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Doubling the tolls becomes an act of hubris

Instances of hubris abound in history. Indeed, one of the great lessons of the ancients is that hubris, or excessive arrogance in action, typically leads to the undoing of its purveyors. Examples of such hubris might include, say, the Athenians' unjust conquest of the Melians, an act of pure and unjustifiable aggression which, though successful, was followed by Athens' devastating loss at Sicily. This calamity ultimately led to Athens' fall.

Last week, the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority's board of directors approved a new 15-year, \$12 billion capital expansion plan. Tearing a page from the Netflix playbook, the board, whose members Gov. Patrick J. Quinn appoints, authorized nearly doubling the tolls drivers will pay to use the tollway beginning Jan. 1. People are upset.

The increase affects both I-Pass users and cash payers. I-Pass users will experience an 87.5 percent toll hike, taking a typical 40-cent toll to 75 cents. Cash patrons will pay double that new amount, taking the typical toll for these poor souls to \$1.50, nearly four times the original I-Pass price. Put another way, cash payers will be forced to pay double the new I-Pass rate, which is, of course, almost double the old I-Pass rate.

But whatever dizziness this rate increase might cause pales in comparison to the vertigo that someone watching the passage of this so-called plan might experience. Who says government can't move quickly when it wants to?

Here's the very brief chronology: On July 28, 2011, the tollway authority proposed its \$12 billion capital plan. The headline of the news release that announced this plan, before even saying a peep about the need for such a plan, boasted that it "will create more than 120,000 jobs and add \$21 billion to the economy."

This massive public works project includes the destruction/reconstruction of the just-this-summer repaved Jane Addams Memorial Tollway all the way to Rockford; a new interchange to connect I-294 and I-57; and a new road that would create western access to O'Hare International Airport. One Chicago newspaper warned the tollway authority that its purpose was to run the tollway system, not to create a jobs program.

In its news release, the toll authority pretended that it would listen to public opinion on the proposal at a "series of public hearings in the 12 counties ..." Yes, it hosted those hearings from Aug. 18 to 23, but the meetings were a sham. They took place over a mere five-day period with as many as four taking place in different locations at the same time.



Law & Politics

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Many individual citizens at these get-togethers voiced loud protests to the increase. They complained about its amount, noting that now is precisely the wrong time (the recession, high gas prices) to further tax drivers.

But their voices were drowned out by those better heeled and financed, namely those who would benefit financially from the plan. This included labor unions and heavy equipment purveyors. Such people came out en masse. Gov. Quinn was quoted as supporting the plan, which he characterized "an employment engine that would create tens of thousands of jobs." Then, only days after those meetings, on Aug. 25, the tollway board voted to pass the plan 7-1.

How was it that this huge plan was so quickly presented and then passed? It can only be because our state is the victim of one-party rule, because there is no opposition party to say boo about anything in an organized and effective manner.

There was no real public vetting of this project prior to the vote. And for sure, there was no real time for any prepared opposition to get going. Indeed, the manner in which this massive project was so quickly jammed down everyone's throats constitutes an act of hubris so great, that one thing is for sure: the Democratic Party in Illinois will take a hit for it. People won't easily forget or forgive this. This could be the spark that ignites a power shift in Illinois politics.

Cook County is Democrat to the bone. So is our state government. And when one party so dominates in this manner, things get out of whack. Any party that enjoys year after year of unchecked power begins to forget the lean years, the struggles it went through to win elections. It gets fat and then it gets sloppy and careless. It happens every time, regardless of which party is in power.

When that happens, the unchallenged in positions of power begin to rule by

edict, to assume that they can act with impunity, that the ends justify their means because their ends are always just. Why are they just? Because they are their ends, and their ends are always unchallengeable.

Why is it that again and again, from the earliest days of man to the present, people in positions of power are so often undone by such hubris? Perhaps it is because power corrupts. Put another way, officeholders all too often forget that they are the servants of those who sent them to office and begin to see themselves, however unconsciously, as the Babylonian King Hammurabi did when he received his laws from the Babylonian god Marduk.

"I am Hammurabi, the king of Babylon ... I am the chosen of the great god Marduk ... I have been chosen to rule over the four corners of the universe by the council of the gods ... I am all victorious and under my conquering command, the armies of Babylon have swept widely ... I am the chosen of Marduk here on earth and it is his command and his will that I rule ..."

As crazy as it sounds, those in power must be constantly on guard against entertaining such thoughts, against allowing themselves to believe they are anything but what they are: the representatives, not the represented; the agents not the principals; and the employees, not the employers. Indeed, is Hammurabi's mindset really all that different from so many in politics today?

Or how about the tollway authority, which so quickly voted on and approved their new plan, before any real opposition or even evaluation could get any footing? It goes without saying that a proposal this big, this sweeping and that has such a profound impact on our state's intra- and interstate commerce should have been put out sooner and the people given more time to evaluate, digest and comment on it.

But no. These individuals (bolstered, I might add, by the bravos of those who will make a lot of money on this project) either believe that they alone know what's best for the state or, more likely, believe they can freely maneuver whichever way they want without consequence.

We will all benefit when those in power have real rivals with whom they must deal. This will bring balance, force pencil sharpening, double-checking and extra care. It will serve as a check on their egos and help them avoid the traps of hubris. It will reinforce in them the notion that they work for others.

For the sake of our state, let's hope this happens soon.