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Public Affairs Magazine Gets To Heart Of Illinois' 'Issues'

By Joe Natale, Senior Correspondent

After 25 years, Illinois Issues remains a must read for policymakers, political junkies and other interested parties, political or otherwise.

The public affairs magazine, published by the Center for State Policy and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS), is entering a new era with veteran statehouse reporter Dana Heupel at the helm.

Heupel succeeds Peggy Boyer Long, who was editor of Illinois Issues for 13 years. Before being named executive editor and director of publications for the Center in January 2008, Heupel covered Illinois state government as a reporter and editor for GateHouse News Service and Copley News Service.

A product of the journalism program of the University of Indiana at Bloomington, Heupel served as city editor of the State Journal-Register (SJ-R) in Springfield, the Fresno Bee in California, the Journals Gazette in Fort Wayne, Ind.; the News Sun in Kendall, Ind., and assistant city editor for the Indianapolis Star.

While at the SJ-R, he conceived and coordinated a newspaper program that won the prestigious national George Polk Award for Political Reporting showing links between campaign contributions and Illinois state contracts. He also won the Illinois Associated Press Member of the Year Award for coordinating a project on open government records. "Right now I'm still on a learning curve with the magazine," Heupel said. "The biggest challenge is trying to get Illinois Issues out there so people know who we are and increase revenue so we can do the things we need to do. Budgets are tight everywhere, and this place is no exception."

Heupel said the magazine has a "high pass through" rate of 12,000, representing the number of individuals that read the magazine beyond the subscribers.

Heupel said that a 2006 readership survey indicated that, "our demographics are great, except with median age. We are trying to attract more younger readers."

"We are aiming at people interested in public policy," said Heupel, with a strong readership among high-income households who often work for or are involved with state government or politics. "Sixty percent have graduate degrees," Heupel said. "That's a great base to build on, but of course we'll look to expand it. I think there are a lot of people out there interested in public policy but not aware of us. We want people to know we exist."

Heupel said Illinois Issues fills a niche that is not often explored by newspapers, television, radio or even the Internet, which is "in-depth analysis of the issues that affect Illinoisans from a bi-partisan standpoint."

Heupel said the magazine does not hew to any political philosophy. "We're a pure journalistic process," Heupel said.

Illinois Issues is published in hard copy 10 months. July and August is a combined issue. The magazine is available to the public sometime during the first full week of the month. The December issue is published online.

"We're online every month," Heupel said. "One of my first focuses is to update and upgrade the Web site with audio, video and more background material for stories in the magazine."

Heupel said the Web site provides an opportunity to use more artwork and color than can be used in the magazine.

"We have to adapt as well as at least complement the magazine and attract a younger audience," Heupel said. "There is a little more room to explain issues with the Internet. There are ways you can tell a story with audio and video. We post updates daily, as does a newspaper. In our online edition, we'll be experimenting more with that."

Illinois Issues is staffed by five full-time staff members, two part-time staffers and two graduate students during the academic year.

"Twenty to 25 percent of our feature articles are written by staff, but a bulk of it we contract with writers for individual pieces," Heupel said.

"People interested in this kind of thing deserve a product that has some cachet. We work very hard on articles, we want to present them in the best way possible."

On the business side of the publication, Heupel said UIS funds a portion of the magazine. "We're affiliated with our State Center," Heupel said. "It's a not-for-profit business, but the university provides a portion."

Other revenue is generated by advertising, sponsorships, subscriptions and fundraising. "Two of our five full-time staff members are dedicated to business practices," said Heupel.

On the editorial side, Illinois Issues has a board that meets twice a year to provide advice and guidance.

"It's a very impressive board," Heupel said. "There are some heavy hitters in public policy circles. We value their advice in terms of stories we publish and overall direction of the magazine. They suggest story ideas and ideas for fundraising."

Serving on the board since 1986 is Taylor Pensoneau of New Berlin. Pensoneau spent 12 years as the Illinois political correspondent of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He is the author of "Governor Richard Ogilvie: In the Interest of the State" and co-author of "Dan Walker: The Glory and the Tragedy."

Pensoneau serves as chair of the editorial committee, and he served as vice chair of the board from 2001 to 2006.

"I've been on the board well over two decades," Pensoneau said. "It's not my intention to be the longest running board member, but I sense I'm in the

running."

Pensoneau said Illinois Issues is a magazine "that's read by state policy makers, the leaders in Illinois public life."

"Illinois Issues is literally the public affairs magazine of the State of Illinois," Pensoneau said. "It was founded in the mid-1970s when there was an impetus around the country for this type of public affairs publication. Others fell by the wayside, but Illinois Issues survived."

Pensoneau credited three people for establishing Illinois Issues in the 1970s: Paul Simon, director of public affairs reporting at Sangamon State University; Sam Gove, director of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois; and Sam Witwer, who Pensoneau dubbed as the "father of Illinois constitutional reform." Pensoneau said a strong editorial staff during the years has maintained the high standards of the publication, including Boyer Long who retired in December 2008. "Public affairs in Illinois is a big deal," Pensoneau said. "The magazine has gone beyond mainstream media coverage of issues. It elaborates on key issues and the fundamental aspects of issues. It goes way beyond issues that are covered by newspapers."

"Illinois Issues has never been afraid to tackle unglamorous or unsexy issues, like environmental issues. How are we going to handle waste water in the future? Newspapers aren't going to cover that from a business point. It won't sell newspapers and it is boring for people."

Pensoneau said Illinois Issues has enhanced its reputation with detailed insightful stories about key individuals in state government. "During elections, Illinois Issues goes way beyond regular coverage," Pensoneau said.

Pensoneau has also been involved with the issuance of the third edition of "Mostly Good and Competent Men," a biography of Illinois governors that has been released by Illinois Issues. He and Boyer Long updated the chapters on the most recent governors, George Ryan and Rod Blagojevich.

As for the overall approach of Illinois Issues, Pensoneau said the board maintains "a delicate balance between academia and streetwise stuff. It's not an ivory tower publication."

And high school students are a target demographic for the publication. Tony Halter, executive director of the Center for State Policy and Leadership at UIS, said the publication is looking to expand to the high school student audience in order to encourage civic engagement.

"We look at and interpret state government and the people working to push legislation through," Halter said. "We want people reading it; writing about it; and people working in their local areas. You use what you have to create more involvement."

Joe Natale is a freelance writer from Springfield.