

## Politics

### Pritzker leans into role as Illinois' CMO



Credit: Stephen J. Serio  
J.B. Pritzker

By John Pletz - March 27, 2024

Early last month, Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker invited a couple dozen site-selection consultants to a River North restaurant to get better acquainted.

Pritzker and his economic team were feeling good about some big wins, such as Stellantis and Gotion's electric vehicle and battery plants, respectively, and wanted to tell the state's story. Mingling regularly with site-selection consultants is a routine act for most states. Not so much for Illinois. Those gathered in the room guessed it hadn't happened since the late Jim Thompson was governor more than 30 years ago.

Pritzker is leaning into the promise he made when running for governor that he'd be the state's chief marketing officer. Illinois needs to rev up its economic development game to reverse

stubborn population and job-growth trends that have been a drag. The state's population growth has been minimal, and job growth has lagged the nation.

"We have a good story to tell, and the time is right," says Kristin Richards, director of the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Development, who made the pitch alongside the governor and John Atkinson, chairman of Intersect Illinois, a public-private partnership focused on recruiting businesses.

The February meet-and-greet was mainly with site-selection consultants in Chicago and the Midwest. "Many of these people weren't familiar with strides Illinois had made," Richards says.

The team plans to widen the audience in the coming months. "We're taking this on the road," she says. "We will continue to host events like this and expand our reach, hosting site selectors in other states."

Richards notes that Pritzker is meeting with site-selection leaders this week in California as part of a trip to promote the state's film, technology and manufacturing industries.

His pitch goes something like this: The state's finances are in better shape, with a reserve fund instead of a backlog of overdue bills, and improved credit ratings.

Illinois has beat out other states for some big projects, such as Gotion's battery plant. More recently, EV maker Rivian doubled down on Illinois, expanding its plant in downstate Normal while hitting the brakes on a new factory in Georgia.

On the tech front, Illinois landed a big piece of a \$1 billion hydrogen project and a \$250 million biotech hub funded by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan.

Pritzker also successfully pushed the state Legislature to provide him with more tools, including incentive programs tailored to the EV industry as well as a deal-closing fund. He's pushing for another \$500 million for quantum technology.

"He deserves credit for strengthening the incentive program, getting projects over the finish line," says John Boyd, a principal at The Boyd Group, a site-selection firm based in Boca Raton, Fla.

The state still has a lot of catching up to do, he says. "A lot of governors have been really proactive — Greg Abbott in Texas, Roy Cooper in North Carolina. Economic development is in the DNA of Tennessee, Georgia, Texas, the Carolinas, Indiana."

Bashing Illinois has been part of their playbooks, he adds. Pritzker and his team still have a lot of hard work ahead to make lasting headway in changing a narrative that's been reinforced for more than a decade.

“It takes more than salesmanship,” Boyd says. “It takes policy. Safe streets in Chicago, holding the line on taxes and spending. There’s still some heavy lifting that needs to be done to improve the state’s business climate.”



By John Pletz

**John Pletz** is a senior reporter covering technology, aviation and cannabis for Crain’s Chicago Business. He joined Crain's in 2007 and previously covered technology for the American-Statesman in Austin, Texas.