

Introduction

Checking our progress; meeting the challenges

By Robert F. Rich

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Illinois currently faces a host of critical challenges and problems. We are not alone, of course. We regularly read about the woes that are experienced by other states. Illinois can, however, be distinctive by developing a strategy to take advantage of the opportunities ahead. We can leverage the federal stimulus package and develop economic partnerships to reinvigorate this state. We can take advantage of the opportunity provided to us by recent and coming transition in state government to develop new public and economic confidence in our state.

This is the fourth edition of *The Illinois Report* and in this space for the past three years we have documented the challenges facing the state. Once again, the pages that follow will check our progress in some areas and discuss continuing challenges in others. Meeting these challenges will require leadership that is committed and courageous enough to take advantage of new ideas and make difficult – even unpopular – choices. Our citizens are expecting innovation and bold leadership.

Illinois is indeed at a crossroads in 2010. This is an election year and one in which the country will begin to come out of the recession. What economic choices will be made by our political leaders? Will we build on the campaign finance reforms introduced during the past session of the General Assembly and continue to move forward with developing public confidence? Will we as citizens elect leaders who, in the tradition of Richard Ogilvie and Jim Edgar, have the courage and vision to move the state forward.

Judging from primary election ballots across the state, there is no shortage of

people who wish to serve in public office. Voters assessing the performance of government at all levels deserve to go to the polls with confidence that the candidate of their choice has provided specific, detailed, and complete proposals for how he or she will address the state's needs. The problems facing Illinois are not new. It is time to move beyond campaign slogans and rhetoric and to find realistic solutions. Simply continuing to document our problems will not move the policymaking process forward.

Energizing Illinois' struggling economy must be a top priority. The unemployment rate at the end of 2009 exceeded 10 percent, higher among African-Americans and Latinos. Retail businesses have closed. Manufacturing and supply-chain businesses have laid workers off or padlocked their doors. State government alone cannot reinvigorate the economy. It will require relationships between state government and business, educational institutions, health-care institutions, agriculture, and others.

Effective partnerships with the private sector and with higher education can help attract more federal dollars to the state. Partnerships between state government and education are crucial to promoting economic development and drawing the research and development that leads to new jobs and new opportunity for investment. Successful partnerships, however, will not come until the comparative and competitive advantages of Illinois are clearly defined.

At the same time, state government in Illinois must restore its credibility. Past ethical lapses and persistent political squab-



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bling have bred cynicism and mistrust among the taxpaying public. Progress has been made with the enactment of recent ethics and campaign finance legislation, but more work remains to be done before public trust can be fully restored. Elected officials, educators, and corporate Illinois can take the next step by looking beyond changing laws and toward changing the culture that often puts power and influence ahead of trust and integrity. The Institute of Government and Public Affairs intends to play a major role in promoting deliberations on these issues.

As we look to the future, it is imperative that we, as a state, promote long-term solutions to the major problems facing Illinois. The public needs to come to expect innovative and responsive solutions and

not the same options and terms of debate they have been accustomed to in the past. In addition to the economic, educational, and health-care issues we are all familiar with, some of the major agenda items in the next few years will be: (a) redistricting (will we make progress in drawing a fair and equitable map?); (b) developing energy alternatives (will be able to respond to the consequences of global climate change and energy shortages?); and (c) changing the political culture of Illinois (will we come to a point where we encourage our children to go into government?).

Some headlines from this fourth edition of *The Illinois Report*:

- Illinois' state budget situation grows even more precarious. A major financial

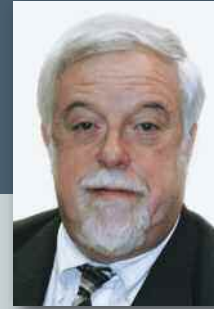


service recently reduced the state's bond rating to second lowest in the nation. Only California is worse. Policymakers are faced with difficult decisions.

- The state's economy continues to struggle in the wake of the worst national recession in decades. Unemployment in Illinois rose to double digits in 2009 and recovery promises to be a slow process.
- People of color in Illinois are disproportionately affected by "The Great Recession."
- Health care reform, in whatever form, will have an impact on policy in Illinois.
- Progress has been made toward ending what many view as Illinois' "culture of corruption." But regaining public trust will require much more than passing laws.

We also look into waste recycling programs in the state and explore options for policymakers to consider and, for the first time, we include a chapter on agriculture policy. We look at these issues in an evidence-based and nonpartisan manner, and it is our hope that these chapters will spur discussion and development of policy in Illinois.

Illinois remains a rich state that is critical to the success of the nation's economy. Our state's resilient and dynamic work force will be ready to respond as the economy recovers. Universities, public and private, remain incubators for innovation. But economic recovery in Illinois will drag unless the state shows real progress toward correcting the structural deficit that plagues government. This structural deficit continues to threaten the state's stability and must be addressed, even if it means making unpopular decisions. Illinois simply can't continue to subsist on credit, falling further and further behind on its obligations.



Robert F. Rich is in his second tenure as the director of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs. He led the Institute from 1986-1997 and returned in 2005. Dr. Rich has joint appointments with the College of Medicine, the Department of Political Science, and the College of Law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is the founder and former director of the Office of Public Leadership at IGPA, and is the coordinator for the local and state government strategic initiative of the Partnership Illinois Program. Dr. Rich is a permanent fellow in the European Center for Comparative Government and Public Policy. He focuses his research on health law and policy, federalism and the role of the states, environmental policy, and science policy.

We at the Institute of Government and Public Affairs are committed to providing policymakers with the expertise, evidence-based research, and information they need to make the important decisions that are necessary to ensure our state's future. We stand ready to provide a forum for discussions of the issues addressed here or others that face Illinois.