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LAW BULLETIN MEDIA

Illinois Constitutional Convention takes a statewide road trip

Shortly after The Sixth Illinois Constitutional Convention opened on December 8, 1969, the issue of holding hearings arose. Representatives of groups and officials were eager to testify, but how could ordinary Illinoisans present their views? On January 7, 1970, Samuel W. Witwer, president of that year's convention, appointed a committee to study the feasibility of holding open hearings around the state.

The chair of the committee was David Stahl, Deputy Mayor of Chicago. Stahl and Witwer told the other delegates that many Illinoisans could not testify in Springfield, where the convention met, and that the delegates should go to those citizens throughout Illinois. Moreover, it would be beneficial if delegates visited the parts of Illinois about which most of them knew little. Chicagoans and suburbanites should visit downstate and vice versa.

The idea was novel. Apparently no state constitutional convention had ever "gone on the road." The proposal was that groups of delegates, each containing a mix from Chicago, the suburbs, and downstate, would travel to cities all over Illinois and hold "open mic" hearings. At least one member of each substantive committee of the convention would be included in each group.

On February 9, 1970, the groups started out with staff and the press in tow. The "road show," as the reporters soon dubbed it, met first in Chicago, the suburbs, and the

three downstate cities of Rockford (in the north), Peoria (in the center), and Marion (in the south). Those hearings lasted a week.

Despite the bleakness and cold of an Illinois winter, the hearings attracted favorable attention from Illinoisans. Citizens were surprised that the delegates solicited and listened to their views. The road show was such a success that it expanded to Champaign, Quincy, Rock Island-Moline, East St. Louis, Alton, Effingham, and Olney over the next three weeks.

By March 6, 1970, the delegates had conducted twenty-five hearings. About 7,300 Illinoisans attended a hearing, of whom 1,270 offered testimony. The extensive press coverage reached even more citizens.

But what did the delegates learn on the road that they could not have learned from their colleagues from those areas and from testimony taken in Springfield? The short answer is that there is nothing like seeing and hearing in person. Many delegates told me that the road show overcame their parochialism. Few of the delegates had ventured beyond their part of Illinois to visit other parts of the state before they went on the road show.

Delegates from the Chicago metropolitan area were amazed at what they saw in southern Illinois. One Chicago delegate saw children waiting in freezing cold for the school bus that was their only way to get to school. He told me that



LAW AND PUBLIC ISSUES

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when he saw a first-grader holding an older sibling's hand and both of them shivering by the side of a country road, he "realized why downstaters cared so much about roads."

A downstate delegate also told me about seeing children waiting for a bus to take them to school. But these were children waiting for the CTA bus on the west side of Chicago. He saw broken glass on the streets, crabgrass growing through cracks in sidewalks,

and dilapidated buildings. Above all, he realized that racism and poverty made everyone in the community feel hopeless. He looked around and thought, "these children have no chance."

When the month of hearings ended, Illinois citizens had learned to appreciate the convention. When the delegates returned to Springfield and exchanged stories of what they had seen and heard, they had a new appreciation for their fellow-Illinoisans. The delegates realized that this is a diverse state that is home to people of many different backgrounds, but all wanting a better life for themselves and their children.

Each delegate had come to the convention with his or her own views of what should be in the Illinois Constitution. Now they knew that the new constitution would have to be the result of compromises born of mutual respect for each other and for all Illinoisans.

They set to work.

Author's note

This column appears today, March 23, 2020, because it is the 50th anniversary of the author's first day as a research assistant for the convention. It was the beginning of the greatest experience of her life. She has often said that she "went to Springfield a Chicagoan and came back an Illinoisan." Like the delegates from Chicago, she learned the truth of the Illinois tourism slogan, "just outside Chicago, there's a place called Illinois." Thank you, fellow-Illinoisans.