, so city legislators alone cannot come close to enacting a casino for Chicago. Emanuel is persuasive, but I don't think he can find enough support from suburbanites and downstaters to achieve his goal this spring.

In other words, don't expect many lawmakers to write profiles in courage during this spring session of the legislature.