

HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE MANAGER ASSOCIATION



In 1952, the VMA mounted a campaign to wrest control of our village government from alderman who seemed more beholden to outside interests than to our citizens. At that time, affairs at village hall were characterized by patronage, party factionalism, and corruption. The VMA convinced Oak Parkers that we would be well served if elected village trustees concentrate on policy decisions and hire a professional manager to carry out policies and to administer the operations of village government. The achievements of the past fifty years prove the VMA was right. It is fair to say that the VMA has made Oak Park a community that is admired and respected throughout the region and the nation - a place we chose to call our home.

After 1952, the VMA continued as a local, independent, non-partisan citizens' group. It devoted itself to the job of seeking highly qualified candidates to endorse for election as president, trustees, and clerk of the village. To accomplish this goal, it organized a broadly-based selection committee of volunteers representing all segments of the community who came together prior to each election to select a slate of candidates for the forthcoming village election.

The VMA's selection process continues to work to recruit candidates based on the highest standards of leadership, personal character and integrity, a history of involvement in village affairs, and knowledge of community issues and the process of local government. One does not have to be a member of the VMA to serve on the selection committee. Citizens who live in all parts of the village, male and female, all races, property owners and apartment dwellers have come together for this crucial task of finding excellent leadership for our community. Since 1953, VMA endorsed candidates have done well at the polls. Of the more than 250 vacancies to be filled over these years, the great majority were filled by candidates endorsed by the VMA. (In 1984, an opposing slate elected three trustees of six trustees. In 1995, an independent candidate won one trustee seat; in 2003, a candidate from an opposing slate won a trustee seat. In 2005, an opposing slate elected three trustees, and an independent candidate was elected president.)

One of the most misunderstood aspects of the VMA's history in Oak Park has to do with the relationship the organization has with the VMA-endorsed elected village boards. The VMA has always lived by the principle that it does not in any way dictate policy to the officials it helped to elect. Rather, it allows its endorsed and elected candidates to govern based upon the broad guiding principles of the organization.

The Oak Park village government has over 30 formally appointed village commissions, boards, committees and task forces with more than 300 citizens serving without pay. These volunteers advise the president and the board of trustees. VMA members, like any other concerned villager, have the right as individuals to apply to serve on these commissions, boards, committees, and task forces. But they do so strictly as Oak Park residents and not as representatives of the VMA.

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Throughout its history, the VMA has debated its role in village affairs. It rarely took positions on issues. There were notable exceptions.

- ★ In 1957, the VMA endorsed a bond issue to pay for relocating the CTA el tracks to the Northwestern R.R. embankment along Lake Street.
- ★ In 1959, the VMA directors issued a resolution opposing high rise apartments.
- ★ In 1960, the VMA opposed a referendum to redistrict Oak Park.
- ★ In 1961, the VMA joined the American Association of University Women, Friends of the Library, and the League of Women Voters to support construction of a new library.
- ★ In 1965, the VMA supported a Recreation Bond issue.
- ★ In 1998, the VMA endorsed the Domestic Partnership Referendum.

In 2005, the VMA decided to participate more directly in the debate and discussion of public issues. It now expresses its views on any matter that may impact the VMA guiding principles. These guiding principles are more fully discussed elsewhere on this web site.

WHAT THE VMA MEANS WHEN IT TALKS ABOUT GOOD GOVERNMENT

Often people ask, "What do you stand for?" and the VMA generally answers, "good government." This is a correct but too simple answer. "Good government" means those policy decisions and practices that make and maintain Oak Park as a community that is concerned with human rights, fairness, accountable and honest government, and citizen involvement in local government. Since 1952, the VMA has had the prime role in the development of public policy in Oak Park through its efforts to select and elect the village board. But this does not mean that the VMA has picked candidates who spouted a party line or voted "yea" or "nay" because of VMA instructions. The voting records of village boards comprised entirely of VMA selected candidates establish the fact that there is no party line; village boards have always split on major votes and village trustees have never acted as a rubber stamp.

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One of the cornerstones of the VMA has been the belief that the village board can best function if it is independent of partisan influences—whether from local interest groups or from outside political parties and pressure groups. We do not want business to be conducted at Village Hall because of favoritism or patronage. Nor do we want elected officials to feel beholden to the group that got them elected.

This does not mean, however, that the VMA is an organization without issues. Looking over Oak Park's more recent past, here is a list of policy decisions that exemplifies the values and concerns of the VMA. These actions, taken by past village boards, illustrate the kind of government policy that the VMA believes in. It is the sum and substance of what we call “good government.” This list, barely touching the high points, also can serve as a skeletal history of Oak Park's progress in the past thirty years as a community which has embraced innovation and has worked tirelessly to provide a high quality of life for all the people of this village.

- 1961-1965** *Effective zoning and anti-blight measures taken for Oak Park, an aging suburb in need of infrastructure rehabilitation. Streets rebuilt and resurfaced, sidewalks replaced, modern street lighting installed in areas of the village; massive sewer interceptor program begun; two new water reservoirs built.*
- 1966** *Oak Park Residence Corporation established to rehabilitate blighted and problem residential properties, both single and multi-family. It is a not-for-profit agency that also offers management services to privately owned rental buildings in need of better management.*
- 1967** *Oak Park Village Board authorized the sale of \$7,500,000 Revenue Bond issue for construction of sewers. The sewer system in Oak Park, prior to this construction, was inadequate, a health hazard, and caused periodic flooding of basements.*
- 1968** *Oak Park Village Board adopts Fair Housing Ordinance and requirements for the licensing and inspection of multiple family dwellings.*
- 1968** *Oak Park Village Board forms official Community Relations Department--one of the first in Illinois.*
- 1968-1969** *Oak Park Village Board votes to follow recommendations of Planning Committee to begin developing a Comprehensive Plan.*

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- 1973** *Mills Park Tower, a senior citizen housing development for low income elderly, was completed in 1974. This senior citizen housing development is owned by the Oak Park Housing Authority and managed by the Oak Park Residence Corporation.*
- Oak Park Mall becomes the first Special Services District in Illinois, enabling the area itself to pay for construction costs; mall construction begins in Spring of 1974.*
- Oak Park Village Board adopts Racial Diversity Statement.*
- Oak Park Village Board passes an ordinance requiring written leases for tenants in village.*
- Oak Park Village Board votes \$1.5 million housing bond issues to support multi-family stock rehabilitation.*
- 1975** *Oak Park Residence Corporation makes first property acquisition; buys 47-unit apartment building on Oak Park's Chicago border and begins process of upgrading and rehabilitating apartments.*
- 1976** *Oak Park Village Board votes to relocate village hall to Madison at Lombard—a new, modern building that was a vote of confidence in the eastern section of Oak Park at a time when residents of that area were anxious about Oak Park's future.*
- Oak Park Village Board votes to increase its police budget by one-third and hire 30 more police officers.*
- 1978** *Oak Park Village Board adopts Equity Assurance Ordinance to enable home owners to buy insurance against the loss of property value caused by rapid change in any neighborhood.*
- 1983** *Oak Park Village Board appoints Racial Diversity Task Force and renews commitment to supporting racial diversity and cultural pluralism. Emphasis on economic development on east side of the village emerges from report. Oak Park Village Board creates a grant program and staff positions to encourage economic development and to encourage racial diversity in rental units.*
- 1984** *Oak Park Village Board passes handgun ban.*
- 1985-1988** *Economic Development: Dominick's, Prairie Court, Division/Austin, Holley Court, and addition to garage. Studied parking issues and developed new spaces. Modernized water delivery system and new meters, implemented Paramedic program.*
- 1988-1990** *Board adds sexual orientation to protected classes in Diversity Statement. Bonds sold to finance street repairs. Tenant landlord relationship addressed. Return of interest on security deposit ordinance. Studied residency and removed as requirement for village employees. Improved court process for code violations. Implemented IPM approach for Village property. Developed retail rehab grants. Reviewed police department in response to charges of racial discrimination and began implementing recommendations. Economic Development Task Force in place. Modified on-street parking ordinance in selected areas of high density. Created AIDS Committee of the Board of Health.*

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- 1990-1992** *Model lease addendum, security improvement grants for multi-family buildings, new housing bonds, First Time Buyers' Program, CPOC, Tourism Committee, Ad Hoc Rules Committee, CRC review of Racial Diversity Task Force, encourage historical preservation and rehabilitation, occupancy information required on leases, "Project Choice" for MI housing, new inter-governmental agreement with Park District, joint purchasing arrangements with other local governments, require waste haulers to offer recycling to multi-family units.*
- 1993-1994** *Historic preservation ordinance implementation; community policing initiated; privatization of solid waste disposal; diversity issues expanded, health insurance benefits offered to partners of gay/lesbian employees of the Village and development plan for downtown Oak Park completed.*
- 1995-1996** *New deck added to Holley Court Garage; completed Vision 2000 project; approved a \$3 million bond issue to assure high quality housing stock while also maintaining racial diversity; secured state funding to allow reopening of all four Oak Park stations on CTA Green Line; signed mutual aid agreement with River Forest for improved fire protection services at less cost; expanded policy of allowing overnight, on-street parking within apartment districts; expanded community policing; eliminated Village operating deficit and improved municipal bond rating; and designated first four buildings for landmark status under Village historic preservation ordinance. Increased opportunities for participation of minority and women owned firms in Village contracts and implementing recommendations of Task Force on Policy for Promoting (Handicapped) Access;*
- 1997-2000** *Upgrading bond rating. Passed domestic partnership Registry. CIP financing and implementation. Revisions made to the Housing Program. Expanded beat officer program. Gang and drug intervention programs continued. Expanded parking options. Multi-modal station completed; review of community zoning; continued review of parking options.*
- 2001-present** *A period of unprecedented growth. The community as a whole in both the private and public sector has spent or committed to spend \$100 million including hospital expansion, two middle schools, new development on Euclid and Lake, \$30 million for capital improvement (e.g., alley repair and rehabilitation). Highest number of building permits issued for remodeling. Commercial zoning ordinances reviewed and amended. Implementation of a consolidated, joint dispatch center for fire and police supported by Oak Park and River Forest. Installation of new water reservoir at Stevenson Park. Created Gunderson Historic District. Village continues to contribute \$1.5 million to Park District for recreation program. Completion of Dole Library renovation. Intergovernmental agreements to improve streets (Harlem, Austin) which allows for the leveraging of dollars.*