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Foreign experts give state mixed reviews: Part I

By Jim Nowlan

I worry about weak job growth in Illinois, which has been slower in recent decades than in the nation as a whole as well as in the rest of the Midwest.

Our state still has to recover about a quarter million jobs just to get back to where we were in 2000, while the nation has surged far beyond 2000 numbers.

Illinois did add 51,000 jobs in 2014, yet job numbers in Texas jumped last year by a whopping 458,000—and a majority of the Texas jobs are good-paying ones, not the minimum wage kind, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

Recently the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity asked the consuls general of our 10 largest trading partner nations to provide their perspectives on what our state has going for—and against—us when it comes to economic growth.

(A consul general is the top representative of a foreign government outside our nation's capital; the fact that nearly all countries have such offices in Chicago speaks alone to the city's importance.)

The survey has been made public, with the names of the nations redacted, to encourage candor.

Chicago, which is a hot spot for job growth, received mostly glowing reviews, except for the violence in some of its neighborhoods, which was mentioned a couple of times. Downstate did not fare so well.

“There are vast differences in perception between Chicago and downstate,” wrote one consul general. “While the former has plenty of positives, the latter is not seen to be competitive with Indiana, Wisconsin and even Iowa.”

“I should say that the perception of Chicago and its suburbs as an investment location is far more positive than downstate Illinois,” said another.

The foreign observers lavished praise on Chicago: “Chicago is a global city with an identifiable international culture, a habitable and appealing downtown,” observed a consul general, who went on to laud the research universities, arts and cultural offerings.

[As for the universities, I think one has to include the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, with its distinguished engineering and science programs. The Urbana campus is becoming ever more active in Chicago, providing leadership for an advanced manufacturing center there, and in collaborations with the University of Chicago, which lacks an engineering program.]

Other major pluses for the city—and state—appear to be our location in the center of the nation and the rich arteries of interstate, rail, water and airport transportation infrastructure. These advantages were mentioned by almost every consul general.

Several mentioned that well-educated young people are drawn to Chicago and this adds to the a growing concentration of high tech innovation in the center of the city.

Otherwise, the remainder of Illinois seems to be uncharted territory to the nations represented in the survey.

Even Chicago is less well known and appreciated than the metropolitan regions on the coasts.

“There is a deep lack of understanding about the Midwest,” said a consul general. “It’s still inhabited by buffaloes and bears.” Another said that even Chicago is still seen as the city of Al Capone and Michael Jordan, if you can believe it, after all these decades.

Years ago I wrote an opinion piece for the *Chicago Tribune* in which I suggested, seriously, that we should change the name of Illinois (unknown to the world) to that of Lincoln (known).

The name change effort alone would draw world attention to us, and Abraham Lincoln is surely more representative of how we want to be known, rather than for a feckless Indian tribe that was driven out of the state by the Iroquois.

I am near the end of my allotted space, yet I have barely gotten up a head of steam on my topic, so this column will have to be continued next week.

I will close this piece by noting that when foreign nations do have a perception of our state, it is often negative.

For example, almost all the small sample of consuls general surveyed noted disapprovingly the high level of uncertainty and instability regarding our state fiscal situation, and of how the state (and city of Chicago, for that matter) will meet its obligations to its pension systems.

Business plans years ahead and abhors uncertainty.

Most respondents also noted the high corporate and property taxes and the strong influence of labor unions relative to that in neighboring states.

In my next installment, I will continue this discussion of how we are perceived and offer some policy changes. I’ll bet you can’t wait.