**Protect the bottom line and think outside the deficit**

When visitors come to Illinois they enjoy our cities, towns, and countryside. They fill our hotels, meeting centers, restaurants, shops, and attractions. And most importantly, they leave behind an economic impact that drives billions of dollars to the bottom line.

But right now that engine is threatened, putting at risk more than $2.5 billion in annual tax revenue precisely at a time when Illinois can afford it least.

Yet that is exactly what is on the horizon as the Illinois legislature and Governor Rauner consider proposals to slash funding to the tourism industry. Using only a small portion of hotel tax revenue --- and not the tax revenue generated from Illinois residents --- the state has reinvested the money spent by visitors. Since the 1980s, Illinois has been among the nation’s leaders in innovative sales and marketing efforts that have drawn more visitors to the state.

Like a farmer who uses seed corn to deliver bumper crops, the results have been impressive. In 2014, a record 107 million visitors came to Illinois, the fourth consecutive year for a new mark. Those people didn’t show up by accident. They were drawn here in many ways --- from incentives to conventions and trade shows, to advertising and marketing in the U.S. and across the world, to partnerships with local organizations.

The seed money is now threatened in the proposed state budget. More than $30 million in hotel tax could be diverted away from drawing more visitors --- and their spending and tax revenue --- in a misguided effort to solve other problems.

Illinois was ahead of its time 30 years ago when it recognized the need to reinvest a portion of visitor spending to continue feeding this economic engine. Today there are very tough choices facing Illinois regarding next year’s budget. But one easy choice that promises proven reward over risk is to continue the current funding for the visitor industry, and the billions that it will mean for the bottom line.