

## Bernard Schoenburg Column

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### Fairness at issue as IPA gets 'out front' on GRT

The Illinois Press Association, which represents hundreds of newspapers across Illinois, recently had a meeting, by telephone, with its members to discuss the governor's proposal to impose a gross-receipts tax on business.

The IPA's own story on that April 2 meeting in its membership newspaper, PressLines, states that the speakers on that conference call were **DOUG WHITLEY**, president and CEO of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, and **J. THOMAS JOHNSON**, president of the Taxpayers' Federation of Illinois.

"Both groups oppose the GRT," said the story.

And **REBECCA RAUSCH**, spokeswoman for Gov. **ROD BLAGOJEVICH** and a former television reporter, thinks something is wrong with a story that doesn't present both sides. The governor's office was not invited to tell its story in the conference call, she said.

"We are very interested in having a fair and detailed debate this legislative session about the governor's tax fairness plan," she said, using the name the governor's office has given to Blagojevich's plan to raise billions of dollars - mostly through a gross-receipts tax on businesses - for schools and universal access to health insurance.

"We're certainly willing to talk to anyone about the merits of the plan, about the details. ... We've actually done countless briefings and meetings" with groups that support or don't support the idea at this point, she said.

"When we learned about that particular forum, we certainly would have been willing to send a member of our team to discuss the plan," Rausch said.

But **BETH BENNETT**, director of government relations for the IPA, which represents all 63 daily newspapers in the state and more than 600 papers in all, dismissed the need for such input in that forum.

"It was meant as a follow-up to our official statement as an industry opposing the GRT," Bennett said, "to allow our newspaper publishers (and other) managers, to ask questions as businesspeople in the state of Illinois."

"We were very clear" about the organizational position, that "this had nothing to do with the editorial side of newspapering, with the news-gathering side of newspapers," Bennett said.

Ah, but that is not at all clear when you go back to the IPA's original statement on the GRT. In fact, the IPA's position has been troubling for reporters, including myself, and potentially calls into question whether

newspapers are covering the governor's proposal fairly.

Bennett admits the IPA has been more out front on this business issue than on others, and she said she knows some people question the group's approach.

But newspapers are businesses as well as journalistic enterprises, she said.

"It's not a pure world for us," she said. "It's not going to be a pure situation."

The IPA's first news release was in the form of a message from IPA executive director **DAVE BENNETT** (Beth Bennett's husband).

It says community newspapers "cannot survive if the communities that they represent are not healthy" and reports that, on March 21, the IPA board voted unanimously to oppose the GRT, "based primarily on the concern that a GRT would ultimately be harmful to the citizens and businesses of Illinois."

The State Journal-Register is a member of the IPA, and SJ-R publisher **SUE SCHMITT** is on the IPA board.

"In deciding to oppose the GRT, the IPA board was careful not to mix the business interests of newspapers with the editorial responsibilities of reporting on the proposed tax plan," Dave Bennett added in the release. That is a nod to the journalistic convention that the business side - and even the editorial page - of a newspaper should not influence how news is reported on the news pages.

But Dave Bennett said the IPA board also believes it's important that newspapers provide "the necessary information to make an informed decision" on the issue.

The release also quotes **CARTER NEWTON**, publisher of the Galena Gazette and IPA board president, as saying the GRT would "result in higher prices for all goods and services, and ultimately cost jobs."

"Newton added that newspapers are the premier voice for community information and have an ethical responsibility to tell as many of the people's stories as possible," the news release says.

And then it adds this: "Consequently, the IPA board is encouraging member newspapers to write news stories that focus on 'the community or local impact of GRT.'"

That sure sounds to me, and many others, like the IPA was trying to direct news coverage.

The problem with that is that straightforward newspaper reporting that points out real problems with the governor's proposal could be called into question if the governor or anyone else thinks a corporate agenda, not just the facts, are behind that coverage.

Beth Bennett said that the IPA is a business group. While it is vocal in support of First Amendment issues, it generally joins quietly with other business groups if there is legislation affecting the bottom line.

In the case of the GRT, however, she said, the effect on the advertisers who

keep newspapers going, as well as the newspapers themselves, is considered so dire that the board wanted the IPA to be out front on the issue. It's the first time the group has taken such a tack since she's been with it, she said.

"We have to maintain a healthy business environment for newspapers to stay in business," she said. "If we don't ... then this is just a moot issue. We aren't going to be writing about anything because newspapers won't exist."

Rising electric rates, with a possible addition of a GRT, she added, create "the perfect storm" for businesses, which may reduce or quit advertising if cuts must be made.

Bennett also said that if the IPA wanted to direct news coverage of the issue, it would have sent out directives asking for newspapers to take a position on the issue. It didn't do that.

"They (board members) wanted to make sure that the message was very clear that we were trying to keep a distinction" between the business group's position and any news coverage by member papers. "So it was not a private communique. We issued a public communique."

This is obviously a dilemma for the IPA, and in an industry where perception of fairness is critically important, the group's stand has caused a potential problem for its member newspapers. I haven't seen any move by the staff at my newspaper to do anything differently in covering this issue because of the IPA's stand. And that's as it should be.

## Walker artifacts

Watch for former Gov. **DAN WALKER** to come to Springfield in June to promote an autobiography and to give the state some artifacts of his famous walk the length of the state that helped him get elected in 1972.

Boots, a metal sign encouraging people to "honk and wave," and a journal of the walk transcribed from his daily dictations, as well as copies of his speeches, will be included in the treasures he's going to turn over, likely to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, which is formerly the Illinois State Historical Library.

His book, published by Southern Illinois University Press, is called "The Maverick and the Machine: Governor Dan Walker Tells His Story."

It includes his views on U.S. Sen. **BARACK OBAMA**, D-Ill., as well as what he calls "the travails" of Chicago Mayor **RICHARD DALEY** and Gov. Blagojevich.

Current plans will have the former Democratic governor, who now lives in California and Mexico, in Springfield June 10-12, which comes after a visit to Chicago.

## 'Capitol Capers' set

A great biennial event for people who like to see their legislators out of character and acting silly (Is that really out of character?) is set for next week.

"Capitol Capers" is a spoof musical revue put on as a fundraiser by the Conference of Women Legislators to help pay for scholarships and leadership training for women. At least 30 lawmakers - men as well as women - will take to the stage and reveal talents you may not have known about.

The past three shows have been a blast, and parts of the script that I have seen make this one fit right into that mold. At the least, it should provide some fun based on many of those contentious issues being fought at the Statehouse this year.

One theme of this year's show is "Capitol Idol," based on "American Idol."

There's also a "Miss Universal Pageant," where legislators in the competition each stand for an issue, like universal health care and pre-K education.

Songs include one about underfunded pensions to the tune of "When I'm 64," Rep. **ART TURNER**, D-Chicago, playing Obama singing new words to "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" and one about the new ban on food on the House floor, taking in vain the name of **TIM MAPES** House Speaker **MICHAEL MADIGAN**'s chief of staff.

Just imagine Majority Leader **BARBARA FLYNN CURRIE**, and Reps. **PATTI BELLOCK**, R-Hinsdale, and **SUZIE BASSIE**, R-Palatine, singing: "Stop in the name of Mapes/ before you eat those grapes."

"One of the big advantages is that we take an evening to make fun of ourselves, and get to know each other outside of the chambers," said Rep. **KATHY RYG**, D-Vernon Hills.

Ryg and Rep. **SARA FEIGENHOLTZ**, D-Chicago. are co-producers. **KATE O'MALLEY**, a lobbyist from Chicago with a theatrical background, is director. Writers are **JULIAN** and **RHONA FRAZIN** of Chicago. **BONNIE ETTINGER** of Springfield is pianist. Sen. **PAM ALTHOFF**, R-McHenry, and Rep. **KAREN MAY**, D-Highland Park, are co-chairs of COWL.

The show is at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Crowne Plaza, 3000 S. Dirksen Parkway. There's a cocktail buffet and a cash bar, and the base price is \$75.

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