

Commentary

Illinois soil and water conservation needed now more than ever

By GRANT HAMMER

As a resource conservationist, Tina's day is full helping farmers invest in both a better harvest and a brighter future for our farmland.

She's up early to go across the county and meet a farmer who wants to make more environmentally friendly decisions on his land but isn't quite sure how to do it. Tina advises him to start easy: Take a small piece of land, plant cover crops and tap into existing state and federal funding to help cover the costs of these proactive measures.

If that works, the farmer can expand to cover more of his land with crops that grow in the off seasons – preventing soil erosion and literally saving nearby streams and community water systems from the results of growing nutrient loss.

She then heads back to sit down with local planners concerned about the best ways to reduce stormwater impacts from

a new residential development. Finally, there is a late stop at an after-school program to talk about the important role that pollinators play in our environment.

It's clear the staff of Soil and Water Conservation Districts are helping drive many often small but critical decisions that, all added up, mean tremendous savings across our state. How does it make sense, then, to cut off the very funding provided last year at a time when Illinois is staking its claim as a worldwide leader on tackling climate change?

It doesn't, and we hope state legislators agree.

Since the days of the devastating ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl in the Midwest in the 1930s, conservation staff have been the respected, effective boots on the ground building relationships, providing technical guidance, and ensuring project funding helps support goals we all agree on: healthier soils, cleaner water, proper wildlife habitat.

We know Illinois' soil health and water quality challenges are significant and growing in concern. SWCDs have adapted to budget cuts over the past decade to do more with less, but we cannot risk undermining our collective interest in environmental and agricultural health by cutting back on the very advocates who help make it happen.

Last year, Gov. JB Pritzker and the Legislature took an important step forward with a critical funding boost of \$8 million after years of cuts, to \$16 million annually. SWCDs welcomed the infusion by correcting dramatic staff reductions that cost all of us the capacity and institutional knowledge critical to stronger conservation practices.

This year, though, that extra funding has been proposed to be eliminated. That's why our organization is among a diverse group of advocates supporting Senate Bill 3471, to match Illinois' ambitious soil health and conservation goals with

the funding and strategy needed to reach them. The proposed Partners for Nutrient Loss Reduction Act, extending the Partners for Conservation Program, maintaining funding for the popular Fall Covers for Spring Savings Program, and supporting the ongoing Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy all should work in partnership to help every landowner who shares our goals of investing in our land's future.

Tina, who represents hundreds of resource conservationists across Illinois, will be checking emails late at night, making sure each stop on tomorrow's trek supports soil health and clean water. The Legislature should step up to maintain funding for SWCDs and show we are right there for them.

Grant Hammer is executive director of the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts, located in Springfield.

Return of congressional town halls would be a sign of healing

By JOHN T. SHAW

Several years ago, the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute was invited to join a dozen universities in the United States to promote bipartisan collaboration and productive discourse at the state and local level.

The Institute developed a plan to strengthen how congressional town hall meetings are conducted in Illinois. Our recommendations outlined ways these meetings could be more informative, civil, respectful and productive. We sent our ideas to members of the Illinois congressional delegation and received encouraging responses. Then COVID-19 descended in 2020 and disrupted all our lives.

In-person town hall meetings seemed ill-advised and unsafe during a pandemic.

Even if COVID-19 had not battered our world, we were aware that in-person town halls are threatened by other pervasive and pernicious diseases in the United States — the rise in political polarization, the decline of civility, and the atrophy of our collective ability as Americans to discuss contentious issues construc-

tively, without rancor or acrimony.

The twin maladies of COVID-19 and political polarization upended in-person town hall meetings in Illinois and elsewhere.

The institute is not giving up on its conviction that town hall meetings are an important instrument to revive our democracy.

Congressional town hall meetings have been an important feature of America's culture of representative democracy for more than two centuries. In their ideal form, they allow lawmakers to describe their work at home and in Washington and to listen to the concerns of their constituents. Open and vigorous dialogue benefits policymakers and the public.

However, the nature of the town hall meeting has changed dramatically in the last decade or so, driven by deepening political polarization and advances in technology, especially the revolution of social media. Both conservative and liberal activist groups often regard town hall meetings as opportunities to confront lawmakers they oppose and create embar-

assing moments that can be captured on camera and then disseminated through social media. Even before COVID-19, many in Congress began to hold only virtual town hall meetings in which constituents attended via phone, internet or Zoom. These meetings are often tightly controlled and often fuel public anger and skepticism about the political process.

Paul Simon powerfully summarized the value of in-person town hall meetings: "It's one thing to read about the farm problem, much different to talk to flesh-and-blood people whose agony is written on their faces and in what they say," he wrote. "It's one thing to know unemployment statistics, another to talk to a mother who is worried about the mental health of her son because he can't find a job. The people who took time to attend town meetings held in every corner of the state helped me to become a better senator."

The institute believes that in-person town hall meetings can again become a constructive part of our political discourse. However, we urge lawmakers and the public to approach them differently.

Civility must be the coin of the realm. Town hall meetings should be restructured as listening and learning sessions that center on lawmakers hearing the views of constituents. They should be moderated by a nonpartisan community leader who sets the tone for a respectful discussion. The range of people who attend town halls should be widened so the audience is more diverse and includes both partisans and independents.

There is no magic solution to rescue and revive town hall meetings. Success ultimately depends on the goodwill and respect of both the public and policymakers.

There are cautious reports that the pandemic is easing. I will take it as a good sign about the health of our nation and our democracy when we are able to revive town hall meetings that are both safe and civil.

John T. Shaw is the director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. This op-ed was distributed by Capitol News Illinois on behalf of the institute.

Need legal balance between owners, renters of storage units

By RETIRED ARMY COL. PAUL KANTWILL

During and since my time as an active-duty officer in the Army, I have devoted much time and energy to protecting military service members from financial predators. Last year I focused on the passage of the Predatory Lending Prevention Act (PLPA), and the nationwide repeal of a Comptroller of the Currency rule that protected payday lenders using evasive schemes to get around state-imposed usury rate caps. While those efforts were successful, there is more to do.

Recently, I took notice of a bill in the Illinois Legislature, HB 4627, which would allow the owners of self-storage locker facilities to avoid altogether the required public notice of the auction of renters' items when his or her belongings have been confiscated. Those auctions often take place without the knowledge of the renter, who might be overseas defending our country or assisting fellow citizens falling victim to natural disasters. Illinois law requires owners to notify renters of an auction only by sending notice to the renter's "last known address."

A deeper look into Illinois' Self

Storage Facility Act reveals a law that is astonishingly lopsided in favor of locker owners to the detriment of renters. It is a law in need of reform.

Whether the renter is active-duty military, our neighbors in the military Reserve or National Guard called to duty, a victim of eviction, or a victim of a house fire, every effort must be made to locate the renter before selling what could be their worldly belongings. Public notice in newspapers and their attendant websites helps.

California law requires owners to allow renters to submit the name and address of a second individual to whom all notices must be sent. In addition, California law also allows renters to formally object to an auction after which the owner must get a court's blessing before proceeding. Illinois law should do the same.

Locker rent increases and late fees should be examined. How many rent increases should a renter endure after their belongings are in storage? Active-duty military or reservists and Guardsmen called to duty might find it impossible to competitively shop or even receive notice once deployed. The current law should be viewed from the perspective of the transient and the vulnerable, not

from only the point of view of owners.

I am all too familiar with real-life cases in which deployed service members have lost literally everything when storage facility owners sell off their possessions. I am sure that, given these difficult times, many other Illinoisans have suffered or will suffer the same.

There are several other changes in Illinois law that could help protect the renters of storage lockers. Many of those changes have been proposed by my colleagues, including the Woodstock Institute, Chicago Urban League, Housing Action Illinois, and Legal Action Chicago.

Those changes include several provisions that would benefit renters and help provide a balance between the rights of renters and owners.

I urge legislators to not only reject HB 4627 but to reform Illinois' Self Storage Facility Act as soon as possible.

Retired Army Col. Paul Kantwill is founding executive director of the Rule of Law Institute at Loyola University Chicago School of Law. This measure remained in House committee at the end of the legislative session in April.

Letter to The Editor

I find it interesting that Alan Ortbal brings up President Donald Trump in his recent opinion column on freedom of the press and the first amendment. Alan attacks the prior president and states that but for the first amendment President Trump would have outlawed media outlets he didn't like. Nonsense. There is zero basis for saying this.

In reality it is the left that are enemies of free speech. It is the Democratic Party working hand in hand with the compliant press, MSM, and big tech that suppress stories unfavorable to the Democrats (example: the Hunter Biden Laptop story) and highlight stories favorable to them, even if false (example: the Russian Collusion hoax).

Perhaps because of the mainstream media's suppression and slanting of the news to fit the Democratic Party's talking points, it is the left that "has an entirely different perception of reality." Who's to say that is not the case. It is certain that there was an abundance of illegalities perpetrated during the 2020 presidential election. To deny this is to deny reality.

*-JIM SCHWEGAL
Godfrey*