Good (snow) fences make good neighbors

Winter’s when even anti-government types might find common ground with progressives in appreciating public services. After all, taxpayers need government to do what individuals cannot, whether it’s building schools and staffing them, or providing police protection. But sometimes politicians zeal for power results in short-sighted decisions, like refusing to reform wasteful expenditures, or refusing to raise taxes when needed.

A case in point is the use of the slatted wooden snow fences, which used to be common, sometimes dubbed “corn fences.” As recent cold and blustery days attest, they’re still needed, but at a time when the states financial house is in disarray and prices are up for fuel, asphalt and salt, the response is cost-cutting, forcing IDOT to sacrifice.

Illinoians bear the burden.

Add to budget and staff cutbacks a relatively late harvest and a stormy December, and the cheap and effective snow fences are virtually absent throughout the area.

“Our [work-force] head count is down, I’d say, 10 or 15 percent,” says Shane Larson, operations engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) District 4; “and we used to bring in temporary winter crews in mid-October; now it’s mid-November. So we run into problems — like the ground being frozen.”

Bad weather hinders things, of course, but bi-partisan political decisions to repudiate any tax increase for growing state needs, and to maintain or even expand programs without adequate resources, force cutbacks. No one likes paying taxes. But no one likes crumbling bridges, animal carcasses by roads, lossy schools, unpaid health providers, or icy roads, either.

For instance, IDOT reportedly changed its long-time “bare pavement” policy to remove all snow and ice from roads. Now the state’s approach to clearing roads is a “2 1/2 percent snow coverage” level, where two wheel paths in each lane of a road is acceptable.

It’s a challenge, Larson says. “It seems like a struggle getting as many snow fences up as we’d like,” concedes Larson, noting the distress of 12 west-central Illinois counties, including Peoria, Knox, McLean, Tazewell, Warren and Woodford, with about 160 full-time equivalent personnel to patrol 5,550 miles of rural road.

“In the winter, we’re plowing, salting, repairing and cleaning the trucks, and we don’t get time to put up snow fences,” he continues. “Right now, I have 25 crews dealing with potholes, which is a safety issue. People expect cold and snow, and wind and ice in Illinois in winter. But what might be the smartest personal choice — staying off streets and roads is much cheaper and safer in terms of public transportation doesn’t go where jobs remain. So people expect winter woes but also government services. Illinois just can’t afford that it seems,” Larson adds. For one thing, “storage is limited, but we have the wood-slats fences and some plastic fences at most maintenance yards. (But) they do tend to deteriorate.”

Snow fencing typically costs about $1 a foot, and is somewhat simple to install. However, using snow fences isn’t an exact science. A snow fence is a thin structure, mostly wood and wire, used to force snow to drift in more predictable ways. They don’t technically stop drifting and blowing snow like windbreaks. Instead, they create a vortex of wind to tumble snow into drifts before the snow reaches roads.

Also, snowplow drivers usually know where snow drifts over roads, but landowners have to approve the snow fences before any are placed there.

From the edge of a road’s right way — about 30 feet out from roads’ center lines — IDOT crews take about 15 steps into empty fields and erect the 4-foot-high fences some 6 inches off the ground.

“We need permission to put up snow fences,” Larson says. “With some farmers there’s no problem. Some prefer we do not — it just don’t like us out in their fields. We can’t force our way on.”

Land usage has changed, too, he adds. “I think there’s less livestock and less fencing in fields, which are cleared and used right up to the right of way.” Larson says. “In the past, the state’s paid farmers to leave a few rows of corn up, but that faded. There’s some renewed interest in that.”

In Springfield, here’s little interest in raising taxes, because conservatives have made cutting taxes a central plank of a plan to save $1.5 billion by mid-year. “If more farmers don’t save money, then we’re saving too much,” Larson says. “If the farmers don’t cut corners, that’s a good thing. But then they cut corners.”

We supposedly live in the freest country in the world. Our national anthem declares that we are “in the land of the free.” Our founders knew the importance of certain freedoms and they expressed this boldly by making the First Amendment address the “freedom of religion, press, and expression.” Historically, there appears to have been a great emphasis on freedom in the United States. However, currently do we understand what freedom means and how we can maintain it?

The best way to respect and honor freedom is to exercise it. Among the best ways to promote freedom is to appeal to the First Amendment by writing or speaking up about important issues and taking positions that may be controversial or unpopular. Journalists serve as the intermediary between the public and the politicians. A working democracy requires a media that will speak the truth. Hence, journalists that epitomize this responsibility to the public need to be admired and defended. In this vein, do you know of the work of Alan Thomas or Amy Goodman? (More on them soon.)

Historically, Americans have demonstrated their sense of freedom by speaking for forcibly, and in unjustices we face. Our nation’s established heroes did this. Thomas Jefferson did so in the cause of unfair taxes levied by the British Empire. Abraham Lincoln did similarly on the issue of slavery, calling it immoral one-hundred-and-fifty-and-years ago while on the grounds of Knox College. Alice Paul did it during World War I on the matter of women’s suffrage. More recently, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke against both racism and poverty, as well as brutal and unjust war in Vietnam.

Fortunately we remember some of these heroes and people and even observe a holiday for them each year. In fact, in just a week, in fact, when the first Monday in May falls on a Monday, it’s celebrated as a federal holiday. Like many federal holidays, it’s as the history is Alice Walker, there are hundreds of other heroes that largely go unrecognized in mainstream history books. It is almost as if their contribution has been washed from our collective memory. More tragically, it has become anti-American to criticize or call into question the actions of the U.S. government or its military. Yet, any honest assessment of U.S. history suggests that such queries and criticism are often warranted. And it is precisely those individuals that speak up, as a result endure ridicule or worse, that we need to support. Sadly too often the important messages being communicated by these questioners or critics are lost in the debate, the righteous, and status quo politics that most people hardly hear their lamentations.

This is why it is so important to ask, as the Helen Thomas and Amy Goodman now. They are (and have been) at the forefront of challenging the status quo. As reporters for the AP, they’re different arms of the same media, they have been persistently asking the tough questions over the years. Are enough of us listening to them? Are enough of us celebrating and defending these patriots who defend freedom? Ms. Thomas, as a correspondent for United Press International (UPI) for over fifty years, and most recently as an employee of the White House Press Corps, has had the opportunity to ask generations of U.S. presidents many questions on behalf of the public. And she has not shirked this responsibility. Demonstrating a courageous and provocative, Helen has the gumption and the sense of urgency of calling us all to get at the heart of an issue. Former White House Press Secretary, Scott McClellan, described Helen as “not afraid to ask the tough tough questions and hold accountable for the decisions that are made” (Interview). On many occasions Helen drilled President George W. Bush about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. After seeing his last press conference this past week, President Bush failed to call on Helen, the most senior member of the Corps. Perhaps she is being cautious, and avoid “troublesome” inquiries. Helen says she would have asked the President, “Why do you continue to support this killing machine?” Interview? Now in her 80’s, she looks as sharp as she has ever been. Her honesty and clarity is something to behold. She protects the civil liberties for all each day by speaking truth.

No less courageous, Amy Goodman deserves our utmost respect as well. Amy has risked her life covering human rights violations of the worst kind in Nigeria and East Timor. She co-founded Democracy Now! The War and Peace Report in the hour-long news program which can be listened to on hundreds of radio stations nationwide as well as watched on Free Speech TV and Link TV represents a hard-hitting representation and discussion of all things political. Daily shows can be watched/heard at www.democracynow.org or in Galesburg on 90.7 WVRX at 6 a.m. or 10 p.m.

How do we treat Ms. Goodman? Well, she was arrested this summer while interviewing attendees at the Republican National Convention held in Minnesota? On what charge? All charges were mysteriously dropped soon afterward.

So where do Helen and Amy fit into our lives? Well, we are in a prime position to defend those who defend our rights and justice today. Whether they are defending the rights of the afflicted, the wrongly accused, homosexuals, single mothers, or people who we need to recognize and applaud. One day in the not so distant future, history will clarify for everyone who were heroes of their time. Why not celebrate their heroism now rather than later? Just this past week Amy Goodman interviewed Angela Davis on the show aired, Tuesday, 1/13/09, and can be downloaded at www.democracynow.org. Interview. Democracy Now. DAILY NEWS SHOW. (1/13/09)