

Dunstan feels budget crisis impact on SIUE



Posted: Friday, April 8, 2016 11:27 am

Segue/Logan Cameron

In this week's segment of Segue, SIUE Interim Chancellor Stephen Hansen, PhD, welcomes SIUE alumnus Alan Dunstan, chairman of the Madison County Board of Directors. Dunstan holds two bachelor's from SIUE: in government with a specialization in state and local government, and in business administration with a

specialization in economics.

Having served on the Madison County Board of Directors for nearly 36 years, Dunstan has been chairman since 2002. He has been elected to three-consecutive terms, and is currently running for a fourth. Overseeing a board of 29 members, who each service districts of approximately 9,800 residents, can be quite complex.

Dunstan oversees 24 departments and collaborates with nine other county-wide, elected officials. While he wears many hats, Dunstan's primary responsibility as chairman is setting Madison County's budget. The budget is presented to the board for approval and is used to run the County's operations.

Dunstan has made Illinois political history throughout his career. As a student at SIUE, Dunstan considered running for office in the Student Senate, but instead ran for an alderman seat for the City of Troy (Ill.). At the ripe age of 21, he won the election to become the youngest elected official in the state of Illinois, at the time. Just two years later, he ran for a position on the Madison County Board of Directors – against the 16-year mayor of Troy, Ill. – and beat him to become the youngest Madison County Board of Directors member ever, still to this day, at 23.

Much like SIUE, the Madison County Board of Directors is currently facing financial hardships as a direct result of the State of Illinois' budget crisis. "With our County budget being appropriated for everything from the Madison County Sheriff's Department to the Madison County Health Department, we've had our hardships while working with very tight budgets as well, but I think we do a pretty good job," explains Dunstan. "Unfortunately, the State of Illinois owes Madison County money, and we are at a point that we are starting to get a little bit nervous about when it's coming."

To combat the impact of lacking State of Illinois funds, Dunstan is working to establish a task force to serve as a conduit between SIUE and various Madison County groups. "SIUE has become such an important part of not just Madison County, but the region," explains Dunstan. "I look at SIUE today, and I'm amazed by the growth. Because we are concerned about what is happening in the state, we want to do what we can to bring the community and business leaders

together, in an effort to support SIUE. We are going to put more light on SIUE, and we are glad to work with the SIUE community as best as we can.”

Hansen further shares, “It’s important that we build more bridges and stronger ties between the University and the community. How we enrich each other – through student internship opportunities, faculty and staff services, faculty research, Madison County Board of Directors work, community services and resources, etc. – keeps us anchored to the needs of the people whom we serve.”

Each expressing great pride for the University that has blazed their career paths, Dunstan shares, “This University has a national reputation and makes you proud to say you have a degree from SIUE. So much has been done in the past and the present that I expect nothing but great things for the future of this campus.”

Hansen responds, “It has been a great partnership with both the community and the people who live or have lived here. We have between 2,100 and 2,400 employees at the University, and we annually make more than a \$500 million impact on the economy.

“Higher education is important, and SIUE is important to this community ... for us! I’m speaking as a member of the community, not on behalf of the University. It’s sad to see it being squandered by lack of support from state government.”

Dunstan shares that the Madison County Board of Directors has not operated without difficulties. “Our county has had balanced budgets since I’ve been chairman of the Madison County Board of Directors,” he says. “We are probably in the best financial state of any county in Illinois, but we have made tough decisions. I have 300 fewer employees today than I did when I took office. That’s not something that I’m proud of, but it’s something that had to be done to balance the budgets.”

He further explains that he feels the growing problems in state and national government decision-making is the presence of unfaltering polarization among parties and their members.

“For some reason, compromise has become a nasty word at the state and national level, but that’s exactly what democracy is!” he says. “You bring together people with different ideas and come to a compromise. You try to come out with something that might not be perfect, but it’s a compromise and is something that works. Polarization is ending people’s willingness to compromise, and it’s really sad to see that. I can see it starting to head down to the county level, and it scares me a little bit. There are complex problems in our country. People need to work together instead of being polarized.”

Dunstan believes this is the direct result of intense exposure to politically-motivated, 24-7 news coverage. “It’s hard to get people together now and just talk about the issues,” he explains. “When we enter a primary season, candidates tend to go further and further to the left and to the right to achieve nomination. I believe that about 75 percent of people are like me and fit in the middle, but both parties are going to the extremes.”

For future planning, Dunstan hopes that his newly-appointed task force can create jobs and begin attracting the talents of SIUE graduates who seek local career opportunities. Hansen shares, “The Illinois Department of Labor Statistics indicates that 80 percent of jobs created since 2008 require a baccalaureate degree. The richer labor force that we have and the better-educated citizenry we have enriches the community, and allows it to grow.”

Both men agree that the biggest issue the University and the County face today is the State of Illinois government. “This area was hit harder by the 2008 recession than most,” Dunstan shares. “The Madison County budget today is just now reaching the level that it was in 2008. Usually, it takes about two years after a recession for a government to catch up – we went through a six-year period.”

Hansen furthers his statement by saying, “When you are trying to attract businesses to Madison County, nobody wants to come to a state that’s dysfunctional.”

Dunstan speaks quite passionately on the disservices the State’s lack of funding is causing to the higher education system. “To me, it’s literally a crime – because education is so important,” he says. “In earlier days, you could probably have a high school diploma and make a good living. Today, if you don’t go to a trade school or college – and most of the time you have to go for more than a four-year degree – you can’t be as successful. Times have changed, and we need to be putting more money into education, because it’s growingly important.”

To conclude the show, Dunstan reveals a special talent in the kitchen that is sure to excite your sweet tooth.

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By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications