

SNG-Nowlan-Illinois in a funk-5-20-11 (715 words)

Illinois seems to be in a funk

By Jim Nowlan

The people of Illinois seem to be in a funk, that is, a depressed state of mind, or a slump, based on the overall tone of the email responses I received over the past few weeks to a column I wrote about the future of Illinois. Few, however, had clear visions of how to come out of our funk; neither do I.

Gary (I'll leave last names out, as several preferred it that way) "feels we are headed in the wrong direction," largely because of the recent tax increase and the high costs of doing business in Illinois.

Robin and his wife have resided in Illinois for 27 years, but they "have had enough" and are seriously considering moving out of state. Robin uses the contrast between Iowa (nonpartisan redistricting) and Illinois (political gerrymandering) as an illustration of what he doesn't like about our state.

The small unscientific sample of emails comes down hard on a culture of corruption as one of the biggest problems for Illinois. "I am sure the political climate in Iowa is much the same as Illinois," adds Robin, "but at least we could rid ourselves of the rotten smell of political corruption that seems to hover over this state like a four odor."

Chuck agrees: "I am pessimistic when I see people's indifference to the rampant, destructive corruption in the state. . . .If people aren't outraged about the illegal 'Big C' corruption then there is little chance of rooting out the legal but morally deficient 'small c' influence peddling and vote buying parasites that sap the energy of the state."

Georgene adds: “In the past few years it has become an embarrassment to admit that I live here. I believe the state is corrupted beyond repair and our so-called leaders are a national joke that is not funny.”

Charles muses that, “The people of Illinois seem to take a perverse pride in being known as one of the most corrupt states in the nation.”

One frustration that surfaced several times had to do with the abundance of local governments. “Township government is a waste of money,” says one respondent, while another decries those who oppose the consolidation of various governmental bodies, “without even a cursory analysis of the benefits.”

James reflects a feeling echoed by several: “Raising our taxes on both citizens and business was the wrong move. We want real tax reform, less red tape, and a fair environment to compete. We can once again be a leader among the states by implementing less government, less taxes, and let local governments decide what is best for our communities.”

The above representative comments are reinforced by the 2011 Northern Illinois University Illinois Policy Survey of 700 Illinois residents. The survey finds that 70 percent of the respondents were “not satisfied” with the direction things are going in Illinois, and only 10 percent are “satisfied.” A decade earlier, in contrast, 51 percent were satisfied with the way things were going in the state.

So we’re in a funk, I’d say. When I was a boy growing up here in the 1950s, Illinois was a proud, positive state, one of the wealthiest in the nation, vibrant and growing. At least that is how I remember it.

Can we be that way again? We have been losing people to the South and Southwest. Our manufacturing job base has shrunk (although I think we actually produce as much as ever). On the other hand, Chicago now ranks as one of the world's very top cities for business.

As for corruption, Illinois is not even close to being the most corrupt state in the nation, based on the number of public corruption convictions per unit of population in the past decade, as compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice. The Dakotas rank much higher, though they have tiny populations. Fourteen other states also rank higher than Illinois by this measure.

What to do? Most taxpayers seem to want government out of their lives. So should we expect that same state government and its top officials to bring us out of our funk? We need a sustained period of business-friendly, high integrity, solid-as-a-rock state leadership. This might change, first, our perceptions of ourselves, and, we hope, that of others around the world.