

SNG-Nowlan-Illinois poised for rebound?

Is Illinois poised for rebound?

By Jim Nowlan

Mother always said it was darkest just before dawn. When it comes to the state of Illinois, I cannot yet see the sun or its penumbra from beneath the horizon, but there are signs that the future may brighten. We need to build on those portents.

Illinois has been in a funk. People I talk with lament our reputation for corruption and the state's embarrassing fiscal situation. Most say we are headed in the wrong direction. Many say they would like to be someplace else.

Americans have a sour view of Illinois as well.

A survey a couple of years ago by Public Policy Polling found that only 19 percent of Americans had favorable views of Illinois, while 29 percent had unfavorable views; the rest had no view whatever of Illinois. Most states had more favorable than unfavorable mentions.

But the times, they are a-changin', maybe.

Rod Blagojevich, the disgraced ex-governor who corrupted and mismanaged the state grievously, has been out of the national news for a couple of years.

And recent action on the state's pension liabilities should take that issue off the national nightly business news, though the state high court must weigh in on the new law's constitutionality. I think, by the way, the court will find a way to sustain the law.

Many of our state's residents fail to appreciate our signal strengths. Our infrastructure, so critical to commerce, is without peer. We have 2,300 miles of Interstate highways, more than any

states but California and Texas. Metropolitan Chicago is the only urban area in the nation with seven major interstates and six of the seven major railroads pulsing in and out.

Metro Chicago also handles more container units than any places but Hong Kong and Singapore. O'Hare Airport is the best connected nationally and internationally of any airport in America, according to a recent study by MIT.

And we have central location and plenty of water and more college educated residents than most states.

Now we need to start making good news, and we can, but it won't be easy.

First, we must put our state finances on a stable and predictable basis. Business absolutely hates unpredictability.

With the pension issue addressed, we need turn to harnessing the growth of the Medicaid program, which has grown at rates far surpassing revenue growth for decades.

Recently Gov. Pat Quinn's Administration circulated a sweeping proposal that would transform the way the poor receive their health care in Illinois.

At present we have a chaotic fee-for-service program that is heavily dependent upon expensive, ineffective emergency room services.

Under the new plan, this would be changed to risk-based, comprehensive, whole person care focused on prevention rather than the emergency room.

The proposal could also curb costs and increase federal funds to the state.

Let us hope the powerful hospital and physician associations don't try to scuttle what will require big, but positive changes in the way they do business.

We also need to improve the state's business climate. A major step in this direction would be to reduce premiums paid by businesses to cover workers hurt on the job. We could do

this by requiring that, among other changes, a business be at fault in worker injuries before a claim is compensable, something that is, amazingly, not the case today.

Another positive signal to the state and nation would be enactment by the voters in 2014 of reform in the way we draw our state legislative districts. A drive is underway to take the job away from the legislators and give it to an independent commission.

The 2018 bicentennial of Illinois' founding provides another opportunity. We can involve all the state's residents in looking back over our state's remarkable history and then ahead to a future that repositions Illinois once again as a beacon to be followed by other states.

The dawning of a renewed Illinois won't come easily, quickly or in one step. Yet there are positive signs to build upon.