

LEAGUE of WOMEN VOTERS™ OAK PARK / RIVER FOREST



Village of Oak Park Board of Trustees March 2, 2009

Cathy Sweitzer, Observer

The meeting began at 7:40 p.m. with all members of the Board, except Trustee Jan Pate, in attendance. Village Manager Tom Barwin was also absent due to illness, but a representative from his office took his place. The Village Clerk and Attorney were present.

Abby Schmelling, Executive Director of the Volunteer Center of Oak Park, opened the meeting with a presentation recognizing Oak Park as one of the nation's "100 Best Communities for Young People." The Village received this accolade from *America's Promise*, an alliance created by Alma and Colin Powell. It is based on the Village's success in meeting five kid-friendly criteria: caring adults; a healthy start; safe places; effective education; and opportunities to help others. Oak Park is the only town in Illinois to be so recognized. Banners celebrating this achievement and featuring six local children will grace the Village.

The Board passed a resolution to support the Illinois Vacant and Abandoned Properties Act. It allows municipalities to create land banks to purchase and hold foreclosed and abandoned properties. Although federal recovery funds may not be used to reimburse municipalities for lost taxes, they may be used to help purchase properties. This effort strives to create affordable housing and stabilize neighborhoods. The municipality would take a share of the sale of properties from the land bank.

The Board discussed a few more revisions to the Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment. Several trustees expressed concern that the requirement for "public art" by commercial developers has not been spelled out in sufficient detail. Rather than risk further delay, however, the Board seems inclined to pass the amendment as is with the assurance that the matter will be taken up with the Arts Commission as soon as possible.

The Public Works Director, the Fleet Service Director and the Police Chief reported on the proposed trade-in and purchase of 8 police vehicles using federal RICO funds. Trustee Ray Johnson asked if the vehicles under consideration were "climate friendly." They are not. Using Michigan State Police Vehicle Assessment guidelines, the Village will probably purchase 5 Crown Victorias, 2 Chevy Tahoes, and a Chevy Impala. At the moment, no hybrids are considered viable for front-line (pursuit, squad car) action. Chief Rick Tanksley, however, noted that hybrid or electric cars are being considered for enforcement purposes. He acknowledged that "every community" is looking at this issue in which Europe leads the way, and that greener choices should be available in the next few years. Trustees raised questions about empty police cars left idling. Chief Tanksley attributed this costly practice to officers not wanting to wait for their computers to reboot when they reenter their vehicles. He has ordered officers not to leave their cars idling except in emergency situations. Another trustee questioned the wisdom of state procurement of these vehicles, considering recent bad experiences with the purchase of road salt. The fleet manager explained that dealers do not give

deals or rebates on public vehicles, so it is unlikely anyone could do better. The Board will move to give consent on these purchases at the next meeting.

The last issue involved offering severance pay to laid-off Village employees. To date, no such policy has been in place. The proposed severance would benefit long-term employees and would be capped at 16 years of service and 16 weeks of payments. Payouts would range between \$12,000 and \$38,000. An additional \$250 would be allotted specifically for outplacement services. Employees would be asked to sign a waiver assuring the Village that they would not bring suit of any kind against it. Trustee Greg Marsey raised strong objections to this waiver. "If you want your severance, you have to absolve the Village of everything," he said. Attorney Ray Heise and President David Pope noted that the waiver was standard "boiler plate." The Village Attorney pointed out that it protects the Village from costly litigation. Trustee Colette Lueck saw it as a means to force the employee to make a decision: "Are you being justly laid off or discriminated against?" The answer determines whether to take the severance or not.

Public comment included a reiteration that the Board should be accountable for its actions. Once again, a citizen raised the issue of too many "special meetings." President Pope explained that this term refers to meetings held on days other than those regularly scheduled twice-a-month sessions, but in no other way suggests exclusivity or secrecy. Special meetings are posted on the Website. He noted that the number of special meetings has actually decreased in recent years. Apropos to that point, the Board decided to override the usual cancellation of April meetings. They will meet on April 20 to prepare for the newly elected members of the Board and to prevent a backlog of unfinished business. Finally, a villager spoke against the proposed "Whistle Stop" program, which he called "adding insult to injury." He supported the right of "responsible citizens" to carry handguns in self-defense, citing a statistic that puts Oak Park's crime rate 36% above the suburban average.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 p.m.

(online minutes: www.oak-park.us/about_our_village/board_minutes_2008.htm)