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Does Illinois matter anymore?

By Jim Nowlan

When I was a kid politician in the 1960s, titans of commerce and industry often served on appointed boards in Illinois, especially those for higher education. No longer, it seems.

Instead, the elites of commerce, technology, industry, law, and financial services focus their influential efforts on Chicagoland. They serve through the likes of the Chicago Economic Club, the Commercial Club of Chicago, Chicago Ideas Week, World Business Chicago, the Chicago Club, and 1871 (a Chicago incubator). You see “Illinois” anywhere in that list?

Elites tend to focus on matters of direct concern to them, like business, family, social circles. Illinois as a state and its government aren’t on their radar screens.

The State of Illinois is basically responsible for education, higher education, transportation, social services and health care.

Yet, elites in Chicagoland send their kids to private schools or good suburban public, which don’t rely on state dollars.

Later, elites send their youngsters East and to other, well, elite private colleges.

As for transportation, the one-percenters mostly fly; they don’t drive state highways much. That’s why Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel recently announced a breath-taking \$8.5 billion program to keep city-owned O’Hare International among the best-connected airports in the world.

In contrast, the State of Illinois hasn't since 2010 had a major infrastructure program to maintain its deteriorating but rich network of interstates and feeder highways.

And, of course, elites don't use the state's social services and healthcare programs, which care for 3-4 million lesser mortals in our state.

Elites have their weekend retreat homes in Wisconsin, Michigan, sometimes Montana and Wyoming, not Illinois.

So, out of sight, out of mind, Illinois.

Downstate Illinois, in particular, is becoming a backwater. In very recent years, ADM and CAT moved their headquarters to Chicagoland from Decatur and Peoria, respectively. CAT and insurance behemoth State Farm have been slowly, maybe not so slowly, moving jobs out of Illinois.

The state capital in Springfield is sleepyville except for the few weeks each year the state legislature is in session. Chicago lawmakers would much rather serve on the Chicago City Council than trek down to Springpatch.

I recently ended a four-year term on the state ethics commission (yes, we have one; doesn't have much power). We had 12 meetings each year, 11 of which were in Chicago.

Even agriculture, downstate's mega-force, doesn't much need Illinois either. Farm policy is set in D.C., and it's the national, not state, commodities and livestock trade groups that count for them.

State governorships are often seen as stepping stones to the presidency, which might make Illinois politics attractive to the ambitious rich and famous. Yet the quagmire of our present dysfunctional state government offers but a killing field for anyone so inclined to try it.

There are pockets of energy downstate. Peter Limberger, actually a German who has adopted his wife's central Illinois, is an economic development sparkplug along the Illinois-Michigan Canal corridor from Ottawa to LaSalle.

Ditto for Jason Anderson and his team in bustling Rochelle, and also for the entrepreneurial missionaries in the Schultz Family of Effingham. There are others, I'm sure, but not enough.

And the University of Illinois, in out-of-the-way Urbana-Champaign, remarkably holds on somehow as one of the world's great universities. State policymakers have no clue about and offer little support for the creative power of a great graduate research center in a world now dominated by rapid advances in technology and engineering.

Yet Illinois does matter, even if the power elites don't realize it. Just go back to the top and review the basic functions of state government.

But as we know, Illinois is a mess right now. So, where to start?

As a broken-down former prof, I nominate our system of public higher education, which is really hurting. Students flee, universities shrivel. This, when we could be a magnet for students from other states, as we are indeed for those from China and other countries.

Yet we have too much capacity and administrative overhead in higher ed; hurting university campuses are understandably hunkered down, protecting their shrinking bases.

We need a band of powerful top elites to organize and think about what Illinois higher education must do, for the sake of their own companies, firms and futures.

Then, they need to present a plan for the future of higher education to the legislature and governor. With their parochial interests to represent, lawmakers cannot do much without persistent pressure from powerful, respected outside forces.

Illinois does matter.