

## Look to Community for Policy

Perhaps the most unique and little-known fact about the Winnetka system of governance a century ago is the role Winnetka Community House played in political affairs. While the Caucus was the political force, Community House weighed in on issues of policy.

Winnetka's tradition of town meetings, once a testament to the strength of the village's community fabric, faded away in both frequency and attendance during the early 1900s. The last meeting may well have been in 1908 when the son of the late Henry Demarest Lloyd called a town meeting to rally support against the granting of a village gas franchise. Lloyd's effort, which attempted to repeat his father's 1894 victory in defeating a similar referendum, succeeded in passing a resolution at the town meeting recommending a vote against the referendum question. However, voters ignored the town meeting resolution and voted overwhelmingly in favor of the gas franchise.

On most matters, the village council could find consensus on a direction. But on some issues they needed a means to assess public sentiment. Still other matters did not fit the purview of a single government or private agency. This is where Community House Council stepped up.

Community House Council was comprised of representatives of the dozens of organizations it served and thus constituted a healthy cross-section of the village. If the village needed input on an issue of policy, it would refer a question to the Community House Council. Two examples help demonstrate how Community House filled this role.

In 1936, the Village received a petition from the operator of a large chain of Chicago theaters requesting a permit to construct a motion picture theater in Winnetka. The village council referred the petition to the chairman of the Community House Council who then appointed a special committee to study the issue and report back. They circulated a letter to representatives of all Winnetka community organizations requesting that they ask their organizations to take a vote on the petition, summarize the views expressed by their members and report back with their findings. The returns from this survey were then summarized and submitted to the village council. Since about 90 percent of village residents belonged to one organization or another, this was an effective means of polling public sentiment. On this matter, the poll determined that a decisive majority opposed granting the permit and the village council promptly rejected the application.

Another committee appointed in 1932 found a solution to a more complex issue. Up to then, charity and relief efforts had been directed by New Trier Township government and a number of local agencies. The challenge lay in how to centralize the collection of funds in a single agency. An investigative committee appointed by the Community House Council studied the issue for over a year and submitted a summary report of its studies. Then a second committee was appointed, composed of representatives from each of the seventy-

three village organizations. The plan was presented to this committee, put to a vote and adopted.

Authors of a 1938 thesis on Winnetka government wrote, “Community House Council was an important adviser to the village council in all matters affecting the life of the community. It was a source to which the president and trustees could invariably refer when in doubt about village opinion. It was both the sounding board and the coordinator of public opinion, articulating the views of villagers in advance of decisions by the council.”

The importance of the Community House Council lay in its ability to assemble viewpoints from every section of the village and every interest. More personal in format than the common forms of public surveys today, this forum for collecting viewpoints engaged friends, neighbors and colleagues in discussion of village issues. It both capitalized on and benefitted from village cohesiveness cultivated in our local organizations. In this way, it served as the chief advisory board to Winnetka’s government on matters of policy.

Winnetka Community House Council became the chief advisory board to Winnetka’s government. PHOTO COURTESY OF WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

