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The future of Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

I need your help on this one. I have embarked on a long-term project about the future of Illinois. This is a tough assignment, because we all want a good future for our state, even though the track record of recent decades has not generally been positive for Illinois, certainly not relative to the nation as a whole.

So I would appreciate your thoughts on this topic, by [email](#). To provide you some context for my thinking, I offer the following observations.

Recently I participated in a roundtable discussion about Illinois, with sharp Farm Bureau folks and other civic leaders in the Champaign-Urbana area. Our discussion leader asked us first to identify weaknesses in our state.

I started by saying that Illinois has a bad image across the country. We are seen as a corrupt state with a national laughingstock for a recent governor, who will bring us back into the news soon, when his second trial for corruption begins.

Other negatives identified by the roundtable included that of: 1) a highly partisan, bickering state leadership with a Chicago-centric dominance; 2) lack of involvement by the citizenry, and 3) a loss of self-reliance as a society.

Actually, these three factors could be said generally of lots of states, so are not unique to Illinois.

Other weaknesses I see in Illinois include a lack of entrepreneurialism and an undistinguished educational system. Venture capital in Illinois, for example, flows away from the state and to California and the two coasts. And our schools statewide rank a little below average on national test scores, anything but a clarion call to attract people.

Further, our business climate tends to rank near the bottom on recent surveys of CEOs and other business leaders, and those surveys were taken before our corporate income tax reached 9.5 percent as a result of recent state tax increases.

What are the state's strengths, the roundtable participants were asked? Transportation, said one, and it's true. We are a national hub because of our airports, water, Interstate highway and rail networks. We have more miles of Interstate highways than any states but huge California and Texas, and almost any many as those states. Our railroads load and unload more cars of freight annually than any state in the nation.

We also have abundant water resources, underground and via Lake Michigan, something that cannot be said of the rapidly growing (for now) Southwest. And our soils are among the most productive in the world. Another at the roundtable noted that we have rich resources in our people, whom he said were hard-working and productive.

So, from this quick snapshot, we can see a mixed bag of pluses and minuses for our state.

Where have we been tending as a state? We are much more diverse than ever. In 1970, one in ten Illinois residents belonged to a minority group; now it is one in three, with the state now having more Hispanics than blacks.

Our wealth has declined, relative to that of the nation. After World War II, Illinois was one of the wealthiest states in the nation, with 120 percent of the national

average of per capita income (of 100 percent). Now Illinois has just about 105 percent of the national average, and we rank 14th among the states in per capita income, rather than 3rd as we once did. This does not mean that we are poorer than we once were, just that our wealth has been growing more slowly than that of the nation.

Can we do anything about this relatively slow growth? Some say it is possible, if we were to cut taxes to improve our business climate. Others say no, instead we must improve our education outcomes, which may, or may not, require more money, which we don't seem to have. This is basically the low cost versus high quality of life argument.

Can the state as a government really affect the future of the state, or are there much larger forces at play that will determine our future, regardless? These forces might be the transformation from a manufacturing to a service economy, and maybe the attractiveness of Sunbelt states for relocation.

What do readers think about the future of Illinois? What can we do? What should we do? What kind of future do we want for our children, if indeed they stay in the state? Your comments will be much appreciated and I will respond to them, as I embark on this project about the future of our state.