

By Jim Edgar

The allegations brought against Gov. Rod Blagojevich have once again put Illinois in a negative light. Unfortunately, this is only the most recent example of allegations against public officials in our state who have failed to put the interest of the people of Illinois first.

It is important to state that Gov. Blagojevich has been charged with criminal conduct, but is presumed innocent. However, given the conviction of former Gov. George Ryan and the recent allegations against Gov. Blagojevich, the negative implications to our state are many. In addition to the serious legal implications for the Governor, these matters have a much larger and potentially more damaging effect on the state of government and politics in Illinois and the bond of trust the public should expect to have with their elected leaders.

The details of these criminal charges will undoubtedly further erode the public's trust in Illinois government. But to many people, all public officials are the same. This is unfortunate because in my 30 years in government, I can attest to the fact that the vast majority of elected officials – Republicans and Democrats alike -- are honest, hard-working men and women who are doing what they believe is best for the State. In addition, thousands of people in state government work hard every day implementing government policy and providing services to the citizens of Illinois. Their actions are critical to our state, but they rarely receive the attention or the credit that they deserve. Unfortunately the public disgrace of high profile Illinois elected officials casts a disparaging shadow on all public employees – even those who perform their service with competence and integrity.

It saddens me to know the negative publicity from these charges hurts more than our state's reputation today – it also discourages good people from becoming involved in government and public affairs. This is especially unfortunate because the very solution to the problems evidenced by the Blagojevich allegations and the Ryan conviction is to have good people agree to serve in the public arena. However, when good, young people see what is happening in state government, one can understand their reluctance to get involved. We must do all we can to encourage men and women from all sectors of society, both in and out of government to get involved.

But I believe there is hope for a better tomorrow. In addition to negative implications surrounding the state of Illinois government and politics, these unfortunate circumstances ironically may also produce something positive – a greater interest, understanding and responsibility of our citizens. It is time for the people of Illinois to become serious about their government. Our citizens must take action to become more informed about the issues in state government and the character of our leaders. Most importantly, our citizens must be willing to work to fix those parts that may be broken. Indeed, the Chicago Tribune and virtually every Illinois media outlet did their job in 2006, reporting the details of numerous state and federal investigations into the Blagojevich Administration. Nevertheless, Gov. Blagojevich cruised to re-election.

Without sincere citizen involvement and participation, I fear that we will not get the type of government that Illinois deserves.

The arrest of Gov. Blagojevich may also be a very strong wake-up call to all elected officials of the serious nature of the business of governing Illinois. All who serve in state government should now be more motivated than ever do the right thing. If Illinois is to regain the trust of our people, state leaders must govern to produce the best results for the people – and they must do so in a manner that is as open and transparent to the people. We must assure that the public has confidence in the process that produces the outcomes they desire.

This is a critical time in the history of the State of Illinois. We have the opportunity to and hold our elected officials to a high standard of conduct. We have the opportunity and the obligation to get involved and become more informed and engaged as citizens in the decisions that affect our lives. We have the opportunity to demand change and ensure that the integrity of our leaders reflects the true character of the people of Illinois. While that goal may seem a long way off today, I believe we can achieve it when we expect more of our leaders and more of ourselves.