

Roots of Policy and Politics in Winnetka

Imagine a time when the extent of local government was a gathering of friends in a spacious living room. In our current age of complex government institutions and contentious elections, it seems impossible such a neighborly gathering could be viewed as government. Yet these early meetings not only made decisions crucial to the development of Winnetka, but also set the pillars of our early system of local politics.

Protecting a Wholesome Place for Families

At a gathering of friends in the home of Artemus Carter in 1868, the decision was made to apply for a legal charter as a village. Carter was a close friend of Charles and Sarah Peck. They had been members of the same Unitarian congregation in Chicago, along with several others who had been enticed by the Pecks to purchase land in Winnetka. Many of the new residents in the later 1800s were the families of young men who had come west to seek their fortune in Chicago. Having succeeded, they moved to Winnetka to escape the grime and corruption of Chicago and raise their young families in the fresh environs of the woods of the north shore.

The values that united these influential settlers came from their desire to establish a wholesome environment for raising families, and then to protect their village from the corrupting influence of Chicago-style politics. To this end, the Winnetka Charter was drafted to establish Winnetka as a “dry” community and to preserve an extraordinary amount of power in its local government.

Town Meetings

Regular town meetings were used to come to agreement on village affairs and the village council enacted those decisions. The town meeting of Winnetka has its roots in the New England and Unitarian backgrounds of many of its leaders. They were familiar with the town meeting form of direct democratic rule, as well as the congregationalist style of working together in their churches to direct church matters.

Rev. Quincy Dowd of Winnetka’s Congregational Church played a major role in making the town meeting an effective force, preaching: “Changes and improvements do not just happen. They are the product of creative, cooperative personalities, concerted counsels and endeavors.” He was noted for his capacity to bring people together to find agreement, but



Reverend Quincy Dowd of Winnetka’s Congregational Church played a major role in making the town meeting an effective force for change and improvement.
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he had his hands full when a controversy arose which would ultimately establish another pillar of early Winnetka policy.

Municipal Ownership and Control

In 1885 divisions formed over the granting of franchises to utility companies to supply villagers with gas and water. Opponents fought for local control of utilities and the sense of self-sufficiency that would result. The issue settled down for a while when the council voted to construct a village water plant. But in 1894 its decision to grant a gas franchise set off a revolt stirred up by none other than Henry Demarest Lloyd.

Lloyd had been one of the early investigative reporters, known as “muckrakers”, whose exposés of political corruption and abuses of industrial giants were helping to propel the country from the excesses of the Gilded Age to the righteous zeal of the Progressive movement. His writings against the Standard Oil Trust were stirring passions just as the village council voted to grant a gas franchise to a utility company. As part of this revolt, a town meeting gathering decided to require all candidates for the spring election to sign a pledge guaranteeing to refer utility franchise questions to the people for a referendum. This practice was maintained for many years and enshrined the value of municipal ownership and control of utilities.

By 1900 Winnetka’s population had grown to 1,800 and the town meeting had largely faded from influence and existence in Winnetka. But the impassioned speeches at those meetings on behalf of protecting our family-centered community, by retaining legal authority to govern ourselves and local ownership of utilities, still ring through in today’s conversations on key issues.