

Nowlan submission to PJS-6-17-14

Make no little plans

By Jim Nowlan

It is time to begin to turn things around in Illinois. I think some positive elements are coming into place. And I have the sketch of a plan to do so.

Plan is the operative word or, better, implementation of a plan is the operative phrase.

As I have said in this space before, Illinois doesn't do any planning, or big picture thinking, at the state level. We haven't done so for decades, all the while we have been slipping relative to the nation in economic terms.

Part of the problem is that Chicagoland dominates the state, which is not the fault of that great region, just the reality.

All sorts of planning goes on for that region. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency on Planning has its "Go to 2040" plan. The Metropolitan Planning Council does similar work. There is more.

Yet those plans focus on different things from what states do. Local governments are into important stuff—water and sewage; public safety; streets and highways; regulation; urban planning and more.

States overlap on these functions yet are responsible for other matters—education, health care, social services, transportation and more, all of which affect Chicagoland residents as much as they do us downstate.

But we don't think long and hard about the state matters because the activities live in the shadows of the big region's focus on local and regional planning.

Indeed, a great plan for Chicagoland was done in the early 1900s by architect Daniel Burnham, who reportedly issued the famous phrase, “Make no little plans.”

His plan for Chicago was anything but little, though it focused on the built environment rather than on people.

The Burnham Plan helped give us the great Chicago lakefront that is accessible to all. Burnham proposed great boulevards and parks for Chicago as well, much of which was ultimately implemented.

Burnham had the backing of the great business leaders of Chicago, who also convinced the city to create a 328-member plan commission. The large panel worked for three decades to build support for and see implementation of big parts of the Burnham Plan.

Today we have an opportunity to focus on Illinois rather than just the metropolitan region.

We celebrate our state’s bicentennial in 2018, which is just around the corner. Gov. Quinn has created—but not yet named—a typical commission of up to 40 members to “commemorate the significance of the State’s contributions to our national history.”

I have a different, complementary idea for Illinois.

Former governor Jim Edgar has in recent years created an exciting program of Edgar Fellows. Each year, he selects about 40 young men and women from throughout Illinois from both parties who are destined for success in public service.

Many of the fellows are already serving as state lawmakers and local government officials. I have met many of the fellows, who are impressive and give us great hope for the future of the state.

Each set of fellows comes together for a full week packed with stimulating sessions with business, academic, civic and other leaders from the state and national scenes. After the intensive week, each class of fellows continues to meet, learn from one another, and build networks of key connections.

When I speak to the incoming class of Edgar Fellows in a few weeks, I will propose that they and the Edgar Fellows alumni take on the challenge of developing something like the Edgar Fellows Bicentennial Plan for the Future of Illinois.

Such a multi-year effort would need financial support, which these energetic leaders could wheedle from the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club (which bankrolled the Burnham Plan a century ago) and other civic groups and charitable foundations.

I see such a planning project as a complement to the historical work of the state's bicentennial commission.

And as tomorrow's statewide leaders, the Edgar Fellows will be in positions to take the lead in implementing their plan, in which they would be invested.

Whatever, we need to stop beating ourselves about how bad things are in Illinois and start thinking about what great contributions Illinois can make in the future.

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