

SNG-Lincoln embroiled in politics-7-14-14

Lincoln embroiled in Illinois politics, again

By Jim Nowlan

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) is a popular tourist attraction in Springfield, with nearly 4 million visitors going through the turnstiles since its opening less than a decade ago.

The Trip Advisor website notes that nearly 1,300 of 1,400 reviews of the attraction give it the top, “excellent” rating, which is a resounding testimonial.

But there is turmoil at the museum, and cool heads need to prevail to chart a clear, positive future for the ALPLM.

In the late 1990s, former governor George Ryan pushed the idea of a museum honoring Lincoln for the state capital. A presidential library designation was added to attract federal dollars for the \$167 million complex near the old state capitol in Springfield.

Politicking at the time determined that the ALPLM would be under the small Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, which oversees 57 historic sites around the state.

Three boards were created to oversee and advise the agency and ALPLM, which has become part of the problem. There is the historic preservation agency governing board and both foundation and advisory boards for the ALPLM. Each would like to run the library-museum.

Problems abound at the ALPLM. It has never been accredited. The position of state historian has been vacant since 2011, and other key vacancies exist. There have been five directors in less than a decade.

And there is no strategic or financial plan for the ALPLM, according to a 2012 evaluation by advisory board member and retired academic Richard Meister.

Since 2005, the ALPLM has lost nearly half its staff, from 120 down to 65, observes Meister. In the same period, the overseeing historic preservation agency has taken budget cuts of 40 percent, in addition to a 10 percent cut just this year alone.

Enter politics.

In frustration that the overseeing agency was not paying attention to the concerns of the ALPLM advisory board and was “hobbling” its efforts, advisory board chair Steven Beckett drafted a bill this past year that would separate the ALPLM into a free-standing agency, separate from historic preservation.

Speaker of the House Michael Madigan, a personal friend of ALPLM’s executive director, picked up the bill and tried to ram it through the legislature in the last week of the spring session of the General Assembly.

Seeing its crown jewel slipping away, the historic preservation agency cried foul and mounted an attack on the bill, which passed the House 84-29 and now resides in the state senate, awaiting action.

Beckett, a University of Illinois law professor, says the present flow chart for ALPLM doesn’t make any sense. He simply hoped the legislature would deliberate on what might be the best course for the library-museum for the future.

There is at least one option in addition to the free-standing ALPLM.

This would be to throw up one’s hands and turn the operation over to the National Archives and Records Administration, which operates most presidential libraries.

This is the preference of Tony Leone of Springfield, who in the past has served on both the agency board and ALPLM advisory board. He calls the present situation a “disaster” that cannot be reconciled by the several, contending boards.

Leone notes that in the 1970s, the state of Illinois turned over the Lincoln Home in Springfield to the National Parks Service, which operates the site quite nicely.

Beckett’s free-standing ALPLM option would impose some costs, which the historic preservation agency puts at \$2.4 million out of its \$7.8 million agency operating budget. The ALPLM would need, for example, its own administrative, budget, human resources and legal staffers.

By the way, Illinois and its rich tapestry of history are lost in all this. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is the renamed old Illinois State Historical Library, where I have done research over the years.

The importance of Lincoln, the budget woes and staff vacancies have put Illinois history in the shadows, which is unfortunate as we approach our state’s 2018 bicentennial celebration.

We need to call in experts from the American Alliance of Museums and the American Library Association to provide the legislature and governor a sober assessment of the best organizational construct for the ALPLM.

Lincoln and his legacy are too important to get this one wrong.