

FIRST PERSON: LEGISLATORS ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE THEIR HOME DISTRICTS

Making new laws is only one of many ways senator views his role in economic recovery



by Illinois Sen. Dale Fowler

Like many state legislators from the Midwest, my roots run deep in the region that I have the privilege of serving. It's a place that I've called home my entire life.

The 59th Senate District encompasses all or parts of 13 counties in southern Illinois, runs along our state's border with Kentucky and Missouri, and includes parts of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

I was first elected to serve this region in 2016.

Ever since then, my work as a legislator has been driven by these questions: How can I help my home district grow and develop economically? How can I help enhance opportunities for our residents and businesses?

I've discovered that the answer is about much more than making new laws. We as legislators are uniquely positioned to be advocates of the communities and people that we know so well and that have special places in our hearts.

Here is the story of my home district and how I try to help it as a state legislator.

A WIN-WIN: TAPPING INTO THE POWER OF TOURISM

I fear that when people think of Illinois, they overlook and undervalue the strengths of our southern region.

What many people forget, for example, is that southern Illinois is an amazing tourist destination, with visitors coming from all over the country to enjoy a national forest, a multitude of state parks, shopping destinations, historic attractions and outdoor recreational spots. From Shawnee National Forest to Rend Lake to Dixon Springs State Park, the region has boundless attractions that

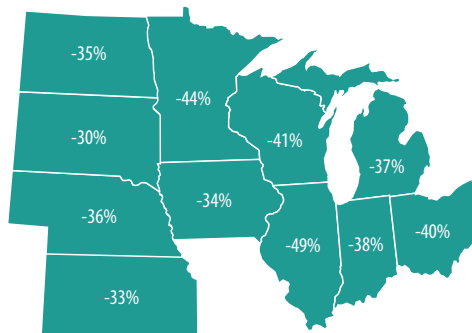
should continue to drive our tourism economy.

According to the U.S. Travel Association, for every \$1 million spent in Illinois by domestic and international travelers, 7.5 jobs are created. It estimates that in 2019, travel spending in Illinois generated a total of \$7.8 billion in tax receipts.

Tourism is an economic winner for any region, and throughout my tenure as senator, one of my major goals has been to promote Southern Illinois' diverse and stunning attractions.

My "Southern Illinois Treasures" series is a self-narrated, ongoing collection of videos (available on Facebook and other platforms) that take viewers to different parts of the region and highlight unique spots to visit. With Illinois' leisure and hospitality sectors having taken a major hit over the past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, driving tourists and visitors to these treasures is more important than ever in helping our state recover.

% DECLINE IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM SPENDING IN STATE BETWEEN 2019 AND 2020



Source: U.S. Travel Association

MEET THE MOMENT: HELPING BUSINESSES THROUGH COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic took a major toll on our local economy: skyrocketing unemployment rates, business closures, and the devastation wreaked on our vital hospitality industry.

This makes the goal of promoting and supporting economic development all the more critical.

After all, as an elected official, it is my responsibility to help the people of my district. And if people don't have jobs, if businesses don't have the support of their state government, or if entire industries never recover from this pandemic, our communities will suffer.

I refuse to let that be the story for Southern Illinois.

Now that we are beginning to move toward a full reopening of the economy, my responsibility as a lawmaker is to do my part to help create an environment that encourages job creators to rebuild.

For me, this includes sponsoring business-friendly legislation, such as my pending proposal to allocate a percentage of future federal COVID-19 relief funds to our state's Business Interruption Grants, or BIG, Program.

BIG leverages federal funding to help small businesses, particularly those in industries hit hardest by the pandemic and in some of Illinois' economically disadvantaged areas.

Under the proposal (SB 1615), 25 percent of COVID-19 funds would go to this program, which provides grants and loan-forgiveness assistance to businesses.

Beyond legislative proposals like these, I also believe that my office should serve as a resource for businesses and local communities as they navigate the post-pandemic landscape. I have a responsibility to promote, encourage and support our local enterprises, especially the small businesses that make up the backbone of our economy.

SUPPORT AND PROMOTE: LEADING ON 'BUY LOCAL'

For the past several years, I have put together an exposition for local vendors. At this event, they are able to promote their businesses, sell their goods and gain greater exposure. The Southern Illinois Made Expo attracts thousands of visitors, all in the spirit of shopping local. (Visit SImade.org to learn more.)

Whether it's touring a business, hosting an expo or shining a spotlight on job creators, we as elected officials have a unique platform to support our employers and employees.

We also can work to change the perception of our home region. That has been one of my goals for Southern Illinois, a region that is too often underestimated but that plays a vital role in the success and future of our entire state.

ROLE OF SMALL BUSINESSES IN MIDWEST'S ECONOMY

State	# of jobs from small businesses	% of total jobs in private workforce from small businesses
Illinois	2.5 million	45.1%
Indiana	1.2 million	44.4%
Iowa	649,796	48.0%
Kansas	605,147	50.5%
Michigan	1.9 million	49.0%
Minnesota	1.3 million	46.9%
Nebraska	412,587	49.5%
North Dakota	195,312	57.4%
Ohio	2.2 million	45.3%
South Dakota	209,403	58.2%
Wisconsin	1.3 million	49.5%

Source: U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, "2020 Small Business Profile" (data from 2017)



Illinois Sen. Dale Fowler (left) and Gov. J.B. Pritzker (right) announce a major new initiative to invest in the Alexander Cairo Port, which is located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

We have tremendous potential for growth and development. Currently we are in the process of building a casino/resort, and have numerous businesses that are being repurposed, revitalized and expanded. We've also made historic levels of investment in infrastructure, and a state-of-the-art inland port at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers is now under development.

We have the people, resources, ideas and tenacity to succeed and grow. It won't be easy, but we will find a way. Southern Illinois has a bright future, and as an elected official, I'm honored to be a part of making it happen.

Illinois Sen. Dale Fowler was first elected to the state Senate in 2016. He is a 2018 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).

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