

SNG-Anything good to say Illinois-7-31-17

Anybody have a good word for Illinois?

By Jim Nowlan

How long has it been since you heard anyone say a good word about Illinois?

Oh, I recall a decade ago when Thomas Friedman, in his bestseller *The World Is Flat*, waxed enthusiastically about how the world-wide web browser was basically created at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Tom was impressed, as he should have been.

And I have seen positive stories in the national news more recently about how downtown Chicago is a mecca for young professionals, their creativity and energy, and all the great restaurants and music that brings in its wake.

But other than that, precious little.

Instead, there is a drumbeat of negative, downright depressing reports about population flight, high taxes, government dysfunction and violence in Chicago's ghettos. Enough to drive one to drink.

Why are we all beating up so relentlessly on Illinois? If it's so bad, let's do something about it. It wasn't always this way.

When I was growing up in small-town central Illinois after World War II, Illinois was a big deal—wealthy, vibrant, creative, an economic juggernaut of factory smokestacks, hog butcher to the world.

I grew up in a nurturing community and had a good public school and public university education.

Illinois was at the center of a burgeoning, dense network of new interstate highways, an incredible 8th wonder of the world. O'Hare Airport was—and is—the best way in America to reach the world.

Illinois was good to me, and I was proud to be from the Land of Lincoln. Still am, but there is work to do, I admit.

Since then, other states have been catching up to our state, some passing us, as home air conditioning made the South and Southwest habitable. By the way, Illinois has been seeing a net outflow of white residents since the 1970s; this is not just a recent phenomenon.

The mostly white world of my childhood now finds more than a third of us from minority groups, which creates primeval “us versus them” tensions.

Illinois has been hurt more than neighboring states by manufacturing decline, because we had more of it to begin with.

State and local taxes in Illinois are high, in the top third among the states, though Illinois is not the outlier some want us to believe. The high taxes stem largely from trying to pay for a public employee pension albatross created earlier, with the state high court declaring we have little wiggle room for cutting the pension burden back.

If it weren't for this albatross, Illinois could be either a low-tax state or one with a high level of services.

All the negative talk about what a terrible place Illinois is creates a death-spiral, self-fulfilling prophecy. If all we hear is negative, we begin to believe it, and take up the chant. The toxic talk wears us down, and dulls our former “can do” spirit.

So, is the state worth saving? At the risk of sounding like Mary Poppins' grandfather, I say Yes, if only out of my desire to give back and to preserve, maybe rebuild, the public institutions that were so good to me.

But how?

The 2018 Bicentennial Celebration, beginning in just a few months, is an obvious handle for positive messaging. This could be a year filled with honest, mostly positive re-tellings of how our marvelous past could be prologue to a great future.

The state has all the ingredients—location, unparalleled transportation infrastructure, well-educated workforce, verdant fields and plenty of water. Most states would die for these advantages.

But we need cheerleaders. In small cities near me, for example, the chambers of commerce have “ambassadors.” They wear loud blazers and spread the gospel about what a great place their town is.

We can sign up hundreds of us to spread the word about what a great place Illinois is—or is going to become once again. We could be “Abe’s Envoys,” or some such. But without the loud blazers.

And let’s adopt most of Gov. Rauner’s turnaround agenda—workers’ comp reform, maybe Right to Work for downstate. I fear, however, that Rauner and Speaker Mike Madigan now care less about policy change than about vanquishing the other. Sad.

Let’s turn down the trash talk. We should boycott any candidate—most of them—whose campaign message is basically: “Let me count the ways my opponent is a scumbag!”

I know this sounds Pollyannaish, but we need antidotes to all the surliness that saps out spirit.

Let's hear it for Illinois!