

SNG-Bounce in our step-1-30-17

Can Illinois put the bounce back in our step?

By Jim Nowlan

I decided to “get outta’ Dodge” for a couple of weeks. I have landed in Thomasville, Georgia (pop. 19,000), just north of the Florida panhandle.

Each morning I have coffee out front of a shop in the upscale, 1880s-vintage downtown. I have been struck by the smiling, friendly and upbeat nature of folks here.

I swear they have a lively bounce in their step as they head out to start their day. Why so, I wondered?

I visited with Tom Hill, a native and the retired curator of the city’s history museum.

Unique in the South, the cultured Hill observed, the town welcomed tourists from the North as early as 1870, the smoke from the War of Northern Aggression still lingering.

Rich northerners flocked to the town, the southernmost terminus of any railroad in the late 1800s, to escape winters back home.

Over time, these oil, steel and banking magnates stayed and replaced cotton with quail, turkey and deer hunting, among the towering pines on their estates.

The plutocrats have infused the town with such as an endowed, 19th Century hospital that has grown into a regional center, today employing hundreds of doctors and supporting good-paying jobs.

The town is majority black (51 percent), elected an Africa-American mayor in the past, and has a solid black middle class. Tom reports his Rotary Club has 10 black members.

Okay, so prosperous Thomasville is different from most towns. No wonder they have a bounce in their step.

The citizenry know they have a good thing and, Tom says, they work together to keep it all going.

This brought to mind that when I was a youngster in small-town Illinois in the 1940-50s, folks in our state also had a bounce in our step. We had it relatively good, and the future looked bright.

Not today.

Much of rural Illinois is in a serious decline. The only influx for many towns seems to be poor white folk who come out from nearby cities for the affordable housing.

Meanwhile, in many of our Illinois cities, minority neighborhoods and often dysfunctional families appear to have ceded control over their youngsters to gangs, which too often treat their 'hoods as free-fire zones.

At the state government level, we have not figured out how to handle the albatross called the Illinois (and local police and fire) pension problem. Illinois is spending about \$5 billion in annual spending for our state pensions beyond the “normal annual cost” of our pensions.

[This is needed for decades to come to bring the asset base up to a healthy level, and the state high court has said we can't cut the pensions back. Without this anvil on our backs, Illinois wouldn't have major budget problems.]

Typically, state governments don't much affect a state's economy, but our dysfunction in Springfield has added to perceptions by business that Illinois—even with all its strengths of location, transportation infrastructure, water and more—is an unstable, unpredictable place to set up shop.

I have a couple of recommendations.

First, Illinois must take the long view of how to get a bounce, ultimately, back in our step.

Illinois has never known where it is going. [Witness Springfield, where the best we can do is six-month spending bills, without the revenue to cover them.]

The state should create an independent, permanent, long-term thinking commission, peopled with folks from government, politics, the academy, think tanks, business and civic leadership.

[Such an entity could have telegraphed years ago the problems we wrestle with today.]

Second, just as in Thomasville, where folks work together to make things work well, so our top leaders have to do the same.

In Illinois, politicians have made that nigh impossible.

Election politics and governance have always been entangled, yet in my day the outcomes of the campaigns used to then guide governance, once an election was over.

Today, it is almost the reverse. Election politics and governance take place simultaneously and are indistinguishable. All the “gotcha” politics in the state Capitol seems aimed at the 2018 election (read: Armageddon), rather than at crafting a comprehensive budget.

Ironically, even after the 2018 election, whatever the outcome, nothing big will be possible without buy-in from both political sides. No different from the present.

And given the pain that will be exacted to stabilize our budget, whenever, both sides will share the blame from citizens, fair or not.

[As sportscasters like to say, repeatedly, “The next series of downs will be crucial,” and so it is with the coming several months of the spring legislative session.]

Illinois simply cannot wait until 2019 (after the 2018 election). I fret each night.

What a wonderful goal—working together, as here in Thomasville, to put the bounce back in our step.