

A Bennett Plan

Some questions can only be answered by a comprehensive plan. That was clearly the case in 1917 as the Village Hall Advisory Committee recommended appointment of a commission to draw up a plan for Winnetka.

In all, 73 people were credited with membership on the Plan Commission, including elected officials, citizens representing various civic organization, and 13 Winnetka architects, engineers, and landscape designers. Their first act was to hire renowned city planner, architect and co-author of the Chicago Plan, Edward Bennett.

Edward H. Bennett

Bennett immigrated to San Francisco from his native England in 1890 at the age of 16. Working in an architect's office, he was encouraged to study at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, which he did from 1895-1902. Upon graduation he returned to the states and then moved to Chicago in 1903 to work for the prominent urban planner Daniel H. Burnham.

By 1909, with the issuance of the Plan of Chicago, Bennett's name vaulted to acclaim. While his partner Burnham figured prominently as promoter and fundraiser for the Chicago Plan, it was Bennett's layouts and drawings that would define the character of Chicago for decades.

Bennett's Beaux-Arts education and involvement with the City Beautiful movement informed his city plans. He was a noted leader in establishing zoning ordinances, conducting transportation studies, and regional planning design.

An Urban Plan

The field of urban planning was in its infancy as Mr. Bennett began his career. In Winnetka's Plan his most enduring legacy has been the well-organized urban land use design that has shaped this community for nearly a century.

Bennett's analysis of future village needs was quite rudimentary by today's standards. He projected that, based on available residential acreage within the village and the existing density of 10 persons per acre, Winnetka could see growth to a maximum of 17,400 persons. While Winnetka's population did spike to 17,174 in 1990, the U.S. Census shows Winnetka's population maintaining closer to the current level of 12,370 since 1940.

His involvement in planning Chicago's regional highway system informed his design for Winnetka's commercial and residential streets, foreseeing a future Skokie Highway to the west of the forest preserve. He pressed to continue Green Bay Road through Winnetka as a commercial thoroughfare to divert heavy traffic from Sheridan Road.

Land use policy was established by defining specific areas of the village for commercial use, civic buildings, schools, parks and residences. He platted the village with smaller residential lots around the three train stations and larger lots further away. Commercial districts were confined to the Green Bay corridor. This land use policy would be encoded in the original village Zoning Ordinance.

A City Beautiful Plan

Bennett's former boss and mentor, Daniel Burnham, had also worked on the 1902 redesign of the core of Washington, D.C., with the National Mall and monumental government buildings. This was an early use of the City Beautiful concept that sought to create social order through beautification.

The most ambitious City Beautiful ideas of Bennett's Winnetka Plan never took root. A stately arrangement of civic buildings, stretching west from the location for a new Village Hall, was to feature a Civic Auditorium. The auditorium would ultimately be included in the 1930 reconstruction of Community House. A lakefront harbor the length of the village was also never realized.

A Plan For Every Season

The fresh perspective that is generated through a comprehensive planning effort is key to the continued vitality and relevance of any community. New economic realities and lifestyle preferences, as well as new projections of future challenges, mean that any plan has a limited lifespan.

With that in mind, Winnetka conducted two more comprehensive plans and is now developing a comprehensive plan for its business districts to lay the framework for a vital and prosperous core to our community for generations to come.

Caption for photo of Title page of Plan of Winnetka:

Philip S. Post, vice president of International Harvester, chaired the original Winnetka Plan Commission. He led this team of officials, architects, engineers, landscape designers and representative citizens in guiding the formulation of Mr. Bennett's plan. While Mr. Post is credited with writing much of the Plan, he died just months before it was published. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

PLAN OF WINNETKA

THE REPORT OF
THE WINNETKA PLAN COMMISSION
ACCOMPANIED BY
THE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
OF
MR. EDWARD H. BENNETT
CONSULTING ARCHITECT

