

AMERICA 250

State-funded commemorations kept mellow

Pritzker's office listed about \$376K in costs for programming

By Olivia Olander
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

By almost any measure — but especially compared with President Donald Trump's campaign-style National Mall speech and Washington's massive fireworks show over the Independence Day holiday — Illinois' celebrations to commemorate the United States' 250th birthday this year have been decidedly low-key.

Gov. JB Pritzker's office listed about \$376,000 in costs for semiquincentennial-specific state programming, a relatively low price tag amid federal funding cuts and a striking contrast to the all-out, politically charged events in the nation's capital.

Illinois residents and visitors may see a lasting impression from the celebrations, however, as the bulk of those state dollars, about \$300,000 from existing funding, went to grants for 22 public art projects throughout the state, including a mural of singer-songwriter and Maywood native John Prine going up on the exterior of Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. The other biggest line item: the printing of Illinois "passports" encouraging visitors and residents to see historic and civic sites, for a cost of about \$76,000 "from existing operating resources," according to the governor's office. The state's overall spending plan for day-to-day operations during the budget year that began July 1 totals nearly \$56 billion.

Other state agencies are incorporating contributions into existing staff time, contracts and other resources, Pritzker spokesperson Andres Correa said.

Through Labor Day, for example, the state archives and state library, which fall under the purview of Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias, are putting on a special archival exhibit at the Capitol called "America 250: Land of Lincoln."

The bulk of the hundreds of events publicized by the Illinois 250 commission were put on by nonprofits and other outside organizations, not the state itself, said Gabrielle Lyon, chair of the Illinois America 250 Commission.

The celebrations faced federal budget cuts heading into this year, and the state's budget also is tight, she said. The nonprofit Illinois Humanities, which Lyon chairs, lost about \$2 million as part of cuts last year from the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency, a good portion of which would have been used for the anniversary this year, she said.

Even the billionaire governor, asked about the costs at a news conference unveiling the plans back in December, replied, "I honestly wish we were able to spend more because I want the celebration to be as big as possible."



A "250" American flag is displayed atop the Arlington Heights Park District float during the Frontier Days Fourth of July Parade on July 4 in Arlington Heights. **JOE LEWNARD/DAILY HERALD**



Gov. JB Pritzker answers questions from the media after a press conference at Navy Pier on Dec. 3, 2025, highlighting Illinois' plans to celebrate America's 250th anniversary. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Darius Dennis, founder of Big Wall Sign & Mural, left, and Daniel Levin work on a John Prine mural on the exterior of Old Town School of Folk Music in Lincoln Square on July 8. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

In fact, federal funding cuts forced communities across the country to scale back plans for the semiquincentennial, The Associated Press reported last year.

"People in Illinois care about their history and their heritage, and they know it's connected to the American story. The dollars haven't been in place that we probably — certainly — could have used," Lyon said, adding, "It's not lost on me, the irony that the dollars are staying, for the

most part, all in Washington, but the people who are really making the meaning of the moment in Illinois, they're in the townships, they're in the cities, they're at the county level."

The commemorations both in Washington and across the country over the recent holiday weekend came as Trump continued seeking to make his mark on the country's understanding of its own history.

The Trump administration

this month slammed leadership at the Smithsonian Institution museums, particularly the National Museum of American History, as activists that "cannot be trusted to tell America's story honestly and in a way that is inspiring, unifying, and worthy of our great republic." He previously targeted programs that promoted "divisive narratives" there and has generally signaled the institution has become too liberal.

Trump also created the public-private partnership "Freedom 250" to run his administration's events for the anniversary, including the "Great American State Fair" on the National Mall, a move that created tension with the America250 commission Congress established a decade ago.

The state of Illinois opted out of state-funded participation in the Great American State Fair earlier this year, leaving the Peoria Riverfront Museum to send a showcase instead. Pritzker also chose not to send Illinois National Guard troops to Washington for the celebrations this month, breaking with some other Democratic governors, including Minnesota's Tim Walz and Michigan's Gretchen Whitmer, and earning praise in a letter signed by a group of 19 former defense and military leaders.

In Illinois, museums, historical societies and other organizations including Illinois Humanities know "how important public imagination is to what we invest in for the future," Lyon said Thursday.

"We have really stepped up into this moment to say, 'We are going to find a way,'" she said. For the commission overall, "it was never a set of goals around parties or big fireworks shows," she said.

Indeed, there was no central, state-funded event commemorating the anniversary.

In Chicago, Navy Pier planned an extended fireworks show on Independence Day — an event that ended up so blotted out by clouds that the pier issued a disappointed statement on social media. But as Navy Pier is operated by an independent nonprofit organization, that display was self-funded through normal operating revenues as well as philanthropic and corporate sponsorships, not by the state, said Marilyn Gardner, president and CEO of the popular tourist destination.

Lyon said she's seen enthusiasm for the civic-minded, diverse celebrations that the commission has promoted. About 100,000 passport brochures were distributed statewide, encouraging people to visit historic landmarks, museums and other civic sites, and about 2,000 individuals requested them in the mail, she said.

Barbara Engelskirchen, chief development officer at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, said the museum chose to participate because initiatives that are good for the state and community are good for the museum, too.

"We want people, whoever they are, wherever they come from, to engage with the art we have here," she said.

At least four of the public art projects funded through the Illinois 250 grants have already been unveiled, according to the Illinois Arts Council. The projects were intended to reflect Illinois' history and diverse stories across communities, Executive Director Joshua

Davis-Ruperto wrote in an email.

"Public art is accessible, it's free to experience, and often-times becomes a permanent part of a community's landscape," Davis-Ruperto wrote. "This small investment offered an opportunity for the state to support local artists, strengthen cultural organizations, and create opportunities for residents to connect through their shared history in meaningful ways. Honestly what better way to celebrate our state and the nation?"

For Lyons, two highlights of the celebrations so far have been viewing a public reading of the Declaration of Independence in Peoria on Wednesday — the 250th anniversary of the founding document's first public reading — and witnessing people at the Little Village branch of the Chicago Public Library record conversations for Illinois Voices 250, a privately funded initiative to preserve the stories of Illinoisans in the Library of Congress.

The Little Village library event was especially meaningful "given all that community has had to contend with," in recent months she said, including militarized immigration enforcement during the Trump administration's Operation Midway Blitz and what she described as exclusion of many groups, including immigrant communities, from the anniversary celebrations at the national level.

"Then to see these grandmothers, people in their 30s and parents and children, just have a conversation about this moment and what's important to them was unbelievably powerful," she said.

The Associated Press contributed.

Experts say earthquakes in area more common than some might think

By Tess Kenny
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

It's not every day Illinois sees an earthquake like the 2.9 magnitude tremor that struck Lake Michigan on Wednesday afternoon. But quakes in the area are more common than some might think, experts say.

So far this decade, the state has seen 44 earthquakes, according to Robert Bauer, a principal scientist of engineering geology with the Illinois State Geological Survey. Wednesday's marked just the latest. The mild earthquake was recorded off the shore of the northern suburbs near the Illinois-Wisconsin border. Stretching 3.1 miles deep, the quake took place 13.8 miles northeast of Evanston, per the U.S. Geological Survey.

From year to year, local seismic activity varies

greatly, Bauer said. On average, though, the state experiences about 10 earthquakes a year. That's certainly more infrequent than other areas of the country — with Illinois being in what USGS deems a "stable continental region" — but the occasional quake is far from a rarity. But what caused Wednesday's quake and others like it? It goes back to the basics of geology.

The Earth has four major layers, and the two outermost make up a thin surface that coats the planet. That surface, though, is in fragments.

The Earth is made up of many pieces. More than that, those pieces — called tectonic plates — are constantly moving. The pieces meet at plate boundaries, where they usually grind up against each other slowly.

Earthquakes, at their most basic level, are a function

of friction between those pieces. As for what determines why earthquakes are more frequent in some areas than others, that's a little more complicated.

Quakes are concentrated at plate boundaries. At boundaries, because the edges of plates are rough, areas can get stuck while the rest of the plate keeps moving, per USGS. An earthquake occurs when an edge is stuck for long enough that the energy that would usually cause the pieces to slide past each other is stored up instead. When that tension snaps, a large amount of energy is released.

But there are also intraplate earthquakes. That's the case for Illinois, which sits far from the nearest boundary. These tremors are made possible by faults — cracks in the bedrock — deep below the surface, according to Bauer.

Beneath Illinois, there are preexisting faults tied to an earlier geologic era, essentially ancient cracks long buried over time, Bauer explained. Though Illinois isn't bordered by a boundary, pressure from boundaries to the east and west can stress these faults, inducing earthquakes, Bauer said.

There are two major seismic zones that affect Illinois, according to the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, including the Wabash Valley Seismic Zone and the New Madrid Seismic Zone. The Wabash Valley Seismic Zone is located between southeastern Illinois and southeastern Indiana, whereas the New Madrid Seismic Zone is located in the Central Mississippi Valley, covering a wide swath across several states from Illinois to Arkansas.

The bulk of the state's earthquakes happen in southern Illinois because those old layers of the Earth are more broken up downstate than they are up north, Bauer said.

Historically, some of the strongest earthquakes the state has seen have come in at just over a 5.0 magnitude, Bauer said. In recent years, Bauer pointed to a 5.2 magnitude earthquake recorded in southern Illinois near Mount Carmel in 2008. Going back to 1968, there was a 5.3 magnitude quake, also downstate in Hamilton County. And more than a hundred years ago, in the Chicago area, a 5.1 magnitude quake shook Aurora, which caused some damage and led to a few fires, Bauer said.

As far as magnitude goes, however, earthquakes are also felt a bit differently in the Midwest than, say, Cali-

fornia, which lies close to a plate boundary. Being in the center of a tectonic plate, an earthquake in Illinois will radiate a lot farther than one by a boundary, Bauer said.

Think of it like a bell, Bauer explained. When a bell is cracked, the waves don't go very far. But with a bell that's complete, it rings. In other words, an intraplate earthquake goes a long way.

On Wednesday, local North Shore officials reported no damages as a result of the Lake Michigan tremor, nor were there any reports of injured boaters or swimmers.

And while earthquakes may not always be top of mind here in intraplate territory, Bauer encouraged earthquake awareness — safety especially — nonetheless.

The Associated Press contributed.