A Time To Plan

"To every thing (turn, turn, turn) there is a season. . ." Perhaps you are familiar with the Byrds song. "A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to reap. . ."

Today, as temperatures dip, the change of seasons is a time to get kids back to school and prepare the house for winter. But when your house is a growing village, a new season calls for taking on big challenges.

A Season of Growth

The early 1900s was *definitely* a new season in Winnetka. As population doubled in each of the first three decades, new homes were constructed at an astounding rate. Large lots were divided into smaller parcels. Homes, businesses and schools pressed closer to each other. New children crowded into our already full classrooms.

Trucks from Chicago barreled through village neighborhoods on a tortuous circuit north. Noisy trains rattled nerves, spewed smoke and, worst of all, took innocent lives in needless accidents.

Outmoded facilities such as the old Village Hall needed to be replaced. It was "a time to break down, and a time to build up." But build what, and where?

Vacant lots were being sold quickly in the post-war prosperity but there was still plenty of land. To provide for future needs of this burgeoning community, it was "time to gather stones … er, properties… together." But which properties?

Winnetka was known for its stately homes, majestic trees and abundant wildflowers. But as travelers exited the train station they were greeted by an unsightly blacksmith shop. "A time to keep, and a time to cast away," but what to keep, and what to cast away?

The Plan Commission

Around the nation, this wave of urban sprawl prompted the realization that development needed to be regulated. States passed legislation to empower local municipalities to take control of their future. Through land use and zoning regulations neighborhoods and schools could be separated from factories and farms, effective routes of transportation could be carved, and a balance could be struck between the rights of individual property owners and the general safety and welfare of the village.

Winnetka's Plan Commission was appointed in early 1917 with Philip S. Post, vice-president of International Harvester, as its chairman. Its first action was to hire the famed architect Edward H. Bennett, to draw plans for Winnetka's future. Viewed as "one of our own" yet also an outside expert, Bennett would bring sensitivity to Winnetka's values but also the clear eyes of an unbiased visionary.

Sustained Leadership

It would take four years for the Plan of Winnetka to be adopted. During that time World War I consumed the nation's attention. Young men, including our village manager, went "over there" and the nation's resources were diverted to the war effort.

After the war, a backlog of public projects pressed to the fore. In 1920 the campaign for what would become Skokie School consumed the village in a massive debate over the location and need for such a large facility. By then the Plan of Winnetka was well developed and the rationale and need for the proposed school well established. Winnetka's elected officials could articulate the vision and press its case. The Caucus helped support its leaders during these pivotal times by pledging to re-slate all incumbents.

In 1921, the Plan of Winnetka was adopted by the Village Council, published as an impressive hard cover book and distributed to every home in the village. It was the product of efforts by those who took time to speak and time to listen, time to accept reality and time to dream of a future, time to decide what to keep and what to change.

In Winnetka's season of change, it was a time to plan. A century later, we reap the benefits of the many ideas planted back then. Not all took root, but those that did are the hallmarks of the Winnetka we cherish today.

Edward H. Bennett, architect and city planner, was hired to design Winnetka's first Village plan. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and is best known as co-author of the 1909 Plan of Chicago. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.