

## Rural folks sing the blues in Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

Almost three out of four small town and rural residents across Illinois (73 percent) think overall economic prospects for families in the state will be worse in the next five years. This is according to a poll reported on recently by a rural research unit at Western Illinois University.

The same poll of 1,450 respondents found that almost half (49.5 percent) consider Illinois a poor place to live, versus only 26 percent who think it a good place.

And almost half (47 percent) think their quality of life has become worse in the past five years, with only 11 percent feeling it has become better.

Talk about singing the blues.

Rural Illinois lost 12 percent of its population between ages zero to 44 just between 2000 and 2010, according to data provided by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at WIU.

In a 2013 essay, small town Iowa native Richard Longworth identifies what he calls a new white underclass in rural America, “a working class without jobs to do, stranded without education or useful skills in a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy that has no use for them.”

Author of *Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism*, Longworth says that, “This country is just waking up to the pathology of its new white underclass [much of it in rural America]—the same unemployment, the same bad schools and drug use, the same familial breakdown, the same hopelessness” as in the urban black underclass.

Rural sociologist Cynthia Struthers, who conducted the poll cited above, worries that the perceptions she reported will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. “Many people [in rural Illinois]

are tired,” she says. “They often don’t see a way the tide is going to turn back, and once into a spiral of decline it is difficult to come back.”

Can the spiral of decline, if there is such, be reversed?

There are some positive signs.

A recent Pew Research poll of Americans found that more than half (51 percent) would prefer to live in small towns or rural areas, even though only about 20 percent do so at present.

Many small towns in rural Illinois continue to be vibrant places. According to the Struthers poll of rural and small town Illinoisans, 61 percent of the respondents are active in one or more school, local government and community organizations.

Further, almost half (46 percent) have wanted to open a business in their communities.

Longworth, who spent several years exploring the Midwest for his book, is not optimistic about the future of rural America.

The forces, Longworth says, that tend to push people out of rural Illinois are unrelenting: Jobs are in the city; farms continue consolidating; the jobs in small scale assembly industries that rural towns recruited to their industrial parks are easily outsourced overseas.

More important, says Longworth, “There is little ‘drive’ out there in rural America to change things. The often older leaders simply hope their town outlasts them.”

Yet Longworth does have some prescriptions for small town Illinois.

“Focus on the community colleges,” he says. “Do everything you can to attract smart local students to these colleges, many of whom want to stay in their communities.

“Offer them courses in entrepreneurialism. Help them start businesses.

“There are still local families with some serious money, from agriculture, banking or whatever. Encourage them to create family foundations that would invest in these young people.

“Seek out local lawyers and accountants to offer pro bono services on how to set up businesses.”

I also have a suggestion, which focuses on education.

Families want high quality education in a safe environment for their children.

I am afraid most rural schools fail to offer truly distinctive, topnotch education. Being just as good as the school down the road is no longer good enough.

But schools that offered the International Baccalaureate, with its rigor and strong emphasis on critical thinking skills, would be. So might schools that offered one or more foreign languages like Mandarin from grade school on.

These offerings would not come cheap, yet I believe the investment would pay off, by attracting young families that want to see their children compete in the global economy.

Small towns with strong leaders and positive followers might just survive and prosper. Otherwise, rural communities will continue to sing the blues, and wither.