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Signs underscore Oak Park's commitment to sustainability

The austere, black and white signs popping up around the Village bearing only the number 350 may have some passers-by wondering what it could mean.

But those most concerned about the future of planet earth know that the number 350 is vital – it represents the amount carbon dioxide in the air measured in parts per million that must be achieved to avoid runaway climate change. Consensus in the scientific community is that the count currently is 387.

As part of the Village of Oak Park's commitment to sustainability, and in celebration of the 40th annual Earth Day, April 22, the Village has adopted the 350 environmental message as its rallying call to residents to help make Oak Park a leader in sustainable practices.

"The concept of thinking globally, but acting locally is the single most descriptive way of boiling down what we as a community must do to ensure the health and safety of our planet's future generations," said Village Manager Tom Barwin.

"More and more people in Oak Park and in communities around the country are engaging at the grass roots level to address climate change. These 350 signs symbolize our commitment and represent knowledge every responsible citizen should be aware of. Our hope is the signs will serve to remind us that the future of our community and our planet really is in our collective hands."

Barwin said he embraced the 350 concept after a presentation by the Oak Park and River Forest High School Environmental Club to the Village Board in March. The energy and commitment of these students were inspirational, he said, and convinced him the Village needed to step up and help communicate this important message.

"Science has now pretty much concluded that carbon dioxide must be decreased to 350 for us to sustain the planet as we know it," he said. "Even for those diminishing numbers of people who don't believe climate change is a risk, common sense would suggest that the tons of pollutants we continue to spew into the air cannot be a good thing for the planet's health. But change won't occur until we, the people, step up and take responsibility for our actions and make a commitment to change each and every day.

"We humans have not been challenged like this before. Mobilizing against slow motion, complex, long-range, collective problems will require a new paradigm. The internet and youth engagement in geo-global environmental public policy may have arrived just in time."

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Raising awareness is a critical first step in the Village's long-range plans to embrace sustainability, according to K.C. Poulos, Oak Park's Sustainability Coordinator. Five signs bearing the 350 message are being installed, including one on the glass at Village Hall visible from Madison Street. Signs also were installed at South Boulevard and Marion Street, North Boulevard and Oak Park Avenue, South Boulevard and Ridgeland Avenue, and on the north side of the viaduct at Austin Boulevard.

A striking graphic of the earth created from a photo taken from outer space also was installed on the eight-foot, circular window on the second floor of Village Hall on the south side. This image, Barwin said, is what the 350 campaign is all about – saving the planet.

"Back in the day of the muscle car, the youth knew 350 as the size of an engine," he said. "But today, in the age of the internet, 350 is a symbol of the youth who are taking the lead in bringing about positive change. Their voices are being heard in grassroots movements in Oak Park and throughout the country."

The 350 signs were created on outdoor pressure-sensitive street graphic film by local business Visual Impact Media, 1016 North Blvd. They were funded by proceeds from participants in Oak Park's first Earth Fest, scheduled for Sat., April 24. The gathering of vendors promoting their sustainable products and services, as well as a host of kid friendly, eco-related activities, is scheduled for 10 a.m. – 1 p.m., at the Public Works Center, 123 Madison St.

To read more about 350, visit to www.350.org. To learn more about Earth Fest, visit www.oak-park.us/environment.

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