

## OAK PARK



A Frank Lloyd Wright home, one of 29 in Oak Park, adds to the desirability of the village, which plans to integrate.

# Integration takes more than a racial quota

By Daniel Lauber

As Chicago's black belt begins to stretch out to that comfortable, traditional, middle- to upper-income suburb, Oak Park, the local press and even the national media have created the impression that Oak Park is trying to use a racial quota system to keep blacks out. Nothing could be further from the truth. Oak Park may be the first community in this country to voluntarily initiate a comprehensive and planned approach to integration well in advance of a massive black in-migration.

Nationally known for its 29 Frank Lloyd Wright houses and his famed Unity Temple, Oak Park is one of the most desirable suburbs in the Chicago area. The attractiveness of Oak Park's excellent schools and public services is enhanced by the fine public transportation system connecting the village with Chicago's Loop. Houses sell for \$20,000 to \$100,000. For years Oak Park has enjoyed a reputation of offering the best of both urban and suburban living. Oak Park can count only 1,300 blacks scattered among its 62,500 residents. Only in the southeast section of Oak Park, adjacent to Chicago's West Side ghetto, is there any sizable concentration of blacks.

Last December, Village Trustee Robert Varnes introduced an amendment to the village's fair housing ordinance exempting blocks with more than a 30 per cent black population from the provisions of the ordinance. The village would be required to help blacks seeking housing in these blocks to find comparable space elsewhere in Oak Park. To understand the rationale for this amendment in the overall integration strategy of Oak Park, and the controversy it has caused, it is necessary to take a look at Oak Park's unique situation.

Six years ago Chicago urbanologist Pierre de Vise predicted that Oak Park would be 10 per cent black by 1975 and 24 per cent black by 1980. He feared that Oak Park would follow the traditional pattern of inundation and consolidation into the black ghetto which was then engulfing Austin, its neighbor to the east. Today Oak Park is only 2.3 per cent black; the south half of Austin is nearly all black.

Last September de Vise revised his prediction for Oak Park down to 12 per cent black by 1980. Since resegregation from all white to all black generally takes but 12 years, Oak Park has already broken with tradition. The racial count in Oak Park's elementary schools ranges from 4 per cent to 19 per cent nonwhite, with an average of 8 per cent nonwhite (and only half of that black). Oak Park somehow refuses to follow the conventional patterns of racial change. Why?

Part of the reason lies in the community's foresight. Despite Village Manager Lee Ellis's assertion that "with a minority population still under three per cent it may seem a little premature to worry about such things," many Oak Parkers are concerned about achieving integration and preventing resegregation. A year ago the Village Trustees unanimously adopted a policy statement on "Maintaining Diversity in Oak Park," which stressed that "Oak Park has committed itself to equality, not because it is legal, but because it is right; not because equality is ethical, but because it is desirable for us and for our children. . . . Housing patterns in large metropolitan areas of this country have worked against equality and diversity. Block-by-block racial change has fostered inequality by creating de facto segregation. Efforts to achieve diversity are nullified by the resegregation of neighborhoods from all white to all black. . . . We must not succumb to Big-City-style residential patterns. A free and open community—equal and diverse—can only be achieved through dispersal: a mixture of racial and ethnic groups throughout the village. . . . It is our intention that such principles will be a basis for policy and decision making in Oak Park."

Rarely, if ever, has a community with such a small number of nonwhite residents taken such a stand on integration. Most communities don't acknowledge the "problem" until large numbers of blacks have moved in. For example, South Shore, a "liberal," lakefront community on Chicago's southeast side and very similar to Oak Park, was more than 30 per cent black before its community organization officially adopted stable integration as its goal in 1967. Now it is almost all black. Oak Park, on the other hand, has taken a positive stand on the issue while it still has some control over the situation.

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Last August the 15-member Community Relations Commission, appointed by the Village Trustees to coordinate Oak Park's integration efforts, adopted a unique series of recommendations that have come to be known (with apologies to Woodrow Wilson) as "the Fourteen Points." H. Kris Ronnow, director of Oak Park's Community Relations Department, outlined the comprehensive nature of the integration effort. He noted that his department has begun to monitor real estate agencies, lending institutions, and insurance companies for compliance with the fair housing ordinance. The ordinance has been strengthened by giving the commission subpoena power; prohibiting "steering" (directing white home seekers only to all-white areas and blacks only to racially changing or all-black areas); providing better data gathering on sales, rentals, and loans; and governing management practices. A bill has been introduced to return to the village the right to license real estate brokers. (This authority was assumed by the state in 1970 under its new constitution.) Housing code enforcement has been beefed up to maintain quality. The department has also recommended the licensing and inspection of buildings. Under this system, the village would require a new occupancy permit each time a housing unit was sold or rented, thus giving the village better control of housing conditions and racial patterns.

To allay the fears of white property owners in neighborhoods in the process of integrating, the commission is investigating the development of an "equity assurance plan" to guarantee the resale value of homes. The Village Board has approved \$1.5 million in housing bonds to be used by a nonprofit corporation to solicit investment funds and acquire title to selected properties. This is designed not only to halt deterioration of the property but to prevent the concentration of blacks in certain areas.

The Oak Park Housing Center was opened two years ago under the dynamic leadership of 35-year-old Ms. Bobbie Raymond. The center attempts a sort of "reverse steering," by guiding blacks to housing outside the southeast section of the village and encouraging whites to settle there. Village employees are being given special training in dealing with situations that may arise as a result of racial change.

Ronnow also reported progress on other points dealing with public relations, increased police protection, and the maintenance and improvement of village services. In big cities, the quality of these services usually falls during black in-migration, as a distant city hall transfers its resources to white areas. Since Oak Park controls its own public services, however, it enjoys yet another advantage over most integrating communities.

The Fourteen Points include an effort to halt the exclusion of minorities by communities surrounding Oak Park. If blacks could choose their housing freely, communities like Oak Park would not experience such a great demand for housing by blacks. The Illinois Human Relations Commission (which opposes Oak Park's proposed quota system) will hold hearings to determine if the surrounding communities do exclude blacks. It would be difficult for the commission to conclude otherwise. Cicero, for example, has only five blacks among its 67,058 residents. In one neighboring suburb a nonwhite family's home was firebombed this year. As the police moved the family, a high-ranking city official accused the family of provoking the near-riot. Of Oak Park's other neighbors, only one has more than 10 black residents: River Forest, with 45. Could this possibly be due to chance alone?

Oak Park teachers are currently undergoing intensive training at the National College of Education in Evanston to prepare them to deal with an economically and racially integrated student population. Ken Stevens, superintendent of the Oak Park elementary schools, feels that the schools must be prepared to confront changing student needs and values. Already the school hiring manual requires teachers with training in human relations and an appreciation of cultural differences.

According to both Stevens and Kris Ronnow, Oak Park has never given serious consideration to abandoning the neighborhood school system. My research suggests that now is the time to replace the neighborhood school with grade centers that draw students from throughout the village well before racial concentrations can develop in any school. Right or wrong, whites prefer to be in the majority. Under a grade-center arrangement, Oak Park's southeast section could become mostly black, but its schools would still be mostly white; under the existing neighborhood school system, the southeast side schools would turn black. Replacing the neighborhood school system would eliminate the local schools as a measure of racial change and would assure whites and blacks that their schools would remain integrated. There is nothing sacrosanct about the neighborhood school; many educators feel it is inferior to the grade center or cluster park. Sociologically, it exaggerates the proportion of blacks living in a neighborhood, since pioneering black families with school-age children often replace elderly whites without children. It also aids and abets the traditional pattern of block-by-block racial change. Elimination of the neighborhood school system can help prevent this pattern from starting in Oak Park.

Where does the notorious 30 per cent quota plan fit in? A unique section of Oak Park's fair housing ordinance allows the Village Board to exempt locations, buildings, and transactions from the antidiscrimination provisions of the ordinance if the exemption is designed to achieve integration and prevent or eliminate de facto segregation or resegregation. Exemptions must be supported by certain findings of fact to make sure they are not granted arbitrarily or capriciously. The findings include information on integration in the neighborhood itself and its schools, as well as in the surrounding area, plus data on sales and rental activity in the neighborhood (or even in a particular building). As the law stands, the individual who applies for an exemption bears the legal burden if challenged in court.

The 30 per cent amendment, proposed last year but not yet adopted, would shift the legal burden of this provision to the village. The amendment would establish a portion of southeast Oak Park as a "designated area" in danger of "becoming a black segregated area." The amendment would make it unlawful to sell or rent to a black person in the designated area if 30 per cent or more of the block on which the house or the apartment building is located is occupied by black persons. Any black person refused housing in the designated area for this reason would be assisted by the Community Relations Department in finding comparable housing elsewhere in Oak Park. The department also would be charged with finding white families to purchase or lease real estate in the designated area. The amendment stresses that no limitation on the sale or rental of property would be permitted outside the designated area.

The amendment recognizes what most people choose to ignore: integration is a black and white problem, not one or the other. The amendment takes into account the fears—

rational and irrational—of whites and blacks. It assures whites that they will not become a minority on their block if they stay there. It assures blacks that they will be investing in a community that will stay integrated. It assures everyone that integration will not be just the period between when the first black moves in and the last white moves out. As the Community Relations Commission's minority report on the amendment says, it is "one tool in a multifaceted effort to prevent resegregation." It could be the "one untried ingredient that may make the difference in allowing Oak Park to achieve its goal of [becoming] a completely integrated community."

The Community Relations Commission voted 8-7 against the amendment. It was the first major change proposed in the fair housing ordinance since its adoption in 1968. Then in March the Village Board tabled the amendment and ordered its attorney to revise it. Will the amendment be enacted? "Some ordinance in some form will be passed," Ronnow says. "The village is prepared to make some laws which provide the opportunity to attain and maintain integrated status," he added.

Amendment opponents, though, voice some cogent, and possibly irrefutable, arguments. Everyone agrees that the quota would be difficult and expensive to enforce. Not only would administrative costs run high, but estimates indicate that as much as \$250,000 could be spent defending the amendment against certain judicial challenge by the Illinois division of the American Civil Liberties Union. Two lawyers quoted in the majority report of the Community Relations Commission, Gerald Muller and William McNally, feel that it is "doubtful that the courts would even consider the village's interest in preserving integration as justifying the ordinance. The fact the burden of maintaining integration falls only on blacks, that the treatment is not evenhanded, may create an irrebuttable presumption of unconstitutional discrimination."

Recent court decisions, however, indicate a more favorable trend. The Washington State Supreme Court recently upheld a law school's preferential admissions policy for minority students, saying flatly that "the Constitution is color conscious to prevent the perpetuation of discrimination and to undo the effects of past segregation." In New York City, a federal appeals court approved discrimination for the purpose of preserving integration in a predominantly Latino area, but only if it could be proven that there were no alternative means of preserving integration. In another New York case, a federal judge ruled last January that a racially segregated school and its neighborhood were the result of a "a conspiracy, explicit and implicit, of an entire society and its local, state, and federal government arms to impose social, political, and economic segregation." The judge ordered housing officials to adopt practices in both building and renting that would encourage whites and middle-class families to move into the neighborhood surrounding the segregated school.

There is, obviously, "a conspiracy, explicit and implicit" to perpetuate residential segregation in the Chicago area, but conspiracies are hard to prove in court.

A key part of this conspiracy, for example, is the almost universal real estate practice of steering blacks into neighborhoods that are integrating or already all-black. At the same time, white home seekers are steered to all-white communities and away from integrating communities. Available homes in all-white areas are not even mentioned to black buyers, nor are whites told about homes in integrating

areas. Already two real estate firms have been found to be steering blacks to Oak Park and whites away from it. Successful monitoring programs run by the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities have resulted in several convictions of real estate agencies for steering and discrimination in other suburbs. But the problem is so widespread that only vigorous prosecution, with the threat of loss of both the firm's and the salesman's real estate license, could possibly have any effect. To break down the barriers to integration is a complex and immense undertaking; there are no simple remedies. Fortunately, Oak Park's leaders recognize this.

The Community Relations Commission's majority report asserts that the quota is not only illegal but immoral. The morality question boils down to one of interpretation. As Robert Varnes, the trustee who introduced the amendment, says, "The quota is immoral. Resegregation is immoral. Doing nothing is immoral. You just have to choose which position you take."

Some object that the proposed quota will provoke panic among whites living in the designated area and cause them to sell before the quota is reached. Some whites probably will sell quickly. However, interviews with numerous former South Shore residents show they would have remained in the community had they had some guarantee that no more than 30 per cent of the residents would be black. There is considerable demand by whites for housing in integrated communities, if continued integration can be guaranteed. Many blacks also desire integrated living. Blacks already are moving out of South Shore because it has resegregated. The vast majority of Chicagoland communities are racially segregated. The choices for persons seeking integrated living are extremely limited by the forces that conspire to resegregate integrating communities.

Data compiled by Pierre de Vise, assistant professor of urban sciences at the University of Illinois (Chicago Circle Campus), reveal how successful the forces of racism have been. Last year he calculated how many blacks would live in each of the 201 suburbs and each of Chicago's 76 community areas in a color-blind housing market. To do this, he randomly assigned blacks proportionally to the existing housing stock throughout the metropolitan area, at prices comparable to what they were already paying, thus eliminating race as a variable.

In this color-blind market, none of the 277 communities would be less than one per cent black nor more than 25 per cent black. Cicero, where a black youth was beaten to death when he visited that suburb seeking a job, would become one-fifth black, whereas now it has only five blacks among its 67,058 residents. Of Berwyn's 52,502 residents, 8,033 would be black, instead of the present eight. On the opposite side of the fence, only 22 per cent of Chicago's population would be black, as opposed to 33 per cent in 1970. South Shore would be less than 25 per cent black, rather than more than 80 per cent. South suburban Harvey would be only 17 per cent black; in 1970 it was nearly double that.

These figures indicate the wisdom of Oak Park's efforts to open up surrounding suburbs to blacks. In a color-blind market governed principally by economics, Oak Park would become only 14 per cent black. The existing restricted market places the brunt of the expanding black housing demand on the very few receptive white communities. Many blacks will spend more than they can afford on housing in order to enter such a community. Then the concen-



**An integrated, stable community** is what Oak Park residents are hoping to achieve through a comprehensive program known locally as “the Fourteen Points.” Today, Oak Park is about 2.3 per cent black. It is seeking to maintain diversity. The quota proposal is part of the plan.

trated black demand on housing, combined with the real estate industry’s blatantly racist practices, has always led to resegregation of the community. But if this demand could be spread throughout the metropolitan area, subject only to housing price and job location, no community would need be more than one-fourth black. In reality, most largely black communities will remain so for the foreseeable future. However, the expansion of the ghetto would necessarily cease, or at least slow down. The Oak Parks would not even have to consider quotas; the market would, by itself, regulate the number of blacks seeking entry. Strange as it may seem, the free-market people oppose any government interference that might guarantee a marketplace free of any racial restraints.

The greatest obstacle to Oak Park’s efforts to integrate and to prevent resegregation will be the exclusionary practices of other suburbs. Pressure must be exerted on these communities to open their doors to nonwhites. Oak Park’s community relations director, Kris Ronnow, wants government action. He says the Northeast Illinois Planning Commission should use its A-95 review powers to deny federal funds to racially segregated communities. He feels the state should deny revenue sharing funds to those communities operating contrary to the law. Justifiably upset that the regional, state, and federal governments are ignoring communities in Oak Park’s situation, Ronnow wants other communities simply to obey existing law and relieve Oak Park and similar communities of the huge pressures they are experiencing.

To enable Oak Park and similar communities to integrate successfully, real estate practices must be changed. Steering must be eliminated. Blockbusting must not be allowed. A sure sign of success would be the appearance of advertisements in the *Chicago Daily Defender*, a black newspaper, offering quality housing in currently all-white River Forest, Berwyn, and Cicero—an unlikely prospect in the near future. If current real estate practices are unchecked, Oak Parkers can anticipate only a brief interim of integration.

However, Oak Park has more pluses than most people

imagine. In light of the energy crunch, the two rapid transit lines that place Chicago’s Loop less than 20 minutes away make Oak Park very attractive. A demand-responsive village transit system is under study. City services, schools, and shopping are excellent; and a \$12-million, 8-acre housing and shopping center is planned. So far no panic has set in.

According to Ronnow, 40 per cent of the houses sold there last year were sold to other Oak Park residents. One-third were sold to persons from other western suburbs. Only one or two per cent of house sales were to blacks; only four or five per cent of apartment rentals were to blacks. The community itself is only 2.3 per cent black. As black resident Sherlynn Reid put it, “It is the responsibility of the white people to decide if Oak Park is going to be white, black, or integrated. After all, if they don’t move out, no one else can move in.”

Both the local and national press have been fascinated with Oak Park’s integration effort, but they have concentrated only on the sensational story of a suburb seeking to impose a racial quota on its housing. They have not explained that this quota proposal is but a small part of a much more comprehensive attack on traditional patterns of racial change, nor have they shown that the amendment was proposed to shift the legal burden of the ordinance from the property owner to the village. The short-term nature of the amendment has been ignored. One of its purposes is to buy time for the long-term integration devices to develop, while preventing the disastrous formation of a ghetto in Oak Park. Without the quota, the Fourteen Points may not have time to succeed.

Oak Park has an excellent opportunity to integrate successfully. It has recognized its problem early, established its goals, and taken steps to attain them. It has recognized the need to open other communities to blacks and has caused initial steps to be taken in that direction. Oak Park is the master of its own fate to a greater extent than most integrating communities. Nevertheless, the actions of the state and other communities will most likely make or break Oak Park’s attempt at integration. ■