

In Illinois, it's all about "king of the hill"

By Jim Nowlan

When I was a kid, we played a game called "king of the hill." One boy at the top of a heap of some sort would fend off others who tried to pull him down and replace him.

That's pretty much the game of life as well. Our DNA, forged millennia ago, drives us still today to play king of the hill.

Media mogul Ted Turner said that money is how we keep score of who is winning in this game of life. And so it is in Illinois, its government and politics, always individualistic in the extreme.

This self-interest has led to our current budget impasse.

On the one side, we have Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner, a small government guy (an insider tells me the governor has staff around him who "hate government"). Rauner and his uber-wealthy friends want to whack government because they see it as needlessly draining wealth from the individual.

In sharp contrast, many Democrats like House speaker Mike Madigan are career politicians quite comfortable with government. Indeed, many have increased their wealth through government.

For example, for almost half a century Madigan has been piling up money at his property tax appeal law firm, as deep-pocketed clients have come to him almost solely because of the speaker's role as a political power broker.

But it doesn't stop there. To provide another illustration, many executives and professionals in health care, probably mostly Republican, are also comfortable with government.

Health care is now largely a government enterprise and represents the largest category of government spending at the federal and state levels, greater than for Social Security and defense.

In Springfield, the powerful Illinois Hospital Association and the state doctors' society assiduously protect their members' interests, whose incomes are often multiples of those of their counterparts in other developed countries.

So the game of life goes on in Illinois politics, with everyone seeking to increase his pile of money.

This past week, however, Gov. Rauner said belatedly that he was willing to meet Madigan and Democrats 24/7 to resolve the budget impasse.

Savvy pundit Rich Miller thinks Rauner has reached out because of pressure from GOP lawmakers in public university districts, who rightly fear the long-term damage being done to higher education by lack of a state budget.

Miller goes on to observe that the wily Madigan, who has taken Rauner's scathing and unrelenting attacks on him quite personally, sees weakness and wants to hoist the governor with his own petard.

Now is the time for Democratic lawmakers to jump in and demand that Madigan put such behind him and get down to the business of stabilizing the state's horrific budget situation. Yet I fear they lack the backbone to do so.

Another problem is that the budget deficit and unpaid bills are now stacked so high that a big tax increase (after a big tax reduction in 2014) will be necessary to straighten matters out.

Lawmakers may not have the stomach for such, but ultimately they will have to relent if the budget is to be balanced.

As a broken-down one-time professor, I lament the damage done already to higher education, which has had a zero budget this year, while needy students have had no state financial aid whatever.

[I have had several parents tell me their children were recently admitted to the University of Illinois, but they decided to go out of state because of the uncertain situation in Illinois.]

The late U. of I. president David Dodds Henry, a giant in his field, once said that it takes decades to build a great university such as the U. of I., but that all can be lost in short order.

State elected officials cannot seem to cut health care spending, nor are they willing to cut public education, and they can't escape the huge bill that is due regarding unfunded pensions. So higher education hangs out there, almost alone, as a place budgeteers can make cut after cut after cut.

Sad.

I think higher education will face, at best, state funding going forward that is only about half of the modest 3 percent of the total budget it has been receiving from the state in recent years (excluding pension payments).

The sector will have to organize to protect the best and most important of its programs, and painfully jettison much else.

[I know one community college president who is reshaping her college to get along without *any* state dollars. The cutbacks she is making have been severe and will reduce opportunities for students significantly.]

The game of king of the hill played out by political leaders this past year has not been worthy of supposedly responsible men and women.