

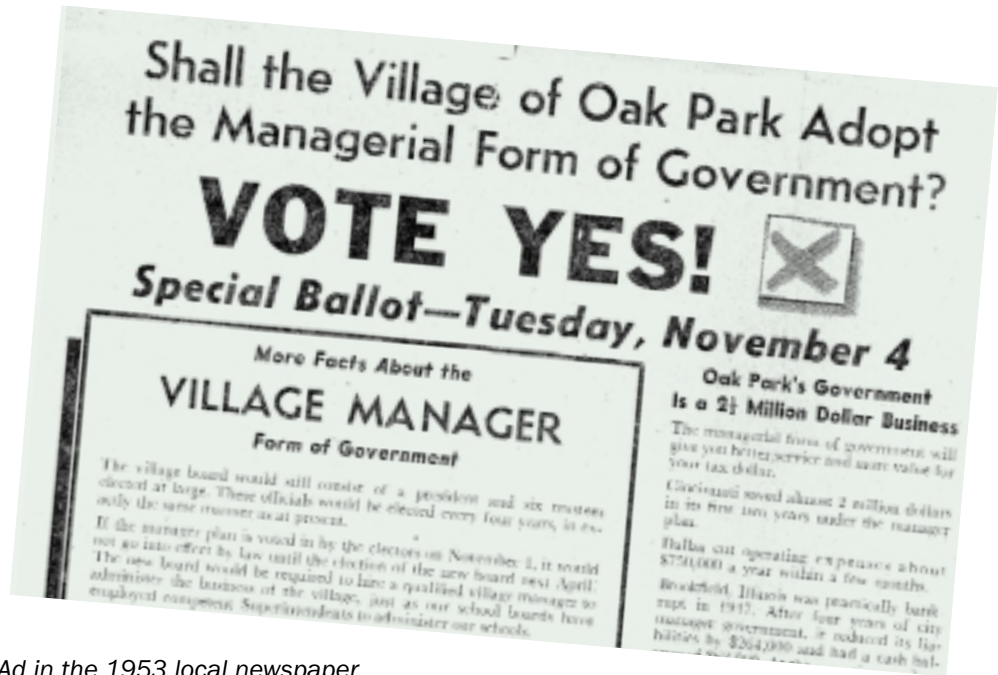
Council-manager form of government ends era of political influence

Voters choose to separate policy making from municipal service delivery

January 2003 marks an important milestone in the history of how municipal government operates in Oak Park. Fifty years ago this month, political lines were drawn as campaigns began to elect a Village President and Board of Trustees who would establish a council-manager form of government.

The election wouldn't be until April 1953, but voters had made their sentiments known the previous November when they approved taking politics out of the administration of Village services in what would become the heaviest turnout in any election in Oak Park before or since. With Oak Park's population approaching 65,000 residents, some 91 percent of registered voters came to the polls on an unseasonably warm and sunny day to overwhelmingly approve a form of government where elected officials would focus on setting policy, while relying on a professionally trained manager and staff to administer the day-to-day delivery of public services.

Before the change to the council-manager form of government, Oak Park had operated since its incorporation in 1902 with a president and six trustees



Ad in the 1953 local newspaper.

who directly oversaw all government operations, from fire and police to public works and finance. Not only was this an enormous undertaking for private citizens who also had full-time jobs, during the 1940s and early 1950s, government in Oak Park was plagued with cronyism and favoritism as competing county political machines battled for power through patronage at Village Hall.

The April 1953 election swept into office a new Village President and Board of Trustees who had campaigned on the promise of taking politics out of the delivery of municipal services, and the transition to today's professional management model began. The state legislation that gave Oak Park the authority to vote on the new form of government said "the power of the council shall be purely legislative" and that the manager who "shall be appointed without regard to

his political beliefs" would be responsible for the "efficient administration of all departments."

On July 6, 1953, 34-year-old Mark E. Keane was formally appointed Oak Park's first Village Manager. Keane, who held a degree in public service engineering, would serve until 1962. Oak Park has since had seven managers, including current Village Manager Carl Swenson who was hired in 1996.

Oak Park certainly is not alone in choosing to have its municipal services managed much like a private-sector business enterprise. Nearly half of the communities in the U.S. with populations of more than 2,500 currently operate under the council-manager form of government.

For more information on the administration of Village municipal services, call 358.5770 or email village@oak-park.us.