

SNG-Nobody looking down the road-9-7-15

Nobody is looking down the road in Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

The state of Illinois typically lurches from year to year, focusing on its annual budget, never looking to the horizon. At present, operating without a formal budget as Gov. Rauner and Speaker Madigan wage their war of political attrition, the state is operating month to month, even day to day, as the courts step in to tell Comptroller Leslie Munger which bills to pay and when.

Given our grim budgetary situation and sullied state reputation, we almost desperately need to do some long-term thinking about Illinois, or we may crash. We don't know where we are going.

I still recall from a 1970s book the lament of then North Carolina governor Terry Sanford that there is no one in the governor's office whose only job is to gaze out the window and brood about the problems of the future.

More recently, former governor Jim Edgar told a group of up-and-coming Illinois leaders that, "Once you come into the governor's office, there is no time for 'the vision thing.'"

To put a point on Edgar's remark, I remember when I was helping with the transition of new governor Jim Thompson into office in 1976, his chief of staff came into my office late one afternoon. He slumped in a chair and sighed that he had 400 telephone message slips(!) on his desk from mostly influential people who wanted something or to tell Thompson how he should run things.

No, there is little time to gaze out the governor's office window, much as that is needed.

The most famous planning ever done in Illinois, actually for Chicago, was the Burnham Plan of the early 1900s, named after famed architect Daniel Burnham and sponsored by the Commercial Club of Chicago (Marshall Field and his type were members), which is still in going strong.

The plan gave the city its magnificent, open lake front, grand parks and wide boulevards. Not all of Burnham's vision was implemented, but a good part was, though it took years of wrangling by the city council to get that much done.

Planning for the future of a big state is even more difficult. You have not only physical infrastructure, as in the Burnham Plan, but also issues that affect people directly, as in education, universities and social services.

And, brother, our state problems are gargantuan. In addition to a business climate that is widely perceived to be abysmal, we have to carry on our collective back the anvil that is \$105+ billion in unfunded pension liabilities. This burden will take about one-quarter of our state general funds for three decades, money that could otherwise go to education, parks, whatever.

On the other hand, the state has great strengths. Our transportation infrastructure is unrivaled. For example, we have 2,300 miles of interstate highways, more than any states other than Texas and California.

An MIT study recently named O'Hare Airport the best in America for both domestic and international connections. Chicagoland is the nation's largest rail hub, handling about half of all the containers that traverse the nation.

And we have location, location, location—right in the middle of the country, within a day's travel of much of the nation's markets.

And did I mention water, in copious amounts here in Illinois, which will become ever more important to business.

So where do we want to be in five, 10 years? We don't seem to know.

Personally, I would like to see Illinois transform its education system with longer school days and a longer year, to meet the Asian challenge head on. If we fail to do so, I think we are simply sleep-walking through our own decline.

But that would take investment, not the disinvestment we are engaged in at present, primarily to meet the pension obligations.

A year and a half ago, former governor Pat Quinn appointed a commission to prepare for our bicentennial in 2018. Former governor Jim Thompson and a number of thoughtful luminaries are on the panel. But the group hasn't even met to organize as of yet.

I propose that this commission get to work and take on the task of not only looking backward to celebrate our glorious history, but also the challenge of looking ahead to develop a grand plan for our state going forward.

And, as Burnham said, "Make no small plans."

Marshall Field and his fellow entrepreneurs would have taken on the challenge with relish. But then they had "the vision thing." Do we?