



McCaleb: Despite challenges, McSweeney thinks big

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David McSweeney does not have an easy road ahead.

The first-term state representative from Barrington ran on a platform of reform. Judging by his words and deeds during his first few days in office, he plans to push forward with his campaign pledges, despite the obstacles that lie ahead.

McSweeney represents Illinois' newly drawn 52nd District, which includes the southeast corner of McHenry County. Cary and Fox River Grove are in the district, as are eastern Algonquin, Crystal Lake and Lake in the Hills, and parts of Lake, Cook and Kane counties.

Not only is he a freshman lawmaker, as a Republican, McSweeney also is a member of the minority party in Springfield. Democrats have supermajorities in the House and Senate, and hold the governor's office.

Getting anything meaningful done in the General Assembly isn't going to be easy. But he's still dreaming big.

McSweeney shared his priorities last week with members of the Northwest Herald's Editorial Board.

The top of his list mirrors ours – pension reform.

Illinois' public pension systems are underfunded by \$96 billion and climbing. Funding pensions takes up a bigger portion of the state's budget each year, reducing the money needed to provide vital services. Taxpayers simply can't afford to pay 3 percent cost-of-living increases each year, or six-figure salaries to thousands of retirees.

During our meeting, McSweeney predicted that the state's credit rating was going to drop because lawmakers have failed to do anything about the growing pension problem. Sure enough, on Friday, Standard & Poor's dropped Illinois' credit rating from an A to an A-, and placed a negative outlook on the rating. The rating agency cited the state's bloated pension systems and lawmakers' inability to fix them for the downgrade. It means it will cost the state more to borrow money.

McSweeney said he supports a bill by Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-Northbrook, that would suspend cost-of-living increases for retirees until they reach age 67, and cap that COLA increase at the first \$25,000 of income. The bill also would require employees to contribute more of their paychecks toward their pensions. He said the bill doesn't go far enough to reform the pension systems, but it's a good start.

To practice what he preaches, McSweeney has opted out of the legislative pension plan, as he said he would, and he also is not taking state-funded health care. He is reducing his legislative office's budget from \$73,000 annually, which he is allowed to spend, to \$63,000. And he's returning 10 percent of his salary.

"We have to lead by example," McSweeney said. "We have to show that we're willing to make sacrifices."

McSweeney already has filed bills to repeal the 2011 income-tax increase and end all legislative pensions. He supports a three-year freeze on property-tax increases, and wants to make it more difficult for taxing districts to float alternative revenue bonds to pay for projects.

In short, McSweeney looks to be a true friend to taxpayers in Springfield.

We'll be following his work in Springfield closely.

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Big score: Congratulations to the Raue Center for the Arts on its next big production. The Raue's Williams Street Repertory will debut the Stephen Sondheim musical "Company" on Friday with John Michael Coppola in the lead role.

Coppola has appeared on some of the nation's biggest off-Broadway stages, and played Frankie Valli of the Four Seasons in the Tony Award-winning musical "Jersey Boys."

"Company" is the story of a single man whose friends all are married. The Raue's own executive director, Richard Kuranda, is directing the production, which runs through Feb. 16.

"As a lifetime member of the Actors Studio and the former director of the National Theater Center, I am most proud of the team and cast," Kuranda said. "I am very excited to continue to build a great theater company in McHenry County."

Williams Street Repertory, also known as WS Rep, is the Raue's in-house, nonprofit theater company. In its short existence, it has produced plays such as "The Fantasticks" and "The Rocky Horror Show."

Tickets for "Company" start at \$30. Visit rauecenter.org for more information.

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Gift of life: A story in the Northwest Herald last week detailed the need for blood donors in McHenry County. For a variety of reasons, blood banks are seeing shortages locally and across the nation.

If you are healthy and able, please donate. Your donation could save a life. Here are some upcoming local blood drives:

- 2 to 7 p.m. Monday at Faith Lutheran High School, 174 McHenry Ave., Crystal Lake.
- 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesday at McHenry County Government Center, 2200 N. Seminary Ave., Woodstock.
- 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Wednesday at Prairie Ridge High School, 6000 Dvorak Drive, Crystal Lake.

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Almost a teen: On a personal note, happy 12th birthday today to my son, Matthew. He'll be spending his special day playing indoor soccer at the Regional Sports Center in Crystal Lake, where he plays goalkeeper for the Falcons. I'm just hoping his legs aren't too tired after spending much of Saturday playing laser maze with his friends. I know I'm exhausted just from watching them.

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