Interview with Robert Weichert

HP-A-L-2010-007

Interview Date: February 19, 2010

Interviewer: Julie Dirksen

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Dirksen: Today is February 19, and I'm with Bob Weichert. We are going to do our interview for the IHPA [Illinois Historical Preservation Agency] Legacy Project. Before I get started though, Bob, would you please give me your official title?

Robert Weichert,
Administrative Services Division Manager
Illinois Historical Preservation Agency

Weichert: I'm the division manager of the Administrative Services Division, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

Dirksen: Before we really get into the whole information about your involvement with IHPA, let's talk a little bit about your background. Let's talk a little bit about your family, starting with your history here in Springfield.

Weichert: Okay. I was born here December 31, 1950. I was the second of six children. I went to grade school in Springfield, two years in Chatham, Illinois. We moved to Decatur, where I went to junior high and high school, graduated from MacArthur High School in 1968. I went to college at SIU-Carbondale, got a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in parks and recreation. Got out in '75, went into the construction business with my father. I had some issues there that needed to be handled, so I ran a company that did asphalt paving, road

oiling, parking lot maintenance, that type of thing, until 1988 when I came to the State of Illinois.

Dirksen: So you really had a broad background and talent that you brought with it, too. In the particular job that you are doing right now, did you come directly from your personal background and professional life to IHPA?

Weichert: I did. I worked construction for a number of years, ran the company, was president of the company, managing everything with that. Upon my father's retirement, since my credentials were in the area of parks and recreation, which is related to what a lot of what IHPA does, I came to IHPA at that point.

Dirksen: So you brought with you all of your wonderful construction background, your love for parks—

Weichert: Correct.

Dirksen: …all of the outdoors and things like that.

Weichert: That's correct. I was very active at SIU-Carbondale. I've always been a history buff, took a lot of history classes, so it was kind of a "perfect storm" situation when the opportunity at this agency presented itself.

Dirksen: And what year was that, Bob?

Weichert: That was 1988, August 4, 1988,

Dirksen: August 4, 1988.

Weichert: Correct.

Dirksen: What I find so interesting is not only was your background with working, but you worked in your family's business, which was construction and all of that. Then you went to SIU, and you were involved there. What were your jobs there?

Weichert: Correct. In addition to going to school, I became the…It was called the head of the Student Government Activities Council, which was the student vice president for activities. We booked most of the events on campus and coordinated those. That's everything from the programs that took place in the large arena to the smaller concerts in Shryock Auditorium to the various other small activities that were programmed throughout campus. So that gave me a very good background in event planning and organization, and management of people.

Dirksen: That was a great background.

Weichert: It was.

Dirksen: And then you come to the agency, because the agency really did not get formed until 1985.

Weichert: That's correct. I got here a couple years after the agency was formed. I came originally as a general services manager.

Dirksen: What does that mean?

Weichert: I was the Affirmative Action officer. I was in charge of the mailroom. I did telecom coordination. I did travel coordination, inventory control for the agency, and then in 1989, I was promoted to the division manager position.

Dirksen: You were the right person at the right time, because here you had your event planning, which you used when you came to IHPA, the first round of employment. You certainly knew about construction, because you had done it.

Weichert: Yep.

Dirksen: You were able to bring your love for the outdoors and all of your activities that you've done with that and your event planning. That's pretty good. They were lucky.

Weichert: My initial disappointment was I really wanted to be in a programmatic area. I would have loved to have done that. But this opportunity presented itself, and I'd had a lot of experience with managing people, managing crews, fiscal, those types of things, and it just kind of was a natural fit. The position presented itself, and I haven't regretted it. I really haven't, because when it became Administrative Services Division, then I had all of the fiscal shop responsibilities; personnel was under my control, general services, physical services, which is the maintenance operation of all the buildings and grounds in the downtown area.

Dirksen: What about the sites? Now did you work directly with the sites managers or were you in charge of that too?

Weichert: No, I was not. But, being in administrative services, we're one of the few divisions that had an agency view. We provide support services for all the other divisions within the agency. So you had a knowledge and familiarity with everybody else within the agency, because we dealt with them on a day-to-day basis. So we're very connected to the sites, very connected to Preservation Services Division, very connected to the other parts of the agency and have more of an agency focus than probably any other unit within the agency.

Dirksen: Let's go back to when you started, back in 1988. Your role then, because the agency was only really open three years then.

Weichert: Not quite.

Dirksen: Right. So what were your duties then? Were you putting the pieces of the puzzle together?

Weichert: We all still were. They had created this agency and brought some pieces from the old Department of Conservation, but then there was the State Historical Library that had existed for 100 years. They had a couple of historic sites of their own that they looked after, like the Sandburg home and the Old State Capitol and Bryant Cottage, I believe, were under that. And we had a lot of groups that really hadn't jelled.

We really didn't get along too well the first few years, because there was a lot of competition for resources. There was a shaking out of who was who and what was what. We experienced a lot of growing pains for a few years there, before we all kind of came together and realized we had a common mission and focus. So, it was a growing time for the agency, just getting to know each other and what we did and how to get it done.

Dirksen: Who was the director then?

Weichert: The first director I worked for…He was actually, really only the first official director of the agency. There was one—last name was Kenny—who was director for only maybe a few days.

Dirksen: Who was that again, please?

Weichert: Kenny was his last name. I don't even know his first name.

Dirksen: I think it was David.

Weichert: I think it was. Yeah, it was David Kenny. He was there for just a very short time. Then Michael J. Divine was the director of the agency, starting in '85, right after Kenny. He was director when I started. His background was in history. His main interest was in the [Illinois State] Historical Library.

Dirksen: This was Michael Divine?

Weichert: Michael Divine.

Dirksen: But you were there when David Kenny was there.

Weichert: I was not.

Dirksen: Oh, you weren't.

Weichert: No, he was only with the agency just a few weeks.

Dirksen: Oh, that sounds like a good story.

Weichert: Yeah. I've heard the story. (Dirkesn laughs) There are some others who were there who can tell you. I've heard.

Dirksen: He was there only a few weeks, but then you came with Michael Divine.

Weichert: Michael J. Divine was the director, and Bill Fleischli was the deputy director for the agency.

Dirksen: Was Michael Divine more involved with the State Historical Society and then had to take over as this or what?

Weichert: Michael was very interested in the State Historical Society. He even had toyed with, at a retreat once, to change the name of our agency to the State Historical Society, which didn't gain any traction from anybody. But he had a very heavy focus on the society, a very heavy focus on what was called the Century Campaign, to raise money for the society. He had a very strong interest in the library and what it was doing. His focus or his priority was not the state historic sites. I don't even know that he visited any of the sites; that was not his area of interest.

Dirksen: Interesting. Well, how long did he last?

Weichert: Michael was there until…Let' see. Michael was there; Bill Fleischli was deputy director. Bill Fleischli left, it would have been somewhere around 1990 or so. Susan Mogerman was brought in as the new deputy director, and then Mike Divine left, right around that '90, '91 time, and Susan Mogerman took over as director of the agency.

Dirksen: Susan came in, I think, in 1991.

Weichert: Was that it. I knew it was right around there, of '91.

Dirksen: But she came in to replace—

Weichert: She came in as deputy director to replace Bill Fleischli, and she served in that capacity for a while. Then Michael left, and Susan was appointed by our trustees as the director of the agency.

Dirksen: Maintained that and took over for Mike.

Weichert: Correct.

Dirksen: When you were formulating all of this, I know that had to have been exciting. But were you able to see any clear vision, as far as what the agency was going to be doing. Did Mike do that?

Weichert: No. We didn't have a lot of that. He had several agency retreats, and the goal was to try to figure that out. A lot of progress were made. We were still

putting together a lot of basic systems even, like…The state inventory system was brand new to all these people with the historical library and things.

Dirksen: What year would that be now?

Weichert: The inventory system was even put in when the agency was formed. But I came in, and they still had all the historic artifacts were on the state inventory system, which was incorrect. They hadn't even separated those systems. They were kind of struggling with how to do these very basic types of systems.

Voucher processing, we had to have educational classes with people at the sites and people in the library on how to actually do this. This was even a couple of years after the agency was formed; we're still going through and setting up those processes on how to do these very basic functions. We had one computer in the agency, (Dirksen laughs) which the fiscal officer, Don Bullerman, had built himself. That was the first computer that we had.

Dirksen: Now what's that again? Say that again.

Weichert: We had one computer in the agency, and Don Bullerman had put it together himself.

Dirksen: How do you spell his name?

Weichert: I think it's B-u-l-l-e-r-m-a-n.

Dirksen: And he built it.

Weichert: Out of pieces. That's what they tell me. That's what he told me.

Dirksen: That would have been before you; so that would have been between 1985 and 1988?

Weichert: Yes. And he had that. I got my first computer in 1989. It had virtually no memory; it had a dot matrix printer, and it cost over $3,000 and could do just about nothing.

Dirksen: How did you remember how much it cost?

Weichert: Because I paid the bills. (both laugh)

Dirksen: Oh, that is too funny. So you were there with Mike, and Susan was there. Let's go to that. Susan was there as a deputy director. You were trying to figure things out. When did the state library get absorbed into the historical—

Weichert: The Historical Library? That was when the agency was formed.

Dirksen: They did do that then.

Weichert: That's correct. They had a board of trustees that were with the library. It was the same trustees, for the most part, that were over the Historical Library [who] became the trustees of the agency, when that was pulled together under the Thompson administration in '85. They pulled some sites away from conservation and put into the agency. They brought the preservation services division, which does the archeological reviews and the regulatory part of the agency, put in there.

Dirksen: Where was that before?

Weichert: It was in conservation also. But then they—

Dirksen: So then they brought in—

Weichert: They brought preservation services that did those things. They brought in historic sites, but there were already…The library itself had a couple of sites. They ran the Old State Capitol; they ran the Sandburg home; they ran the Bryant cottage, and I think they may have had the David Davis Mansion, up in Bloomington, also. So then they pulled various sites. They just kind of cherry picked them out of conservation, and even to this day, some of what they picked and some of what they didn't pick doesn't make any sense. Like, we have Cahokia Mounds. Well, the State Museum had Dickson Mounds. So we got part of the mounds, but not all of the mounds.

We got some of the historic sites, but not all of the historic sites. Fort Massac stayed with conservation; Nauvoo stayed with conservation. There was a big fight whether even New Salem would come to the agency. Then Blackhawk was one of the last ones to come to the agency.

So there was… Lincoln Homestead in Decatur stayed with conservation. I don't know what that process was, but even to this day, there didn't seem to be any sense to what was picked and what wasn't.

Dirksen: Who made those decisions?

Weichert: I don't know, someone higher on the org [organizational] chart than me. I think a lot of politics went into that, I'm sure. There was a lot of resistance to some of the sites coming in. They didn't want to, but they fared very well in the agency.

Dirksen: I keep hearing about how all the things were under the steps of the Old State Capitol. Is that where they put them, the artifacts were in the basement of the Old State Capitol?

Weichert: The artifacts were under the Old State Capitol. When they rebuilt the Old State Capitol in '68, they put the Historical Library all below grade, below level. They had cages down there. They're still there, the old stack areas, and all these artifacts were just stored.

There are a couple of things on display in the reading room of the library, underground. The Gettysburg Address was kept in a safe, under the stairwell of the Old State Capitol. Visitors could walk in the first level of the Old State Capitol and see the Gettysburg Address by looking through a glass in a safe under the stairwell. Virtually everything else was out of sight. We had all these wonderful things, all these wonderful collections, but no one ever saw them, other than a few scholars.

Dirksen: Governor Thompson was really responsible for pulling—

Weichert: He formed the agency.

Dirksen: He formed the agency.

Weichert: Correct. By executive order.

Dirksen: So, at that time then, who knows the basis for the decisions on which sites went into IHPA, versus staying with conservation? Are there any historic sites affiliated with any other agencies besides IHPA and conservation?

Weichert: Don't know, I really don't know the answer to that. There's private ones; there's a lot of private holdings out there. I mean, we've made a couple of acquisitions, the biggest one being the Dana-Thomas House. That came later.

Dirksen: So that wasn't a part of—

Weichert: No. Originally no, that was still owned by the Thomas Publishers. Governor Thompson was able to secure $1 million to buy the Dana House, and then we did a major restoration project to it.

Dirksen: Were you involved with that, too?

Weichert: No, not at all. I wasn't involved in that part of it at all.

Dirksen: When was that done?

Weichert: That was done, I think, it finished up, I believe; in '92 it might have been finished up.

Dirksen: You weren't involved in that, which is interesting because of your position. Did they hire out?

Weichert: We had at that time, up in the sites division…They had a construction and capital project unit. Sandy Stringer was in that unit. There was a guy by the name of Ed Keating, before her. They did capital programs for the agency at that time.

Dirksen: There was a whole group then that were responsible for buildings and grounds, that you weren't responsible for?

Weichert: They did the capital programs. You submitted capital requests to them. They, subsequent to that, developed a priority list, sent it to the Capital Development Board, and then their projects were selected in the budget process. I was involved to a great extent. I worked with them, because of my background.

Right after I started, I ran a project that put new walks around the Old State Capitol. I got involved; we had an unsafe situations with an old vault that was under the parking lot, north of the Journal Register Building. We had to knock in the foundation there, knock in the parking lot, backfill it and pour a new parking lot, and I worked on that.

I worked with Ed Keating and then subsequent to Ed, Sandy Stringer, because of my background and was involved with them on a number of projects, just to help more supervision, review plans, kind of that type of thing. I didn't get out very far afield with the sites. I was confined primarily with to [the] Springfield area.

Dirksen: Because the Dana-Thomas House is such a fabulous historic site, IHPA is—

Weichert: That was a tremendous acquisition. Well, you know, the governor was maligned at the time for spending the money. My gosh, $1 million is nothing compared…I mean, there's one double pedestal lamp in the house that's worth just under $1 million right now. It was a tremendous acquisition for the state.

Dirksen: Going on with what you're doing now, as far as giving us this wonderful background, Bob. I'm trying to keep the history straight here.

Weichert: Susan came in; one of her capacities was legislative liaison of the agency, when she was deputy director.

Dirksen: This is 1991—

Weichert: Right.

Dirksen: …that she was named director.

Weichert: Then I offered myself up to help. So I pretty well took over legislative liaison duties, in addition to the other. I served in that capacity until 2003, when Jennifer Tirey came over, shortly after, and became the new legislative liaison.

Dirksen: So you were doing that for, gosh—

Weichert: Over twelve years. I enjoyed the legislative process. That's changed a lot now also. You don't have to spend the amount of time over there. Now it's all

online, and you don't have to go to the bill rooms; you don't have to sit in the sessions like you had, you know, just spend days and days and days over there. It's much simpler now.

Dirksen: It's all about personal contacts though and knowing where to—

Weichert: It is, and it's important over there to know—with the face time it's important—it's important to know when to be there, and it's more important to know when not to be there.

It's like when I counseled the directors, like Susan [Mogerman], or whatever. She was always good, and the other ones. It's important in a legislative session to know when to speak, but it's more important to know when to shut up. That's probably the hardest thing to teach anybody.

Dirksen: (laughs) I like that. So, 1991, Susan came, and she stayed for thirteen years.

Weichert: Correct.

Dirksen: How was all that, because from what I've heard, there was a lot of kind of trouble or muddy waters when Susan left. Were you involved in any of that?

Weichert: Susan was tremendous. The agency came together under Susan. Mike Divine, we had a lot of growing pains under Mike. Susan came in. Susan was a very balanced director, and she took a total agency view and pulled people together. We still have our squabbles, like every family did, but we went through some trying fiscal times, too, which brought people closer together. Susan really did a tremendous job for the agency and was there a very long time. It provided us with, I think, it was really critical at that time to provide the kind of stable leadership that really made the agency what it is and got up to the point where we did the museum. It's that kind of stable leadership. We didn't have all those transitions, like a lot of agencies, turn over directors every couple of years or every time there's a change in leadership. It really helped us out to have her there.

The last couple of years Susan was there…This is with the planning of the museum, the starting of the museum, the library, that project. There's a lot of heavy hitter politics got involved, and that started at the very highest levels, down and where the museum was going to go, what it was going to be, who was going to lead it. Susan got in the middle of that fight. It was a fight from our trustees, the governor's office, the governor's chief of staff. He [the chief of staff] wanted a big role in it. He'd been cutting out a career for himself there, that's Bob Newtson, envisioning himself doing it. At one time, maybe the University of Illinois was going to run it, or Bob was going to be working for them. Susan got caught in the middle of that fray.

Dirksen: That's when Ryan was governor.

Weichert: That's correct.

Dirksen: And then Bob Newtson was there.

Weichert: He was the chief of staff; that's correct. There was some undermining of Susan's position going on by an individual who became director after Susan, who had a relationship with the governor's chief…It was a very complex thing. There was just a lot of behind the scenes negotiations going on, a lot of hard feelings. We usually update our enabling legislation every so often, and one of the things we did—

Dirksen: Now, what is that?

Weichert: Our enabling legislation is the legislation the agency operates under. It gives us all of our statutory authority to do what we do, preserve and protect the cultural resources of this state. We have authority to serve alcohol, for example; we have authority to charge fees; we have authority to enter into leases. We have a lot of authority under enabling legislation. We list all of our sites there.

So, periodically we update our list of historic sites, as we add in new ones. One of the things that really brought it to a head was we were updating our enabling legislation to correct some things. The Historical Society had severed its relationship with us, so we were eliminating them from our legislation. We were going to update the list.

Well, one of the updates was to put the museum and library in as one of ours. Well, when that came to light, that really created a furor at the governor's office, because they weren't sure that's where they wanted it to be. No one did, but they thought someone was trying to pull a fast one by sliding this into a piece of legislation, which wasn't the case. I think, it was an excuse; it wasn't a reason. They're looking for more ammunition, and I heard, and I don't know, but the story I've heard is, we were given a choice—we being the trustees or the agency—that, if Susan didn't go, the agency wouldn't survive.

Dirksen: It would go back into the Department of Conservation or something.

Weichert: Correct. That was it, and Susan was pretty well forced out. Then Maynard became director, Maynard Crossland.

Dirksen: Susan though was the longest standing director, correct?

Weichert: Correct. Yes, by far. I liked working for Susan.

Dirksen: Yeah, sharp gal, very sharp. One of the things, too, that you would be responsible for—and I'm sure you saw a lot of too, Bob—was the development of the programs that IHPA starting doing. They just grew, the

sites and everything involved with the communities and everything else. Were you involved with that, too?

Weichert: No, not too much on that. I didn't get into programmatic areas too much. I was around to see things grow. I got to see the construction and opening of the new museum at Cahokia Mounds. Prior to that, they operated out of almost a little shed.

Dirksen: Now, when was that?

Weichert: That was back in the late '80s or early '90s; the same with the visitor center at New Salem. That was done under the Thompson administration. I'll tell a funny anecdote, if you got just enough.

Dirksen: Sure.

Weichert: I'll digress just a little bit here. We had a budget shortfall. Susan Mogerman—

Dirksen: Now when was this?

Weichert: This was back in be about nineteen…Susan was director, so it would be like '91, '9-…Thompson was still governor, so it had to be…She was deputy director, because Thompson was still governor

Dirksen: Under Mike Divine then.

Weichert: Right. They came out to do the groundbreaking for the new visitor's center. We had a big budget shortfall, we thought, at the time. It was like $60,000 for seasonal program[s]. It got left out of the budget. Governor Thompson came in, and he did a groundbreaking for the visitor's center. The budget's going to be introduced, and we couldn't get a meeting with the governor. Susan had a relationship, through having worked for him in the past. She literally went over and laid on the hood of the governor's car (Dirksen laughs) to keep him from leaving, so she could tell him about our budget shortfall and got the money put back in our budget. She was deputy director. I will never forget that, because she literally threw herself on the governor's car to get that done. (both laugh)

Dirksen: Oh, that's great. And then did it get approved?

Weichert: It did.

Dirksen: Okay. Good.

Weichert: Yes.

Dirksen: Where's Susan now, with our budget in the State of Illinois, 2010.

Weichert: We thought it was such a big problem $60,000.

Dirksen: That is great. How did you do this though? With all the things you were responsible for, it seems overwhelming to me that in the beginning when you came, and you were developing all these things, how did you decide who's on first?

Weichert: It took time. It really did, time and personal relationships. IHPA, prior to the museum, was a unique agency in a [sense] that nobody left. When you come to IHPA, you stay. That says a lot about what the agency does and the types of people that gravitate to that agency, because people came, but they don't go. They love what they do.

Being a small agency, too, with the large number of things we do, the wide range of responsibility, it's interesting. Like mine, it's interesting. I didn't sit in a cubicle and do vouchers 9:00 to 5:00 or do just HR [human resources]. You wear a lot of hats, and you do a lot of things for a while every day, or maybe don't do it for several days. There's a variety of interests that really keep you going. I think it made it fun.

Dirksen: I know I was always so impressed when I was affiliated with the agency, with the people, the quality of the people.

Weichert: It really is. We have people just long-serving and now more and more are retiring, because of the agency. A lot of them came when it formed in '85. Several of us were added shortly thereafter, and nobody left. You had these key people in these key positions that…And Susan's stable leadership, I think, contributed a lot to people staying there and doing what they're doing.

Dirksen: Who were some of the other key people when you were formulating all of this?

Weichert: The ones I remember that were really key, Bill Wheeler, he was head of Admin [Administrative] Services when I came. Then he took over Preservation Services when I was promoted. You had Bob Coomer. Bob Coomer was at the Department of Conservation for many years. Then he came over with the Sites Division when the agency was formed. Bob spent literally over thirty years with the State of Illinois, working with historic sites and ended up being director for a while at the agency. He was key. You had like Naomi Ramage, been there forever. You got Ted Hild, dry sense of humor, in the Preservations Services Division. Janice Petterchak ran the Historical Library. There's just a lot of those types of people.

Dirksen: What do you think, over these years, because you are certainly able to reflect. What are some of the agency's strengths and their weaknesses? We just talked about a huge strength, which were the individuals, which was the bonding of the administration.

Weichert: That's probably our biggest strength is the people the agency has. Another strength of ours is the quality of some of things that we have. There aren't many New Salems around; the Cahokia Mounds. Some of the sites that we have are just, they're gems. Cahokia Mounds, that's a World Heritage Site.

Dirksen: What does that mean?

Weichert: That means it's designated by the United Nations of something of such cultural significance that it needs to be preserved and identified. The pyramids are a World Cultural Heritage Site. So that's quite a designation to have. We've got things of that quality.

We own collections that are truly priceless and continue to grow. You know, we have a Gettysburg Address, the Emancipation Proclamation, the biggest collection of pre-Presidential Lincoln materials in one place in the world, is what they tell me. The genealogical research that's down at the Historical Library, we have all these collections. Genealogists come from all over, just to study there.

The Preservations Services Division that does the reviews and compliances to protect archeological and cultural resources throughout the state of Illinois, those are real strong things that we do. Now, with the addition of the [Abraham Lincoln] Presidential Library and Museum, that's raised it on to a much bigger stage, as far as our recognition nationally and globally. We had Lincoln's Tomb. Sometimes I like to tease, we're all Lincoln all the time, but he's a very important person who's known worldwide. That's some of our biggest strengths, I think, is those types of things that we have and administer and we're responsible for caring for.

Dirksen: What do you think, then, on the opposite end of that? What would be some of the weaknesses?

Weichert: Our biggest weakness is that not everybody feels as passionate about what we do as we do. There's a large group out there, but unlike a Department of Natural Resources that has a state park in every county in the state of Illinois, we don't have locations in every county. We don't have as large a base as some of the other agencies do. We preserve history. We're very, very dependent upon state funding for our survival. As there's competition for resources—and even now it's even more critical—it gets more difficult.

And we don't provide human services. We don't provide transfusions. No one lives or dies if we don't exist. So when those decisions are made, it's getting harder for us to get our share of the resources to preserve just what we have. That's our biggest weakness, I think, is that, that we're fairly small. It's easy to kind of overlook or…There's been threats, even as soon as last year, to merge us back in with a larger agency. I think that's some of our biggest weaknesses right there, the vulnerability we have, because of our dependence

on the State of Illinois for our funding, albeit extremely small. It would just be so easy to just snap us up.

Dirksen: Yes. It was interesting last year, when they were going through all that discussion about going back again into the Department of Natural Resources and what that would do.

Weichert: That's quite a process; it really was. It was a done deal, and for whatever reason, it was rescinded. Hard to say how it would have played out.

Dirksen: You've done so many things, Bob, and it's just amazing to me listening to you. What would you have done, if you could, to really promote the agency or make it a stronger agency?

Weichert: Well, there's some opportunities that, for whatever reason, didn't happen. There's reasons for everything. I don't know all the stories. I think we could have been more aggressive in going after more stuff.

Dirksen: What kind of stuff?

Weichert: We had an opportunity, before the new Department of Natural Resources was formed, to incorporate the State Museum as part of our agency. That would have brought the [Cahokia] Mounds, would have brought it in and made more of an agency that was like more of a cultural agency for the State of Illinois, not just historic. We've had opportunities to acquire—

Dirksen: Excuse me, when would that have been?

Weichert: Maynard Crossland was director. It was under the Ryan administration, when they formed a new DNR. It was just prior to that. It just didn't work out. There's a lot of politics in that. They have a very strong Board of Trustees; we had a very strong Board of Trustees. [It] just didn't come together.

There are other things. We've had opportunities, things we need to go after. I'd say we're really heavily weighted in the Lincoln area. We had an opportunity, back in the early '90s—Jim Edgar was governor—to go get the John Deere birthplace, that's historic, at Grand Detour. We actually had a trustee meeting there. They gave us the hats. We were going; we were going to get them. It was a great site. It was a way to interpret the agricultural history of the state of Illinois and then the effects of the John Deere and the steel plow on the opening of the West and the Plains and all that.

The deal finally broke down over how much money, as I understand, John Deere was going to give us. Edgar wanted more to help support it, and it fell apart. That was a lost opportunity. There's other things we've had offered to us, but we just didn't feel we had the resources to accept; so we turned them down. I think in that area we could have been more aggressive to acquire more diverse sites in different geographical locations, within the state, so that

we could achieve a better balance of interpreting the history of Illinois. I think that's part of our overall mission, where I don't think we've accomplished as much as we should have. But it's driven by a lot of other things. It's politics is everything; money is everything.

It would have universal appeal. It gives us a broader base, and it's our responsibility. We're supposed to preserve, protect, interpret the history of the state of Illinois. That means all the history of this state, and it's a very diverse state. And so, there's opportunities we have not been able to seize, because of resources or political considerations; it's unfortunate.

Dirksen: One of the things I know that you certainly have been instrumental in doing, Bob, is the whole project with the Presidential Library and Museum.

Weichert: Correct.

Dirksen: Your background again was just too perfect, because you understood. You could talk the talk with the architects and the construction people and all of that; so that is wonderful. But before we go into this specific project, when did you really start seeing and hearing about all of this, and who were some of the major driving forces of that?

Weichert: I've heard something about it since day one with the agency, even to the point that the Historical Library was built with a twenty year lifespan for the capacity of the stack area under the Old State Capitol. That was 1968. So 1988, we're at the twenty year cycle for what we can hold in the stacks. We're running out of capacity to keep the things that we want to acquire under the Old State Capitol. We also have all of these Lincoln artifacts.

I'd seen various plans tossed around from day one I came to the agency. One including taking over the underground parking garage and converting it into a museum-library. That was a concept that was floated. Director Divine called it the "hole in the doughnut" plan. There was the idea of building a building or taking one over across the street from the Old State Capitol and turning it into a museum.

The impetus to get it going formally was Judy Barr Topinka was a state senator in the State Senate. She saw all the display case for the Gettysburg Address, under the stairwell of the Old State Capitol, and she put an appropriation into our budget to get a better display case for the Gettysburg Address. Now it might have been $75,000; it might have been $45,000. That provided the seed money to do a study, but that interest has always been there.

Dirksen: The interest?

Weichert: In a building of some type of…The new library [is] running out of space, some place to interpret the Lincoln artifacts and show these things that we have. Julie Cellini—

Dirksen: Who was the chairman—

Weichert: Chairman of our Board of Trustees, Frank Mason, another one of our trustees. But Julie really had been like…The number one priority was to get this thing going. You can't say enough about our trustees and what they did to garner support and get…When Dick Durbin became a senator, he took this on, to get the resources to get this thing off the ground. Many concepts had been floated for a long time, but that seed money from Topinka is what really got the ball rolling.

Dirksen: So she's the one then that said, Let's do the study, and let's figure out what's going to happen.

Weichert: She wanted a display case. We decided a better use for that money would be to do a study. Then that started garnering the support to get more money to really start formalizing plans for a museum. I wasn't involved too much in the direct planning stages of the museum, as far as, they brought together the library people; they brought together sites to people; they brought in a group that kind of hammered those things out. I got more involved in the nuts and bolts side, reviewing documents once we started getting in to the HVAC [heating, ventilation and air conditioning] designs and those types of things.

Dirksen: I want to talk to you about that, too. But before we do that, were you involved at all with the designations about where the buildings would be or any of that dialogue?

Weichert: No, those designations were made. I got involved to help when Merle Kirby and myself, we done property control. We got involved in some of the land acquisitions, once it was determined. But those arrangements, particularly when the City stepped up, and offered the TIF [tax increment financing] district and offered a certain amount of in-kind, the major part of that being the police station and that area. Those were done at a higher level. I was not involved with that.

Where I was involved, which was—

Dirksen: I was going to say, what is this in?

Weichert: A piece of the puzzle where I was involved was, in 1991 I negotiated the lease purchase of Union Station.

Dirksen: I was just going to ask you about Union Station. Now how did that come about?

Weichert: The Scully family, people are pretty familiar with the Scully family around this area here—

Dirksen: Michael Scully.

Weichert: Michael Scully, interesting gentleman, very interesting guy. They had rehabbed the building of sorts. By doing that they preserved it. There were some things they didn't do correctly, but had they not done what they did, the building wouldn't exist today. They had tried some retail ventures in there; it didn't work.

We're looking for office space for a couple of our divisions. We want to get some of our administrative offices out from under the Old State Capitol. We had two buildings leased over on 210 and 214 South Sixth Street, where Preservations Services was housed. So this came about that this was available.

So I entered in to negotiations. I was directed to do it by the trustees, with Michael Scully, Dick Hart being the legal representative for him, and [I] put together a lease-purchase agreement to take over Union Station, the idea being that we would use it just temporarily for some office space, until we could get a project. Well, that temporary turned out being fifteen years, I think. But that's how we got Union Station. And we had our—

Dirksen: Do you happen to know approximately what year that would have been?

Weichert: Ninety-one, I think.

Dirksen: Ninety-one, yeah.

Weichert: Ninety-two. Yeah. That's when we first started that, correct. So we moved our director's offices down there, and the Preservation Service Division moved down there. They spent many years there, until that came one of the pieces of the ALPLM [Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum] complex.

Dirksen: Just to put that in right now, that was really the last piece of the puzzle that was restored.

Weichert: The first piece was the library, followed by the museum, parking garage, Union Square Park and then Union Station.

Dirksen: Were you involved at all with the selection, as far as working the construction, the architects and any of that?

Weichert: The only extent we were is we did the contractual stuff for them. No, I was not involved in that. I wasn't part of the selection when BRC [Imagination Arts] was selected to do the exhibit components. Capital Development Board, through their bid process, selected the others. I was not involved in that process. I came in a little later, when there were some problems discovered, and I got thrust into it.

Dirksen: In your capacity, did you then have to work with the city and represent the agency with the city, when they were hammering out all of those different areas to build on?

Weichert: We did that, as far as getting the property all together, and then our agency got involved also from the respect that there were older building there. So those were the reviews that kicked in with Pres. [Preservation] Services. Virtually, just about every aspect of the agency got involved, because it was a project of some magnitude that it brought in all of us at one point or another, because of what we all did. So everybody got thrown into it. We had the archeological reviews before they did excavations even.

Dirksen: Well, I know you had to work with CDB [Construction]. Did you work with the architect, as far as the lead architect?

Weichert: I did, after. I got involved with CDB when you get into the review process of the plans. That's where you go through and you look at things. They have a 25 percent review, a 50 percent review, and then 100 percent review of the bid documents before they put them on the street. I was involved with Sandy Stinger on some of the review of those, before the bids were let for the—

Dirksen: So she was still the lead.

Weichert: Correct, she was the lead. I was just there kind of helping. Then, from a standpoint since my staff was going to have to run the buildings and maintain the buildings, we were in there to have a certain amount of input on some things, or at least find out what was being built, so we could prepare to how we were going to do it.

Dirksen: Where is she now? She's no longer with IHPA.

Weichert: Sandy left the State; that's correct. [She] went in to private business.

Dirksen: This is the big question. You referred to the system a few minutes ago. What happened with the library when they did the building that—

Weichert: We had concerns. I've got a really good chief stationary engineer, Dan Ortgessen. You know him.

Dirksen: He's wonderful.

Weichert: The guy's amazing. Dan and I always had concerns. When we got the final copy of the plans, we had concerns about the capabilities of the environmental systems that were being proposed for the library. There were some elements that were missing. This was a company called Cosentini [Associates] from New York that did the design for the HVAC systems.

Dirksen: Explain what that is, so people who are hearing this—

Weichert: That's all heating, ventilation, air conditioning. Because of the collections, we have to maintain some very stringent operating parameters within the collection areas of the library and then after that the museum. Basically, what

it comes down to is sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit plus or minus two degrees, 40 percent humidity plus or minus two percent. Those are difficult things to maintain through the weather conditions that we experience in the state of Illinois. And the humidification, very difficult to control. It's very complex systems, very rigid standards we've got to meet.

We're looking at what equipment's being proposed, and we're going, we don't think they can get these temperatures and get these humidity levels with the equipment that they are installing. We kept raising that issue, and it kept falling—

Dirksen: To whom did you raise the issue?

Weichert: Raised it with the Capital Development Board. Bring it up, subtly bring it up with some people like Sandy, and still, "No, it's going to be okay." So the building's progressing, and it's getting along, and it's getting towards completion, which would be…This is like spring of '01.

Dirksen: Two thousand and one.

Weichert: And 2002.

Dirksen: That's what I would think, more like 2002.

Weichert: Because it opened in 2000. Two thousand and two was the dedication; it didn't really open then. So it's 2001, 2002, and it's getting nowhere. I'm getting more concerned, because they're just about done with some of this HVAC stuff. The occasion was…We give reports at our trustee meetings, and we're at a trustee meeting, and the chairman asks—

Dirksen: And that is Julie?

Weichert: Julie Cellini asks, "How's it going?" And I said, "Well, I think we're building a building we can't use."

Dirksen: That didn't go well. (both laugh)

Weichert: That raised more than a few eyebrows. "And why can't we use it?" And I said, "Here's why. It can't do what they say it's going to do." I went through why we thought that.

We couldn't get Cosentini to understand or communicate or even come out or work with us. They just weren't very responsive. They're from New York, and it's hard to get them here to spend meaningful amounts of time to actually run this equipment. We're starting to run it to see how it's going to go, and it was just hard to get him to invest the time.

So, another brought in a consultant. It's called BRiC [Partnership, LLC]. Tom Bucheit owns a company out of St. Louis. He came in; he runs his charts, and he goes, "They're right; you can't—"

Dirksen: Meaning you're right.

Weichert: Yes. He said, "We can't get the water temperature we need to do the temperature requirements, humidity requirements, that it's going to do. It can't be done with the equipment that's in here." That was a big deal.

As a result, Cosentini and them finally they admitted, "Yep, there's some fault here." There's financial consideration given. As a result, three glycol chillers had to be added to the system.

Dirksen: What's that?

Weichert: What we had in there before, and what you have for most buildings, are just hot water, chilled water systems. They run with water. You can't chill them down too far, or you freeze up your equipment, because it is water. Glycol, basically, is kind of like anti-freeze. You can run much colder temperatures with a glycol system, because it's basically an anti-freeze. They're harder to operate on, but you can get these lower temperatures.

So three additional chillers—very large ones. I think over sixty tons, which is a lot of capacity—had to be added on at the last minute. There's an addition outside the library. If you look on the east side—

Dirksen: In the back, on the east side.

Weichert: In the back. We had built a new wall, and inside there are three chillers. They run the glycol that provide those temperatures so we can control the collection areas and the critical areas in the museum to the proper temperature.

When I brought that up at the trustees and found I was right, that's when the chairman of the board of trustees and the director said, "We need somebody's eyes and ears watching this stuff, so you're it."

Dirksen: So from then on, you were there.

Weichert: That's correct.

Dirksen: They may have had the dedication in 2002, but the library did not open until October of 2004.

Weichert: It was not ready, not by any stretch of the imagination. There were reasons they did what they did and primarily recognized George Ryan who…He did play an integral part in getting some funding, or his wife did. We understand that, but it really wasn't ready.

So I got involved right then. That became a good part of my life, through the construction of the rest of the complex, a lot of long days. I felt extremely honored to be picked to be involved in that. People talk about once in a lifetime opportunities. This isn't even once in a lifetime. World class things like this aren't built very often and, yeah, I can get a little choked up about that. It was really something.

Dirksen: What was it like, Bob, for you to work with this group? It is amazing what you all did, what everyone did. This is your interview, but you were part of the whole contingent, working many creative people, who came from all over.

Weichert: It was pretty amazing. You look at the BRC. This was a complex project, in that we have a general contractor who is building a building envelope and installing all of the environmental systems, those types of things. But then there's a total, separate group that's putting together the exhibit components that are going to fit within this building.

The coordination between those two was extremely hard, and it didn't go very smoothly. Schedules weren't met, and there's a lot of difficulty doing that. But with the wide range of people…We have display cases that were built in Germany and brought over. We've got BRC. These guys are the most creative minds you'll ever want to meet. You look at the "Ghosts of the Library," [holographic presentation] which…I know how it works, and I wish I didn't, because it takes the magic away from it when you know how. I don't tell anybody, because I don't want to ruin it.

Dirksen: It's magic.

Weichert: But they came in. To see these people, like Bob Rogers with BRC. Being around those types of people is really pretty amazing. Joe Walsh lives next door to him. [That] may not mean anything to you, but he's a great guitar player. He was with the Eagles now. He could tell you stories.

Dirksen: Well, look at the man who built the trees, from Breeze, Illinois.

Weichert: Breeze Trees from Murphysboro, Illinois. [He's] Just as common as could be. [I] really liked working with him, a great, great guy. He went out and makes casts of actual trees, out in the woods. He started out doing exhibit for Bass Pro Shops and then came in and did this. It's just amazing, such a diverse group that came in from, literally, all over the world.

Dirksen: All over the world.

Weichert: And the types of artists that they have doing the paintings and the music background that was developed. The musicians were brought in. It was truly a global effort, the likes of which you just don't see in this town.

Dirksen: But then you were responsible too, Bob, for bringing in the people and maintaining the buildings and the equipment.

Weichert: We did the coordination, also.

Dirksen: Now, how did you do that?

Weichert: The construction coordination, all the meetings and working with all the contractors and weekly meetings and the progress reports, and we're putting in sixty, seventy hour weeks for years. Gary Kitchen and myself and Gene Grubb, you kind of just live there, trying to pull all this in.

Dirksen: Excuse me a second. Now, Gary Kitchen worked for CDB—

Weichert: Gary Kitchen's a project manager of the Capital Development Board [CDB], Tim Patrick was a project manager for CDB, who did the library. Gary Kitchen came over and took over on the museum. Gene Grubb was hired to do oversight.

Dirksen: For Siciliano.

Weichert: The architects hired him to oversight for the whole project.

Dirksen: He didn't work for Siciliano?

Weichert: No. He helped oversee. Siciliano was a general contractor. We had ESD [Contractors, Brooklyn] did the environment systems in the museum. There's a lot of tricky things. There's two separate contracts. The library was one contract; the museum was another. Even though the general contractor got both of them, which was Siciliano, we had different companies did the environmental systems. Different companies did the controls systems.

Well, one company did control systems for the library, which produces all of the hot water, chilled water for the museum, but another company got the automated control system in the museum, and the two systems couldn't talk to each other. (Dirksen laughs) There's a lot of those kinds of glitches—they were pretty major—that had to be resolved to actually get the thing to function. It wasn't ideal in that, because of the competitive bidding process, they couldn't have the same set of contractors on both sides do everything. So it made things very complex.

Dirksen: You had to literally be the go-between.

Weichert: Right. I was there to represent the agency's best interests. Sometimes the agency leadership spoke with a unified voice and a lot of times they did not. There was a lot of opinions, and their leadership and struggle within the agency itself that made it a lot more difficult. Could have been a lot smoother; could have been a lot more fun. You're aware of that.

Dirksen: Um-hm. But that came—

Weichert: That came later, when the museum…Well, the library was pretty well done, and we got it open. When the museum started, that's when a lot of that started to happen, to a greater extent.

Dirksen: Now, Susan left; Maynard was there for a while.

Weichert: Maynard was there—

Dirksen: He was the director, but he wasn't there too long. How long was Maynard there?

Weichert: Maynard was only there a couple of years.

Dirksen: As director.

Weichert: Director. Maynard had been with the agency since right after it was formed. He came over, I believe, from DCCA [Department of Commerce and Community Affairs], but he'd been there a long time. Maynard took Susan's place as director. Maynard was there the same time Richard Norton Smith was brought in as director of the museum.

A lot of our problems result from changes that were made to our enabling legislation that set up the relationship and incorporated the museum and the library into the agency. If you read it…My personal opinion, it's horrible the way it's set up. It's a multi-headed Hydra. It set up two directors, so you have a director of the agency, and you have a director appointed by the governor of the museum and library. It wasn't clearly defined, which director—

Dirksen: Reported to whom.

Weichert: To whom. We had a couple of directors who didn't want to report to each other at all, and there was a lot of conflict and a lot of butting of heads. There were several people that got caught in the middle of that. Myself, was one of them, but there are several others. I literally reported to multiple bosses, each of whom thought they had supreme authority, which puts you in a situation that's extremely difficult to balance and really sets you up to fail, particularly when they didn't like each other.

They would put you in that position purposely, so you're caught between two sledge hammers. That took a lot of the fun away from it and made it extraordinarily difficult for anybody in that position. I wasn't the only one. Being the project manager for the agency and being responsible for the operations of the building, I was in the middle of that quite a bit.

Dirksen: I was able to see that, because there were a lot of prima donnas down there at that time. By this time, though, Bob, Blagojevich was governor.

Weichert: Maynard came in as director under Ryan. Maynard was director under Blagojevich for a while.

Dirksen: By now it was 2004. The fall of 2004 was when then Richard Norton Smith came aboard, because he was hired—

Weichert: He'd probably been there…Was it '04?

Dirksen: It was '04, because the museum opened in '05, on April 19 of '05.

Weichert: Right.

Dirksen: He had only come the fall before. They wanted him earlier.

Weichert: No. I think he was here earlier than that.

Dirksen: Was he?

Weichert: Because the museum wasn't that far along when he came. It was up, but we were still open to the weather; we weren't closed in yet, because he did…yeah, that was just a little bit before that, I think.

Dirksen: You're right. You are correct. Because he came in '03.

Weichert: He was at the library. His office was at the library while the construction was going on at the museum.

Dirksen: Yes, that's exactly right; you're right. He came in the fall of '03, and then I was hired in the spring of '04. And Richard was having a lot of battles with—

Weichert: Richard, I believe, was the right person for the opening of that museum, because the guy is a tremendous promoter. He's a genius; he really is. He does some things very, very well. He ginned up the national interest in this place and really was the kind of person you needed out front, to promote us nationally and globally. That was his strength.

I see one of his biggest weaknesses as he didn't necessarily surround himself with people that could provide him the help that he needed the most. I speak to specifically…Richard is what I refer to as the show captain of the cruise ship. He's the guy that's out front shaking the hands; everybody sees him. But there's got to be somebody down actually driving the ship. That would be a good chief of staff or similar position that's doing all the nuts and bolts, day-to-day operational things of the museum.

He brought with him an individual and made him a chief of staff that in no way met those qualifications and was able to do that, and created a lot of paranoia throughout the agency. It was a very destructive management style, very punitive management style, and was not a good thing for the agency and really, I think, took a lot of the fun out of it and did a lot of damage before the departure.

Dirksen: What do you remember about the opening of the museum? Can you remember or were you so overwhelmed with everything?

Weichert: My and my staff, we were charged with setting up the physical arrangements for the visit, which was on a monumental scale. I mean, we literally brought in fake flooring or artificial flooring and covered a square block, so you could set folding chairs up in a vacant lot, where the new park was going to be constructed. We set up 15,000 folding chairs. That's one example. We set up over two miles of metal barricades, because the president of the United States was coming.

Dirksen: And that was?

Weichert: George Bush. Everything we're doing is in consultation with the Secret Service. I've worked with Secret Service several times over the years. I did it with George Bush when he was vice president. I did it with Ronald Reagan when he was in for a visit. I [was] able to do a little bit of advance with George Bush, years ago.

I had worked with them before, and I'm very familiar with them. I get a kick out of them, because they ask questions, but they're not questions. The sentence may end in a question mark, but you really don't have a choice. (Dirksen laughs) They like to make you think you have a choice in what they want. So that made it particularly challenging, trying to deal with all the security considerations. You set things up, and then you move them. We probably took the two miles of barricades up and down and shifted it probably eight times in three days. The staging, it was just a monumental thing.

But it was a tremendous activity, and the excitement that was ginned up with them and the people who came in, that was just really a monumental thing. It was a great event to kick off the opening of the museum. It was on a scale I don't think Springfield had ever seen. It was really extraordinary. I've heard, budgetarily, it cost the foundation a lot more than they had budgeted, but I just couldn't think of a better way to kick it off. It was truly befitting of what we had built.

Dirksen: It was. I totally agree with you. It was an amazing event. Getting the city ready for the event too and all the different—

Weichert: Working with the city, they come and go, "Well gee, the stoplights on Sixth Street are going to be maybe in the sight lines of the camera." [We] took the

traffic control devices down, took the street lights down. A couple of trees in the way, we took the trees out and replanted them later.

Everybody pitched in at a level…the cooperation between all the units of government and all, from the federal on down to the very smallest local, the agency. I called CMS, who have shared services—I'm not always the biggest fan of CMS—and said, "Hey, I need help." They sent me twenty-seven laborers to come out and help us with all this work. It was amazing. Everybody just really threw together and pulled this off. And we did.

Dirksen: Have you ever experienced anything of that magnitude, again or before?

Weichert: Similar.

Dirksen: What was that?

Weichert: On two occasions, and it's been fairly recently. I was instrumental in doing the set-up, with the advance team, for Senator Obama when he made his announcement that he was going to run for the president of the United States.

Dirksen: In January.

Weichert: In January. Something I will never forget; his campaign was just getting started, and he only has one sign that says, the "Obama for President" sign. It had to be fastened to the front of the podium, and none of his advance staff would nail it on there, because they were afraid they would damage it. So I did, (Dirksen laughs) because I had nothing to lose. When I see that on TV, I can only say, "I'm the one that put that sign on the podium when he made his announcement." That was huge in January. But then later—

Dirksen: Well, the weather was just awful. You had to take care of that too, Bob?

Weichert: We did. We set that up. He has a great advance team. I've worked with a lot of advance teams, but his was one of the most down-to-earth, organized advance teams I'd ever worked with. To get that set up, that was huge. It exceeded…People were out there a day ahead of time; it was so cold, so unbelievably cold.

Then [I] had the occasion to do it again. This time, on the hottest day of the year, when he came to announce who his running mate was going to be for vice president. We worked for days to get this set up and to put the tents—

Dirksen: This was where?

Weichert: This was the Old State Capitol again. I lived there for several days. [We] took out a tree that we replaced afterwards, but getting up the fencing and the control and going through the run-through. Then, even I took the Secret Service, with the dogs, through the Old State Capitol to clear the facility. Dan

and I are shut up inside a stand. We're inside the Old State Capitol, and we're just up there.

A very special thing for me was when Senator Obama came up. He was standing there, waiting to go outside, and it's just a sea of humanity and the hottest day of the year. He looked over, and he remembered Dan and I. I'd met him as a liaison, years ago. And he said, "Hey, Bob." He took this gentleman with him, and he walked over to Dan and I. He goes, "I want you to meet the next vice president of the United States. This is Senator Biden."

So Dan and I had him announced to us, before they went outside and announced him to the world. We had a real nice chat with him for several minutes there. And I told him, "You know, some day you need to come back here when it's nice. You've been here on the coldest day of the year and the hottest day of the year." (Dirksen laughs) That was pretty special, that he actually recognized us and came over and introduced Biden to us. I'll never forget that.

Dirksen: You've had so many interesting things, and you're so great about sharing all this too, Bob. You've talked about so many of these different things already. I don't even have to ask, because you've been wonderful to do it. Putting this ALPLM thing together, has it met what you anticipated? Has it exceeded? Are there things that need to be done? What do you think?

Weichert: I don't think anybody, and I mean anybody…Maybe Julie did or Susan, but I don't know that any of us truly understood what we were building when this thing started. I really don't. We'd seen it conceptually. You see the drawings; you see the plans, but to see all these pieces come together and build this complex, the library, beautiful building that that is, the museum, the parking garage, then the park, then you throw in Union Station, where we resurrected a former landmark of the city and preserved it.

I'm probably as proud of that piece as any of the others that I've been involved in, because of that clock tower has been restored. We had the old, original plans that we were able to put the building back the way it was. That's something that sticks out.

Now you see all of that, and still it's hard to grasp, what it is that's been created. It was done by this little agency in the state of Illinois, with a lot of help from a lot of people, but it truly is world class. You look at the national and world figures that come here. Desmond Tutu's been here. We've had the emir of Qatar come here; we've had numerous Hollywood-types. It's put Springfield on the map, to a large extent or a much larger extent than it was. We bandy about and people get tired of hearing, oh, that's a world class institution. But it is; it really is.

Dirksen: The visitation by the foreign visitors is just overwhelming.

Weichert: Some of it was such a hard struggle. For me, one of the most satisfying things was, after it first opened, to take a few minutes and go in and just sit on a bench in the plaza and watch people and watch their faces and watch their reactions to what they're seeing. It really takes away the tough times you had

To hear the response…I travel a lot, as you know. When you go places, and people ask you—

Dirksen: Where are you from?

Weichert: In Spain, they go, where are you from? You tell them, and, "Oh, Yeah." They know of the museum. It's pretty phenomenal.

Dirksen: It is. It's something you will always remember.

Weichert: I found it one of the greatest privileges that the trustees and Julie, in particular, allowed me to even play a small part. Yeah, that's special. It really is special.

Dirksen: Yes, it is. Bob, you've just been so great. I'm just going to say a few more things here. Let's talk a little bit more about the bicentennial, because again, with the whole, diverse division that you are responsible for, you're the one that had a lot to do with making sure that these bicentennial events went on. For instance, all the different people that you have to work with, not only at the sites, but with the maintenance, making sure about the street closings, all of those different things.

Weichert: We facilitate all of the events. We're short staffed right now. We're in tough times, like everybody is. I've had people say to me, "Well, what you need to do is let one of these events fail, so they'll know how important you are, so that you can get more help."

That's not going to happen. We can't afford to do that. What troubles we have are ones that have to be behind the scenes, because I want every visitor who comes to that place to have the same experience. I don't want something…We start playing political games, or something that we have or haven't done ruins their experience. I never want that to happen. We have to find a way to get it done. We pool our resources; we run as a complex; we run lean and mean. Do we get overwhelmed and cranky and complain? Sure we do, but everybody pitches in and does what it takes to get the job done.

Those fights for resources and staff and that, you do those later; you do those behind the scenes. But you never want to have an event come off badly. That's a reflection, not only on me, on the agency, I live in this community. That's why, when the troubles are going on with the museum, you want it to be successful. I live here, and I'm proud of what's here. So, yeah, the bicentennial has lot of challenges. We had a lot of things going on, a lot of venues all over the place. It kept people running, but it reinvigorated interest. You looked at the attendance at the sites; the attendance at the museum were

up as a result of the Bicentennial. For the lack of resources that were committed to it by the legislature of the State of Illinois, it's pretty amazing what got done. That's just that people threw themselves into it and made it happen.

Dirksen: Well, they did what you just said, though. They were so committed to making the legacy of Lincoln go on, to have Lincoln be proud. We got the least amount of money of the three states involved with the bicentennial, with Indiana and Kentucky and Illinois. But we did the most.

Weichert: Yep. Hey, look at what Kentucky got. He was born there, but that's about it. And they got so much more money than we did.

Dirksen: They did. Well, the one day alone, his birthday, the year before his birthday, they did that big, huge kickoff, $10 million for that one day. That's amazing.

Weichert: Yeah. But that comes down to the people we have; that's in the museum and the library. We have great people. We have great staff. They're really passionate about what they do.

Dirksen: But I think it goes back to what you said at the very beginning, though. It's the whole agency, Bob.

Weichert: Yep.

Dirksen: Because it takes the whole committed effort. You've seen it.

Weichert: Oh, yeah.

Dirksen: You have seen it, so amazing. Well, before we wrap up, I just wanted to ask you, are there any things, any of the events or any of the experiences that you feel just really passionate about, that we haven't addressed?

Weichert: I don't know. We're just limited by our resources. Now, we've got a new director, been here, not very long, Jan Grimes, took Bob Coomer's place.

Dirksen: Bob retired.

Weichert: Bob Coomer retired, phenomenal guy, just unbelievable ability to manage people and resources and just a real stand-up guy. I can't say enough about him. Jan, unfortunately, it's hard to say, because she's come at a time when the state is in such bad shape fiscally that all she's been able to do is be here to watch things be dismantled and watch us lose ground, because of lack of resources. So we don't have an opportunity to really explore new things or go after them, when all we're doing right now is trying to survive. It's really limited the director on what they've been able to do or to get a new vision and to go after things.

It'll turn around, and when it does…There's some benefits that's come out of this. People may not see it now, but we experienced it when the agency was growing before, before the library and museum. This fiscal downturn has forced everybody to work together in a much more close fashion. There's a lot of animosity between the sites and the agency and the museum and library.

The sites feel they have been overshadowed by the museum, and they were for a while. You know, it's the new kid on the block. But that's changing. Now, because of the lack of resources, we all got to pull together. What will come out of this, eventually, will be a stronger agency. It won't be this, us and them library or museum, sites, kind of thing. It will be an agency that the hardships has forced us together, forced us to work together, forced us to know each other better, understand our missions. I think, eventually, when the money comes back, the overall agency will be better for it, because it will have brought us all together as one agency.

Dirksen: That's a great vision. It's wonderful. You've been great, Bob.

Weichert: Alright.

Dirksen: Thank you, thank you. One last question, and this is going to be so simple for you. If you could go back to the very beginning of your career, how would you change it?

Weichert: That's tough, because I've had a real good career here. It's not a regret, but I wished I'd have come here sooner. I do. I do. I've had a really good career. I've been fortunate enough to be here for a long time. I've got to experience a lot. I've got to see a lot of things. I've been able to take my children, when they were small, down when Tom Schwartz was the Lincoln curator. They actually got to hold the Gettysburg Address in their hands.

Dirksen: Wow.

Weichert: When you do things like that…Not very many people get to do that. How many people get to go up to the dome of the Old State Capitol and stick their head out? (Dirksen laughs) I mean, when you look at things like that, like we were able to save the old State-Journal Register building and restore it. We save Union Station; I'm really proud of that, that that clock tower's back.

Dirksen: It's a beautiful restoration.

Weichert: We got some really neat stuff. We do a lot of great things, and yeah, it's been great. It really has.

Dirksen: I think they're lucky.

Weichert: Very lucky.

Dirksen: No, the agency.

(end of interview)