

Collected Columns of 2012 by Mike Bryson

Published in as Common Sense op-ed articles in the Joliet *Herald-News*

Snowfall in an Urban Woodland

19 January 2012

(Published as "Winter Is Back, and It's Good to See" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p19)

Last week we finally made the transition from autumn to winter, after weeks of unseasonable warmth that gave us a brown holiday season and made small children throughout Joliet wonder if it would ever snow again.

When last week's storm blew in, I was lucky enough to be deep in a wooded wilderness -- rather than stuck in snarled traffic or confined to a windowless office, where we think of snow as irritating or irrelevant, rather than the miracle it is.

As I dropped my younger daughter off for pre-school at Pilcher Park's Nature Center last Thursday morning, the snow began to fall, gently and steadily. The children gathered to start their day in the woods, all bundled up with thick mittens and noisy snow-pants and stout boots, their sense of joy infectious. Instead of lining up quietly as usual, they whooped and ran, skidded and flopped, embracing the snow with the full passion of childhood.

I was inspired, both by the kids' delightful gamboling and the utter beauty of the woodland scene before me. Normally I leave the park and work dutifully before returning to retrieve my four-year-old naturalist. But that day I ignored my to-do list and took a winter ramble as the wet snow coated my glasses and clung to my beard.

I am particularly fond of the Outer Loop trail, which winds through the northernmost and most remote section of Pilcher Park, a hill-and-valley landscape of towering trees and meandering creeks. Though beautiful in any season, the forest now displayed stunning visual complexity: every branch, twig, seed pod, dried stem, and piece of leaf litter was coated with snow; every textured surface outlined in delicate white.

Soon I came to my favorite spot in the park, an overlook marked by a low stone wall. Here one has a commanding view of a broad wooded valley from a sixty-foot-high bluff. The only sounds were the ticking of snow upon my coat, the cheep of a lone sparrow, and the distant whistle of the Rock Island train.

Looping my way back, I meandered along Hickory Creek, which defines the park's southern border. Few things beguile more than a flowing stream in a snowy woodland, its rippling music foretelling of colder days ahead -- when the restless water turns to ice, and the river sleeps with the woods.

In such places, liberated from human noise and litter by the gathering snowfall, one may comprehend the value and special magic of urban wilderness -- the wild close at hand, even here in our cities and suburbs.

Yes, winter is here again, with its short days, slower rhythms, cold nights . . . and, at long last, snow. It's good to see it back.

Share your winter stories about Pilcher Park and other woodlands with Mike Bryson at mbry22@sbcglobal.net.

The Ongoing Tragedy of the Peotone Airport

23 February 2012

(published as "Great Imaginary Airport a Boondoggle for Illinois" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p20)

Thank goodness for the intransigence and political buffoonery of our Illinois public officials. Without their ceaseless bickering, the ill-fated and monumentally stupid Great Imaginary Airport project envisioned near Peotone might actually get off the ground.

As it is, the GIA -- known variously as the South Suburban Airport (its IDOT-sanctioned title) and the Abraham Lincoln National Airport (Jesse Jackson, Jr.'s grandiose appellation) -- exists only in the misguided minds of transportation technocrats and Pollyannaish politicians.

This bizarre state of affairs stems, in part, from our elected leaders having serious control issues. Ever since I began writing about the GIA fiasco in 2007, debate has raged about who gets to sit on the airport's board, what to call the facility (see above), and which paint colors should adorn the terminal's bathroom walls.

What gets overlooked in this petty drama are two things far more important and disturbing: (1) the grand fiscal folly of a bankrupt state spending untold millions to construct an airport 40 miles from Chicago's Loop that no commercial airline wants; and (2) the grotesque social injustice of government land grabs perpetrated against law-abiding, tax-paying rural landowners within the phantom airport's ghostly footprint.

The GIA is so far from physical realization that even its most ardent supporters have no idea when it might actually be built. Due to the project's incompetent political sponsorship thus far, final FAA approval is probably still years away and far from guaranteed. At least I hope so.

Despite those damning facts -- and the stark economic reality that Illinois is billions of dollars in the red and cannot even pay its regular bills as required by law -- Governor Quinn continues to pledge \$100 million of state money for additional land acquisition for the GIA.

That's not counting the money we've already blown. To date, IDOT has spent \$34,014,383 and change (of taxpayer funds) acquiring 2,471 acres of prime Will County farmland surrounded by the small towns of Peotone, Beecher, and Monee. But since thousands of acres remain in private hands within the GIA's footprint, and with land prices at historic lows, IDOT officials have stepped up the pressure on unwilling sellers by commencing formal condemnation proceedings.

This means that folks like Vivian and Willis Bramstaedt, who had hoped to retire on their farm near Beecher as they enter their sunset years, are being taken to court and will have their land condemned. What the State wants, the State gets.

"We got the letter sometime late in the fall," Vivian told me the other day. "I've no doubt in my mind the state will take our land. There's nothing we can do. It's just a matter of time now."

I asked Vivian how people in Beecher felt about the GIA. "Some support it, because they think it will be an economic boost," she admitted. "But a lot oppose it. The community is split, I suppose. And the thing is, most people can't even think about it anymore. They've had the airport hanging over their heads for so long, they seem to have become numb."

I ask you this: why is Illinois spending millions of dollars it doesn't have to take citizens like the Bramstaedts to court and condemn their property? How can such a thing be tolerated by my fellow citizens in the Land of Lincoln? And why don't any of our elected representatives have the backbone to stand up and state the truth about the monumental waste and injustice of Peotone's Great Imaginary Airport?

Mike Bryson of Joliet (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) urges readers to contact Gov. Pat Quinn, US Senators Dick Durbin and Mark Kirk, and your local state and county legislators. Send them your views, whatever they are, on the South Suburban Airport fiasco.

An Urban Farm in Downtown Joliet? It Could Happen

29 March 2012

(published as "The Revolution of Urban Agriculture" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p11)

The phrase "urban agriculture" might seem like an oxymoron. But this burgeoning social and economic movement is revolutionizing food production, land use, K-12 education, and community development in big cities like Chicago. Smaller cities like Joliet have an opportunity to vault to the vanguard of urban agricultural innovation, if they just seize the day.

This spring some of my Roosevelt University students and I work Wednesday afternoons at the Chicago Lights Urban Farm, a small but incredibly productive operation in the Cabrini-Green neighborhood on Chicago's Near-North Side. This half-acre oasis of green built atop an abandoned basketball court started as a community garden back in 2002. Now, the Chicago Lights staff, volunteers, and local youth interns produce over 100 kinds of vegetables each growing season from this hitherto derelict property.

The Cabrini-Green farm is thus a vital source of freshly grown, organic produce in a place where walking to the nearest supermarket can entail crossing a dangerous gang boundary. It's also a training ground for local youth in need of practical job skills; a demonstration site for sustainable agricultural techniques; a place of peace in an area pockmarked by poverty and violence; and a means of reconnecting urban folk to the natural world.

Here in Joliet, various groups have jumpstarted impressive urban agriculture initiatives lately, including the Cool Joliet / USF community garden project on the near West Side, the Joliet Park District's new community garden opening up on McDonough Street on the far West Side; and Pilcher Park's community/school garden on the East Side.

One remarkable opportunity waiting to bloom sits smack dab in the city's center: the huge vacant lot located just west of JT Central's campus and east of Silver Cross Field. Formerly the site of Rendel's auto-body repair shop, this expansive grassy parcel is now owned by the high school district and has a yet-to-be-determined destiny.

The school district should think big about what this property could be. One ambitious but exciting option is to create an education-focused urban agriculture enterprise for JT Central students that could start small, but eventually scale up and diversify to achieve educational and social impacts that would be unprecedented within the greater Chicago region.

Imagine students, teachers, and staff just walking outside to the farm next door and doing meaningful physical work growing and harvesting organically produced food. Such projects could be fully integrated with the school's science, social studies, phys ed, business and health curricula, so that students learn from the ground up the ecological, economic, and social benefits of urban agriculture. Imagine their fresh local produce being donated to local food pantries, sold by student entrepreneurs at the Joliet farmers market, and eaten by students in Central's cafeteria.

I know -- it sounds pretty far-fetched. But then again, is it any crazier than believing you can grow food on top of an old basketball court in Cabrini-Green?

Mike Bryson of Joliet (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) teaches in the Sustainability Studies program at Roosevelt University. For more information on the vibrant Farm-to-School movement in the US, see www.farmtoschool.org.

Thanks, Jessie, for Getting STAND Back on Its Feet

6 May 2012

(published as "The Airport Nobody Wants or Needs" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p29)

The Saturday before Earth Day, Jesse Jackson, Jr. and a contingent of political supporters rode down to the farmlands of eastern Will County to spade up a little dirt in a pious promotion of the ill-fated Great Imaginary (aka Peotone) Airport.

Given that the project has neither FAA approval nor the support of a single major airline, Jackson's well-publicized pontifications were presumptuous -- but not pointless, for they re-energized the hitherto dispirited airport opposition movement around Peotone, Beecher, and Monee, the small towns most affected by this ongoing fiasco.

I drove out northeast of Peotone that Saturday in hopes of attending Jackson's media stunt and the planned counter-demonstration by the longstanding grassroots organization Shut This Airport Nightmare Down (STAND). Turned out I was too late and missed them both.

But after heading past the Illinois Department of Transportation's heavily-fenced airport headquarters on Eagle Lake Road west of State Route 50 -- a place derisively nicknamed "The Compound" by locals for its quasi-military installation appearance -- I ran into some folks who helpfully filled me in on the day's proceedings.

Robert Ogalla, a farmer whose wife Judy is the vice-president of STAND, grows corn, soybeans, and wheat on their picturesque farm along County Road 10. Back in 2003, the Ogallas received a commendation from the Will-South Cook Soil and Water Conservation District for their exemplary efforts to reduce soil erosion and polluting runoff on their property.

Mr. Ogalla described the lively scene that had transpired earlier that day at the Compound, where over 400 STAND supporters had gathered peacefully to protest Jackson's groundbreaking event and voice their many objections to the state's relentless land-acquisition plans.

"This is some of the best farmland in the world," Ogalla told me, gesturing toward his well-tended fields. "Those trees you see there on the horizon were planted many years ago as part of Illinois' Conservation Reserve Program by my 101-year-old neighbor."

He paused to let that sink in, then continued, "All this will be gone if the airport gets built. The irony of it is that no airline even wants it."

Another STAND member, Virginia Hamann of Peotone, drives a bus for the Peotone School District and helps her husband run a dairy farm located across the road from the proposed airport. "What gets me is the terrible waste of money all this is," she said.

How wasteful, you might ask? Many of those fertile fields I admired that day already have been purchased by the state -- to be precise, 2,471 acres at the cost of 34,014,383 taxpayer dollars -- all without FAA approval of the project, naturally.

Now, with willing sellers scarce and land values low, IDOT has condemned some local farmers' property to close the deal on the remaining acreage within the Great Imaginary Airport's nine-square-mile footprint.

When I asked Ogalla and Hamann how their neighbors were feeling about the airport issue these days, they estimated that a strong majority, perhaps 70-80 percent, now backed STAND's opposition to the project.

So here's your silver lining. After several years of community demoralization in the face of a seemingly-unstoppable government juggernaut, the awakening provided by Jesse Jackson, Jr.'s grandstanding gambit has re-ignited grassroots opposition to one of the most foolhardy endeavors in Illinois history. Or so I hope.

Joliet resident Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) would like to build an airport, too, but just a small one for balsa wood planes in his backyard. No eminent domain proceedings by IDOT will be necessary in its construction.

Bulldozing the Rights of the People: That's the Illiana Way

7 June 2012

(published as "Illiana Bulldozing Rights of Citizens in Its Path" in the Joliet *Herald-News*)

Remember the Prairie Parkway? Just a few years ago, it was the Big New Road Project of choice in northeastern Illinois. A monumentally dumb idea for a whole host of reasons, the Prairie Parkway fortunately fizzled after the recession of 2008 (though old road projects are rather like zombies that can't be killed once and for all).

The new road of the day is the much ballyhooed Illiana Expressway, which will link the booming metropolises of Lowell, IN, and Wilmington, IL, and in the process pave over a lot of high-quality Midwestern farmland. But the Illiana isn't a gentle zombie that plods along with a vacant stare. No, this road monster is pure evil, and it's coming after us with ferocious speed.

Local politicians and IDOT officials claim we need the Illiana to divert truck traffic from I-80 and US-30; support the burgeoning warehouse/distribution center district in central Will County; provide east-west highway access to the yet-to-be-built (or even approved) Peotone Airport; and create jobs.

The Peotone Airport reference is a big red flag, though. Right now, legal but unethical eminent domain proceedings are being wielded by IDOT against Will County landowners unwilling to give up their land for this Great Imaginary Airport that no airline supports.

Now the Illinois legislature has approved "quick-take" powers for IDOT to seize more private property for the Illiana Expressway, an action that should outrage you, fellow citizens. Why?

Start with the gross injustice here. Quick-take allows the state to simply declare it wants a piece of property, then take it. The process is nice and quick -- hence the name -- and conveniently circumvents the normal eminent domain process (itself hardly benign) by which citizens may take the state to court to fight the condemnation or haggle over a selling price once their property is condemned.

Secondly, the road has no funding. The only money that's been allocated thus far for the Illiana is \$9 million for several years' worth of environmental impact and planning studies. Projected unfunded construction costs include over \$3 billion for the Illinois section alone.

Finally, and mostly absurdly, IDOT hasn't decided where the road will go. Right now two different routes for the Illiana are being evaluated (along with, ironically, a "no-build" option to appease malcontents like me). How in the world can IDOT condemn property under quick-take if an official route hasn't yet been chosen and approved? Does this strike anyone else besides me as completely illogical?

Perhaps this is root of the problem. When it comes to phantom roads and imaginary airports, there are no ethics or logic operating in Springfield.

The road monsters are coming, people. It's quick-take season now. Better get out of the way, or you'll get run over.

Joliet resident Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) thinks we have plenty of roads in Illinois already and appreciates the fact that his Joliet street was repaved last week. No new roads were created in this stimulation of the local economy.

Walking to Grandma Millie's

12 July 2012

(published as "'Grandma Millie' Sets Pace for the Family" in the Joliet *Herald-News*)

Not long ago I walked with my kids from our home in Joliet to my Grandmother Millie's house to pay her a friendly visit. The distance is nine-tenths of a mile: long enough for me to get a little exercise, but not so far that my young kids can't handle it.

Every time I make that walk, I reflect on how lucky we are to live in such close proximity to Gram; and how fortunate it was for me growing up here in Joliet, where I could walk or bike to both of my grandparents' homes. I often zipped over to Grandma Millie's in the summer to help Grandpa in his garden, then eat cookies and quaff Dr. Pepper while listening to the Cubs game with Gram.

These days, urban planners rightly extol the virtues of walkable neighborhoods, where people can stroll from their homes to the post office, train station, school, grocery store, barbershop, and park.

Yet in most American communities, walking is an endangered pastime. Consider the contemporary perversity of driving half a mile to the health club to run five miles on a computerized treadmill. Alternatively (and far more cheaply), I just look for any practical excuse to go walking -- like my grandparents did in their day.

Gram was a champion walker most of her life, though it wasn't always so. As a teenager living on Joliet's West Side during the Roaring Twenties, she was dropped off at JT High downtown by her doting father on his way to work. She wore high-heeled shoes to school and was pleased as punch about it.

But then she met Abe Bryson, the son of a laborer whose family was always two steps ahead of poverty. Since his family couldn't afford a car, Abe walked everywhere -- including when he took his stylish new girlfriend Millie out on a date, or gallantly carried her across a muddy cornfield to keep her shoes and stockings clean.

When she once groused after hiking downtown to a Joliet ice cream parlor, he looked down at her feet disapprovingly and said, "Well, maybe you should get yourself a decent pair of shoes, Mil." Sufficiently smitten with his charms, Gram wasn't about to let Abe walk out of her life on account of, well, having to walk. So she got some good sensible shoes, and their relationship blossomed.

My grandparents' walking habits during their courtship and young marriage in the Great Depression would stagger a typically slothful American these days. They thought nothing of walking from Reed Street on the West Side all the way to Pilcher Park on the East Side (over five miles) and then hiking the park's trails before taking a streetcar home. On Saturday mornings, they'd hoof across the river to deliver my Great-Grandmother Bryson's home-made donuts to her regular East Side customers.

Now 98 years old and blind, Gram's just about done with walking. Hobbled with a recent hip injury and in the twilight of her life, she's mostly confined to her bed. But up until recently, she had gingerly moved through her little house, feeling her way along, getting her exercise the best way she knew: walking.

Now that her high-stepping days are finally done, I sense she's preparing for that last long walk home -- the place we all walk to someday.

Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) now lives walking distance from his childhood home in Joliet, the very house where his Grandma Millie grew up.

Wherefore the Middle Class Worker?

17 Aug 2012

(published as "Caterpillar Needs To Strike up a Fair Deal with Worke19" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p--)

Without Caterpillar Corporation, I probably wouldn't exist.

Once upon a time, a Kansas farm boy (my grandfather) moved to central Illinois with some of his brothers to find work. He eventually caught on at Caterpillar in Peoria, where he became a union machinist -- what he always called a "tool and die man." He worked hard, got married, and started a family. Then around 1951, he was transferred to the brand-new Joliet hydraulics plant and moved here with his wife and two kids.

One of those children was my mother, then nine years old, who years later met and married my father -- and just a few years afterward, I arrived on the scene. Hence my very existence depended upon, among others things, Grandpa getting that job at Cat.

I relate this family anecdote because when it comes to grappling with the meaning and significance of the current union strike at the Caterpillar plant in Joliet, now well into its fourth excruciating month, history matters. Personal connections matter.

In a working class town like this, where people from all walks of life have deep and sometimes tangled histories with the Joliet's industrial past, labor disputes resonate. They're not just abstract stories in the news about someone else somewhere else. They're about us: our aspirations, our values, our prejudices, our sense of community.

As an Illinois citizen, I have a vested interest in Caterpillar remaining strong and vibrant. Its very identity is built from equal parts technological innovation, engineering expertise, and good old-fashioned hard work. Cat's products and the myriad of jobs the company provides are important to Illinois' economic vitality.

But as the grandson of a tool and die man, I also feel solidarity with the hundreds of striking machinists out on Route 6. In their rejection of Cat management's offers of a new long-term work contract, Local 851 union members hardly are asking for the moon. What they're putting themselves on the line for, rather, is the preservation of good blue-collar jobs within America's embattled middle class.

Caterpillar management's latest offer to the workers (up for a vote today) would freeze wages, double health care expenses, and cut into pension benefits. One shouldn't forget that Cat has had a longstanding multi-tier pay schedule in place for union machinists, with those hired after May 2nd, 2005, getting significantly lower wages than older "Tier 1" workers. So-called "supplemental" machinists get paid even less than the Tier 2 folks. See a pattern?

Meanwhile, Caterpillar achieved record sales, revenues, and profits in 2011 -- and its second quarter profits in 2012 are the highest in company history. Yet with labor contract talks at fits and starts, Cat is playing hardball by advertising for and hiring replacement workers, thereby taking advantage of high local unemployment conditions in which any job seems like a good job.

The Caterpillar labor dispute is thus a microcosm of the growing cultural conflict between the exaltation of corporate greed and self-interest (the market rules best) and the long-term viability of America's working class (the people matter most).

Most folks agree that our country needs good manufacturing jobs with decent wages and benefits, that companies should play fair, and that employees should work hard. But how do we put those common values into practice? We'll soon find out here in Joliet.

Joliet resident Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) supports the striking workers and exhorts union leadership and Cat management to find common ground at the negotiating table -- the sooner the better.

Want To Create Jobs? Let's Invest in our Schools

23 September 2012

(published as "Equitable Education Equals a Strong Economy" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p25)

The recent Chicago Teacher's Union strike has exposed a long list of contentious issues in our K-12 educational system. The most troubling of these is the glaring inequity among our region's public schools.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Chicago's District 299, where a small percentage of children enjoy a world-class education at one of the District's vaunted selective enrollment schools, while most students languish in understaffed and overwhelmed neighborhood schools surrounded by violence and economic stagnation.

This long-entrenched divide between the educational haves and have-nots not only mirrors the gulf between rich and poor in American society, it also replicates and reinforces these socioeconomic inequities. You don't need a PhD to know that students from disadvantaged schools are less likely to graduate, go to college, and get good jobs, and (not incidentally) stay out of prison.

The source of this inequity is equally obvious. Since local property taxes provide the lion's share of funding for America's school districts, the resources (and therefore the quality) of the schools are directly proportional to the wealth of their community.

Schools in big-money districts have all the bells and whistles: small class sizes, good facilities, broad offerings in languages and the fine arts, and gifted learning programs. Meanwhile, impoverished districts limp along with overcrowded classrooms, out-of-date technology, bare-bones curricula, and overstretched faculty. (The metal detectors are state-of-the-art, though.)

This is not right. It's not acceptable for a kid's educational future to be determined simply by where she was born. And it darn well needs to change.

That's because the fates of our economy and educational system are inextricably linked. When the economy tanks, we unwisely respond by slashing public education funding -- cutting programs, firing teachers, closing schools. State and federal support for K-12 education has steadily deteriorated. But this misguided strategy merely guarantees more economic problems down the line, as we end up with poorly-educated citizens who are not college-ready and cannot compete for good entry-level jobs, let alone start businesses and become "job creators" themselves.

Here's an alternative plan. Let's invest in two critical pillars of K-12 educational excellence that every high-achieving school district in America takes for granted: small class sizes and rich curricular offerings. We do it by (1) hiring tens of thousands of teachers for overpopulated schools, and (2) building additional classroom space where needed. This initiative would put people to work by creating superior learning environments for our kids.

Instead of just emphasizing crowd control in classrooms of 30 children (the standard class size in Joliet's District 86), teachers could do meaningful work with groups of 18-22, thus giving kids exponentially more time and quality instruction. Every school, not just the richest 1%, would have foreign language from kindergarten onward, full-time art and music teachers, a school garden linked to the science and health curriculum, and gifted education for students who need greater challenge.

Citizens of wealthy school districts don't consider these things "luxuries," but rather absolute necessities. So why is it acceptable to us as a nation that so many of our schools do without?

Let's get our professional educators and our tradespeople back to work building a better, more equitable educational system. There is no more important investment in our future that we can make.

Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) is an associate professor of humanities and sustainability studies at Roosevelt University in Chicago. He attended public schools here in Joliet.

How To Get Elected to Political Office

28 October 2012

(published as "Illinois Has One Big, Happy, Political Family" in the Joliet *Herald-News*)

It's not terribly hard to get elected to political office these days. All you need are lots of money, well-heeled connections (preferably of the family variety), a dash of luck, and some clever campaign tactics to bring the vote home. Given this short and simple list, it's a wonder more of us aren't running.

First, you've got to have money. The higher your office aspirations, the more you need. To get this money, you must make connections with people who have money.

Yes, you could work like a dog to earn money and cultivate your connections. But sheer luck is quicker and much less exhausting. Being born into a rich and/or politically connected family is a marvelously effective conduit to money and its siblings, power and influence.

If you're considering families to be born into, check out the Romney, Kennedy, or Bush clans if you plan to compete for state or national office. In Chicago, I recommend having Daley or Jackson as your last name. Here in Will County, a good way to an Illinois General Assembly job is to be born a Walsh or McGuire.

Next, you need to figure out what you stand for on the great issues of the day. But don't get bogged down by complicated stuff like foreign policy or pension reform. Given Americans' long-established preference for style over substance, I recommend utilizing some generic yet appealing phrases such as "freedom," "opportunity," "lower taxes," and "the middle class." These are patriotic, battle-tested, and delightfully vague non-positions that appeal to folks across the political spectrum.

Finally, don't forget to use tactics: practical campaign strategies carefully engineered to cultivate votes. Two wonderful examples of tactical mastery are currently on display right here in Will County.

State Representative Larry Walsh, Jr. (D-86th District) definitely knows how to get his name out there. Appointed by a special Democratic committee last spring to replace Jack McGuire (who conveniently retired right after his election when he suddenly realized he just wasn't up for the job anymore), Walsh is a relative newcomer to state politics with a high profile name. His dad, Larry Walsh, is the longstanding Chief Executive Office of Will County, a former state senator, and one of the area's most recognizable politicians.

Wisely, Rep. Walsh, Jr. has designed his campaign signs to highlight his name in big bold letters -- LARRY WALSH -- while including the "Jr." as a teeny-tiny afterthought that you can barely see without a magnifying glass. Even though most voters don't know beans about Walsh, Jr. himself, they sure recognize his name. You can't buy publicity like that -- though you can be born into it (see above).

But for sheer political brilliance and understated bravado, there's Jesse Jackson, Jr., the embattled and recently reclusive US Representative from IL's 2nd Congressional District who is heading toward a landslide victory despite not having shown up at his office for the last four months, let alone hit the campaign trail.

Reportedly suffering from mental and gastrointestinal illness, and politically buffeted by two different ethics-related inquiries, Jackson realizes that saying and doing nothing at all as the entrenched incumbent is the most expedient route to re-election while facing two overmatched and unknown challengers.

Sometimes in politics, small is beautiful. And silence can be golden.

Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) of Joliet is registered Democrat who fully intends to vote despite the jaded cynicism of this column.

Junior's Fall from Grace: More Bad News for Peotone

4 December 2012

(published as "'Great Imaginary Airport' Wars Not Over Yet in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p26)

You'd think that Jessie Jackson Jr.'s stunning fall from political grace last week would have opponents of the Great Imaginary Airport in Peotone doing cartwheels of joy out in the cold autumnal winds of eastern Will County.

After all, the last significant public appearance by Jackson was way back on April 21st, when as a progressive-minded environmentalist he promoted Earth Day by sanctimoniously spading up soil in a Peotone-area cornfield while surrounded by media and bussed-in supporters from his 2nd Congressional District. His purported "people's groundbreaking" was for what Jackson insisted on calling the Abraham Lincoln National Airport.

That grandiose name is telling, for it expresses Jr.'s once-vaulting political ambition even as it inappropriately cloaks a misguided boondoggle of an airport project in the image of one of America's most revered presidents. It also signifies the longstanding logjam between Jackson's Cook County-based Abraham Lincoln National Airport Commission (ALNAC) and the various governmental bodies of Will County, which understandably want to retain control over the airport's construction and administration.

That's why the folks of S.T.A.N.D. (Shut This Airport Nightmare Down) and other grassroots opponents of the Great Imaginary Airport should mourn rather than celebrate Jackson's departure and ALNAC's inevitable dissolution. Without the gridlock-producing squabbles over the airport's construction funding, name, or design that Jackson's commission helped create, airport proponents now have before them a slightly less congested path toward the project's FAA approval -- which hinges upon, among many other things, a unified governing authority for the airport.

Note that I said "slightly." That's because building a functional political alliance in Illinois these days is about as likely as finding a Republican candidate with a chance to win Jackson's empty seat in the forthcoming special election his resignation necessitates. Consequently, the fate of the Great Imaginary Airport will continue to be determined by a long war of retrenchment among various factions, some high profile and others little known.

On one side are Governor Pat Quinn and his army of IDOT technocrats, who have spent \$29.8 million of taxpayer money thus far buying up 2,317 acres of land in the as-yet-unapproved airport's footprint, and are now expanding their holdings through eminent domain proceedings against unwilling sellers.

Aligned with Quinn are various Will County leaders eager for a big fat construction project to provide local jobs, no matter how temporary those might be or whether the long-term prospects of the airport are viable.

On the other side are Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, who strenuously opposes the project as antithetical to an expanded O'Hare; and United CEO Jeff Smisek, who is on record opposing a third airport for the Chicago region (a view shared by other major airline execs, as well).

Joining their ranks are the politically weak but morally righteous grassroots opponents in eastern Will County, who correctly view the airport as a naked land grab by the state; and a guy named Jim Bult, who in a supreme example of irony already owns and runs a small private airport within the footprint of the GIA (Bult Field) and who to my knowledge has no desire to shut down his operation or take his neighbors' land.

Sure, we'll miss you, Junior, and all the free theater you provided us over the years. But as for the Great Imaginary Airport controversy in Peotone, the war grinds on.

Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) of Joliet thinks other transportation projects are more worthy of Illinois taxpayer support, and welcomes your comments.