

Winnetka's Village Council Stepped Up

Winnetka has always been driven and governed by volunteers. This proud tradition evolved from neighborly collaboration to civic government, from a reading club to a library, from civic organizations to government boards.

Power to Govern

As a settlement grew into a village in the 1860s, new powers were needed for passing laws to maintain order and for levying taxes for schools, roads, and public services. Under the legal principle known as "Dillon's Rule" municipalities were considered creatures of the state, having no inherent powers other than those granted to them by the state. The Winnetka Charter, along with the Illinois Cities and Villages Act, granted Winnetka basic powers to operate.

The authors of a 1938 study of Winnetka's government noted that the powers granted to Winnetka proved inadequate and a kind of customary practice evolved to bridge the gaps. At first, civic organizations functioned on an extralegal basis to address issues as they arose. Committees formed to fight saloons or lobby for track crossing safety.

The Village Improvement Association studied issues related to grade separation, forestry, refuse removal, and the lake beach.

Over time "powers and functions of local government in Illinois were spread over a bewildering multitude and assortment of taxing authorities..." By 1933 there were 1,642 separate taxing units for the metropolitan Chicago area alone. This situation was the result of

overlying the county form of government found in the south with the New England township form. And, more importantly, it included numerous ad hoc bodies designed to serve special governmental functions or get around constitutional debt limits.



The 1921 Winnetka Plan called for the construction of a new Village Hall. After 56 years of conducting Village affairs in train stations and a remodeled school building, the Village Council and administration finally got a brand new home in 1925.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

In Winnetka, separate taxing authorities were established for parks, the library, grade schools, New Trier High School and New Trier Township. Winnetka's Village government provides core services of police and fire protection, streets and sewers, refuse and snow removal. Plus it administers other functions related to zoning and community development and operates municipal water and electric utilities.

Reorganizing Village Government

When Winnetka hired its first village manager in 1915 it was in the midst of exponential growth. Achieving some measure of control on all that change was the call of the day. By enlisting the services of a paid professional to manage Village operations, the village council could turn its attention to planning for the future. But just as the village manager had to reorganize Village administration to be more effective, so too did the village council need to step up as an effective governing body.

One of the first issues was to gather the work of the ad hoc civic organizations under the village council's umbrella to provide support, coordination and leadership. For example, in 1917 the Village Improvement Association became the Plan Commission. One of its first actions was to contract with William Bennett to develop a comprehensive plan for the development of Winnetka. When the state passed legislation enabling local municipalities to enact zoning laws, Winnetka was one of the first to pass such an ordinance and thus established a Zoning Board. Over the years, the Village Council has added more advisory boards on issues such as Business Community Development, Design Review, Environment & Forestry and Landmark Preservation.

The Village Council and President

The Winnetka Charter established the village council with five trustees and a village president, each elected for one-year terms and serving without pay. In 1910 the number of trustees was increased to six and in 1940 a change in the Village Code expanded their elected terms to two years. With each of these changes, the average tenure of the trustees lengthened and the village council was better equipped to engage complex issues that required years of planning and implementation.

The village president in Winnetka is an important office. As a directly elected officer, the village president is the chief executive of the village responsible for enforcing laws and ordinances and presiding over village council meetings. With the approval of the village council, the president appoints the village manager, members of Village boards and commissions and other non-elected officers outside the control of the manager.

Winnetka has been served by 45 different village presidents with William B. Moulton serving the longest term from 1921-1942. His tenacity and extended leadership were key to accomplishing Winnetka's two most enduring civic

improvements, the grade separation project for the railroad tracks and the Skokie Lagoons.

Leadership by Volunteers

Winnetka's proud tradition of civic engagement makes our local government work. Each year nearly fifty professionals and civic-minded neighbors with diverse backgrounds but a common commitment to this community volunteer to serve on Village boards and commissions and assist the village council in its policy-making decisions. While Winnetka has a modern form of government organized to get things accomplished, it is empowered by the talents and vision of engaged citizens.