

“I’m heading for Florida”

By Jim Nowlan

“I’m heading for Florida soon as I graduate,” declared the bright looking college senior, adding, “the taxes are too high here and there aren’t any jobs in Illinois.” Other students near him nodded silently.

The comment came in a recent class on state government at Illinois State University where I lectured.

The next day I was standing in line at a funeral visitation, and the farmer next to me was telling another about his vacation in Florida. “When people saw my Illinois plates,” he recounted, “they laughed and joked about the problems we have back home.”

When I was a boy growing up in small-town Illinois in the 1950s, life was good, and getting better. Crops on the farms outside town were growing in size each year. I saw trucks go through town loaded with hogs or cattle, headed for the sprawling Chicago Union Stock Yards, then to be shaped into bacon and steaks by the great meat-packers in the city.

Chicago was far distant, yet I knew the city was big enough to host my favorite baseball and football teams. And I had seen pictures of the city’s factories, belching smoke, steel and the appliances that my parents were becoming prosperous enough to buy.

My state was Illinois, and I was proud to be from it.

What has changed? Can we return to the good ol’ days?

Whites have been leaving our state for warmer climes for decades. Population growth in our state has been anemic, any growth coming from increases in Hispanic, primarily Mexican, population.

In the past decade, Illinois spent about \$5 billion more a year on average than we took in from revenues, on a \$60 billion budget. And we underfunded our public employee pension system by about \$2 billion a year on average for the past decade.

So taxes went up in 2011, and the typical household now pays about \$1,000 more a year in state taxes, which for the first time puts us above the national average for state and local taxes as a percentage of gross state product.

And according to one national public opinion survey, Illinois is the second most disliked state in the nation, after California.

That is, significantly more people across the country have negative thoughts about Illinois than favorable ones, whereas most states in the survey received more favorable than negative thoughts from those surveyed.

Yet Illinois still has the strengths that made us great. Most states would be envious to have what Illinois has. We have prime location in the center of the country, and most markets are but a day away on our unparalleled infrastructure of interstates, rail, air and water. Most parts of Illinois have plenty of underground or surface water.

And in Chicago we have a leading global metropolitan region. Our system of higher education has been strong, we have much higher than average rates of college degrees among our population than other states, and the state is above average in wealth.

But we have to pull ourselves out of our financial hole and also show the world that going forward we plan to reject corruption.

This can only be done, on the matter of finances, by sensible policies. Unfortunately, we cannot significantly reduce our tax load until we have paid off our overdue bills and established a plan to rebuild our pension funds.

We have already been cutting education and university funding, so there is not much room there for further cuts. On pensions, both current employees and retirees like me will have to take some hits, in pension retirement age and payouts for current employees and in health care premiums for retirees.

Healthcare is the biggest cost of state government. Here, we must try new approaches to cost containment, where we have not been successful in the past. (I will have a separate column on this topic soon.)

The matter of corruption may be the tougher challenge. Too many of us are inured with the sense that government is a place to do well while maybe doing good.

All of the above requires both leadership—and followers—and time. The upcoming gubernatorial campaign will be a test for both candidates and voters.

If candidates try to bamboozle voters with simple, easy solutions and plans, and voters respond to such folderol, Illinois will continue to decline.

If candidates take the high road and convince voters that change is possible, maybe the student headed for Florida will rethink his decision.