

SNG-No fun being from Illinois-12-11-17

It's no fun being from Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

I attended a spiffy wedding (cruel and unusual punishment) in Dallas this past Saturday, at a park on the Texas State Fairgrounds. After the reception, at a dinner table for eight with Dallas executives, both male and female, we played the “Where are you from; what do you do?” game.

I said, “From Illinois, was in politics and government much of my life.” I could swear I saw at least a couple of grimaces, and one noted the corruption in Illinois’ government. I could sense around the table all had their perceptions of Illinois—and they weren’t good.

Very briefly, I told them about all that we have in Illinois, the hard-to-beat infrastructure, the booming Loop in downtown Chicago and, to get in a dig in, all the bounteous water we have. “Oh, guess I didn’t know that,” responded one of them.

And they don’t “know” that. They and all of us live largely in a world of perceptions, all having probably a grain of truth or more, but certainly not the whole, or even correct, picture.

And here in Illinois, we are the opposite of cheerleaders for our state. Even the title I gave this column is negative. Most of us are guilty.

Recently, I wrote about the efforts by Rochelle (12,000), located 75 miles northwest of Chicago, to land a new auto plant. Several emailed me about how stupid I was to think Rochelle even had a chance, given all the writers’ various beefs about our state.

Rochelle didn't win the plant, as the many cities seeking big prizes don't win them. But Rochelle just held a ground-breaking ceremony for expansion of another business there. Rochelle isn't about to give in to naysayers.

We have our problems here in Illinois. So do other states. I saw a major piece in the Wall Street Journal recently about Oklahoma, "the failed state." Nearby Kansas isn't much better off.

And we aren't so bad as we think. The Tax Foundation recently came out with its 2018 "Business Tax Climate" rankings of the state. Illinois came in 29<sup>th</sup>, not great, but not an outlier as many here think. Three neighboring states had worse climates: Iowa (40), Wisconsin (38) and Kentucky (33).

The state with the 48<sup>th</sup> worst such climate, California, has shown more economic growth than any state in recent years.

Yes, we are a state whose leaders oppose Right to Work (RTW makes union organizing harder), and I have supported making downstate Illinois a RTW region. I believe the issue today is more about symbol than substance.

While Illinois ranked 29<sup>th</sup> in the ranking above, a survey of CEOs ranked Illinois 48<sup>th</sup> worst for business. It's all about perception, according to a site selection specialist.

"CEOs don't get involved in the numbers that much, and we seldom meet with them," says Dean Uminski, a site-selection specialist with Crowe Horwath in Chicago. "But it's their perceptions that really matter, because usually they end up making the ultimate decision."

[In a book I co-authored in 2014, I cite an in-state economic developer who recalls a visiting CEO who "joked" about whether he had to make a bribe to get any business done. Not a great start for the conversation.]

Sure, Illinois has work to do, so let's do it.

We have to change the narrative and, over time, the perceptions.

We're so down on ourselves that we can't see the sunshine from the bottom of the deep hole we have dug.

The pluses outweigh the minuses. I have written ad nauseum in this space about the interstates, railroads, airports, location, educated workforce, and the water here. All these factors put us above, often near the top among the states.

What to do?

Stop caterwauling inside government. Stop holding government hostage to politics. Fight like dogs politically on the outside, but solve problems on the inside. I know that is tough, but it can be done.

Do some long-term thinking about where we want to be in 10-20 years, and of how to get there.

Not all such efforts gather dust on a shelf. In the early 1900s, the Burnham Plan gave Chicago its magnificent, open lakefront, great parks and wide boulevards. It took years and leaders didn't get all they wanted, but they transformed the city.

Finally, let's use the 2018 bicentennial to change the narrative to the positive. We have so much glorious history and present-day resources to brag about. Let's make it fun to be from Illinois, as it was when I was a boy.