

First Fruits of the Plan

Four years after Winnetka appointed its first Plan Commission, Edward Bennett's Plan of Winnetka was finally published. But even before it had gone to press, the vision and foresight embodied in the Plan's analyses and designs were already guiding crucial decisions in Winnetka.

Skokie School – Location, Location, Location

Some of the key challenges facing Winnetka involved providing for the needs of a village not five years ahead, but 20 and 50 years ahead. Months before the Plan was published, big controversy over a new upper grade school (today's Skokie School) revealed the tug and pull between the comfortable status quo and a jarring visionary plan.

The Board of Education had identified the need for such a school to provide leading edge facilities and recreational space appropriate to that age group. It had already purchased the 12-acre lot on West Elm Street and planned to raise the \$350,000 to pay for the new building through voluntary "subscriptions" by residents.

The big controversy focused on its location. Should the new school replace the Horace Mann School, situated on what is today the post office site? This location was familiar territory for a school and situated closer to residents in east Winnetka. Or should it be built on the much larger site on West Elm and Glendale where it would have ample room for playgrounds and ball fields?

The Plan of Winnetka had reviewed these issues and anticipated the Horace Mann site eventually being replaced by a small school for younger children in the immediate neighborhood, leaving room for a Community Auditorium on the block.

Perhaps the best summation of the choice before voters on the referendum choosing the school site was this:

Shall We Build for Today? Or Shall We Build With Faith in Winnetka's Future.

The Horace Mann School was built only 21 years ago. It had to be added to in five years. Two other schools have had to be built in the last ten years. And our schools still lag behind Winnetka's need. If we had looked forward far enough twenty, or even fifteen, years ago, we would not have found ourselves in the present difficult situation. But Winnetka then didn't imagine its future. . . . Let us not repeat our mistakes.

By a narrow margin, the larger West Elm Street site won.

First Zoning Ordinance

As finishing touches were being put on the Plan of Winnetka, a Zoning Commission was appointed and charged with writing a zoning ordinance. The new

state law empowered municipalities to regulate height, area, use and location of buildings to ensure orderly community development, protect property values and secure the safety and well-being of the community.

The Zoning Commission took on this controversial but crucial role, using the Bennett Plan as a basis for its new zoning districts. Bennett had cautioned that his zoning recommendations were merely suggestive and that there would be practical matters to work out with property owners in each district. And so there were.

There were “industrial” businesses, such as coal and lumber yards in the East Elm district. Yet that district would be designated “commercial”. Homeowners east of the Indian Hill station wanted to prohibit commercial development around the station, fearing the potential impact on New Trier youths.

Through public hearings, many such issues were raised and the Zoning Board refined the ordinance which was then passed by the Village Council on January 17, 1922. Through the years there have been adjustments as deemed necessary.

First Fruits

Today we see the wisdom of these “first fruits” of the Plan of Winnetka: a western campus for our middle schools adjacent to the park district fields and removed from the central commercial district; the clustering of commercial activity around the train stations; and restrictions on industrial business to protect our neighborhoods and property values. These accomplishments would be followed by more – all inspired and directed by the Plan of Winnetka.

Photo caption:

This sketch of the proposed upper grade school, later named “Skokie School”, was presented to villagers who narrowly approved its location on the West Elm site. Its \$350,000 price tag was paid for entirely by voluntary contributions. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

