

Guiding Principle #2: *Improve the Efficiency of Our Village Government*

The Village of Olympia Fields serves just over 4,748 residents, approximately 1,900 households, and an ever-growing commercial corridor that numbers roughly 200. As a non-home rule community, the Village is constrained in its responsibilities and taxation authority. The maintenance of streets, management of water and sanitation, and oversight of public safety are our primary purview. Albeit circumscribed, our governance of and accountability for these areas is absolute and in order to continue to deliver the best-in-class services for which we are known, it is critical that we operate with efficiencies in mind. Our second Guiding Principle speaks to this directive. We take our role as stewards of your tax dollars seriously—fiscal restraint, intelligent future planning, effective processes, and the cultivation of strategic relationships with new and existing partners who understand our vision and values are paramount. To that end, I am pleased to share with you the initiatives we have in place to conserve money, promote efficiencies, and forge relationships with stakeholders who share our interests.

- The annexation of the OFCC in April 2023 is one of the most consequential achievements of this Administration. The financial benefits of the annexation to the Village's bottom line include the following:
 - *Additional sales tax revenue* conservatively estimated at \$150,000, annually, and substantially more in major tournament years;
 - *Increased property tax revenue*—prior to annexation, the country club paid approximately \$475,000 in property taxes to Cook County; the Village of Olympia Fields now gets a share of those taxes; and
 - *Permitting and licensing fee revenue*, which previously went to Cook County will also now come to the Village, including fees for permits and licenses needed for tournaments.

As you know, these added revenues further offset the tax burden that would otherwise be shouldered by our residents. It is important to understand that the Village comprises only 13 percent of your annual property taxes as opposed to local school districts, which comprise approximately 75 percent.

- This Administration's preeminent goal is to minimize the tax load on our residents. To that end, our Board of Trustees has adopted a "Hold the Line" tax policy for the past three consecutive years (2022, 2023 and 2024). This policy signifies the Village's pledge to its residents to not raise property taxes. However, sometimes the most carefully made plans can go awry. Despite our best efforts, we discovered that some of our residential property owners were assessed a small increase in the Village share of their property tax bill for the 2022 tax year (payable in 2023)—this should not have happened. To rectify this issue and make good on our promise to "hold the line," we instituted the 2023 Property Tax Rebate Program, through which the Village rebated up to five percent of the Village portion of the property tax bill to those Olympia Fields property owners who incurred an increase. I am happy to report that the rebate initiative was well-received and many of our affected property owners took advantage of the program. As noted, we are again holding the line on property taxes for the 2024 tax year (payable in 2025) as well, which translates to approximately \$135,000 property tax savings per year to our residents.
- Speaking of property taxes, the Village, in conjunction with the Cook County Assessor's Office, hosted two standing-room-only Property Tax Exemption Workshops last October that drew over 160 attendees—one general workshop for all residents focusing on the tax appeal process and the other workshop specifically designed to assist seniors aged 65 and older with filing senior exemptions. Cook County Assessor Fritz Kaegi, members of his staff, and Rich Township Assessor Sam Brown, addressed residents' questions about the appeal and exemption processes. Seniors were even able to work one-on-one with Assessor's Office

staff to file exemptions on the spot. Trustees Victor Blackwell and Kelvin Oliver facilitated this two-day program.

- The financial integrity of our Village remains of utmost importance, and I am pleased to report that for the seventh consecutive year, the Village of Olympia Fields boasts a balanced budget and cash reserves that will mitigate unexpected expenditures and give us the freedom to finance capital projects without having to borrow. For instance, we are financing 100 percent (over \$3 million) of the 2024 Phase I & Phase II Street & infrastructure Improvement Project that began in the spring of 2024 running to the end of 2025, with funds already in our coffers. Our mantra continues to be “No New Debt”, which saves money and helps “How The Line on Taxes”.
- The Village’s fund balance policy requires us to maintain five months or 40 percent of expenses in reserve. As of the writing of this report, we project a yearend FY2024 operating surplus of \$1,166,198, which equates to a fiscal yearend fund balance that exceeds 83 percent (10 months) of expenses in reserve. We project a surplus for FY2025 as well, despite even greater pressure on revenues. Sound financial practices, fiscal discipline, and strong strategic partnerships have enabled us to increase our proprietary funds.
- It bears noting that as of January 31, 2024, revenues were up by approximately \$227,000 from the same time the previous year, which from all indications, is attributable to a combination of vigorous commercial development in the Village, the OFCC annexation, and the BMW Championship. However, we cannot discount the additional revenue generated by inflationary increases (which are not so good for us as individual consumers, but benefit the Village in the form of sales tax revenue). Again, these additional municipal revenues help to offset the tax burden that might otherwise be passed along to our property owners and provide a counterbalance to the increased cost of goods and purchased services borne by the Village.
- The Village’s bond rating is AA+, which signifies that we are financially sound and have sufficient revenues and cash reserves on hand to pay our debts—a mark of distinction. Additionally, our Treasurer Stanley King, a Village resident and former senior vice president at Northern Trust with decades of financial experience, does a masterful job of managing the Village’s investments. His deft handling of our portfolio of accounts has put the Village in good stead. The Village undergoes an audit, annually. Our FY2023 audit conducted in 2024 by Sikich LLP, yielded a clean, unqualified report with no findings or irregularities. I am proud to say that the Village has had clean audits for the entire tenure of this Administration.
- The Village is in an enviable position, financially; however, this does not preclude us from seeking grant funding for various projects. Where we are eligible, and where the funding matches a specific need, we do apply. The OFPD recently applied through a ComEd Powering Safe Communities grant worth up to \$10,000 for the purchase of a new speed trailer to help reduce speeding and vehicular-related accidents within Village boundaries. We continue to be intentional in our efforts to support and promote environmentally sustainable measures. One of our top priorities is to eventually convert our OFPD patrol vehicles into a completely electric fleet. In a step in that direction, I am pleased to report that the majority of OFPD vehicles are hybrid, which has significantly decreased monthly fuel costs from \$10,000 to approximately \$3,500; and we are currently exploring grant funding options for the installation of on-site electric charging stations with the goal of purchasing our first electric patrol car later this year, which will reduce fuel costs even further. We have purchased a all electric pool car that is used for staff and code enforcement. Past grants have included funding to defray the costs of the new Post Office lift station construction, OFPD bulletproof vests, and Covid-19 safety supplies and services, just to name a few.

- Reducing expenditures and keeping costs down is a challenge. We look for opportunities to save money wherever we can. For instance, we adhere to a strict purchasing policy that features a tiered schedule of signing authority among department heads, the Village Administrator, and myself for purchases up to \$15,000. Purchases over \$15,000 must be approved by the Board of Trustees. This policy promotes accountability and transparency. In another example of fiscal responsibility, the Village has obtained high-quality medical coverage for our employees, our retirees, and disabled police officers for a reasonable cost compared to other plans. In the case of the latter, our administration has been able to secure quality health insurance coverage for a price that saves the Village approximately \$800,000 over past years' costs.
- Water rates are another potential source of financial weight on the shoulders of Village residents; however, as with property taxes, we have sought to reduce this burden, as well. The Village has not raised water rates for seven consecutive years. In fact, in past years residents have enjoyed a 10 percent reduction in water rates. The Village has recently extended its contract with the Village of Oak Lawn for the purchase of Lake Michigan water for the next 30 years. After extensive research into all of the water delivery options available to us, the Oak Lawn system with its robust infrastructure and redundancies, continues to offer our residents the best option for high-quality Lake Michigan water. In anticipation of the expiration of our current water contract in December 2024, and prior to the inking of the new 30 year contract, we set aside monies (approximately \$800,000) to offset our share of infrastructure upgrade payments that would be due and payable under the new contract—another example of savvy future planning on the part of this administration. The water we purchase from Oak Lawn / Chicago is not cheap; however, our ability to control costs in other areas enables us to assume this necessary expenditure without raising water rates.
- This year we made a significant change to the way we bill for water and sewer usage—our most valuable commodity—by converting to a monthly billing program. I am pleased to report that the new billing program is running smoothly. There are several benefits to monthly billing:
 - Water utility bills are spread over more months, resulting in lower monthly payments, enabling users to better manage their expenses, and easing the burden of having to make large lump sum payments;
 - Monthly billing enables users to identify leaks, plumbing issues, and other problems *before* they result in costly water bills; and
 - What's more, the transition to monthly billing has enabled us to provide residential and commercial water customers with a better designed, more user-friendly billing statement.
- Two years ago, we installed our Sensus FlexNet Tower, to further aid in water cost reduction and improved efficiency. The tower reads the Village's residential and commercial water meters via radio transceivers and provides data on water usage in real-time. This real-time capability enables our public works and utility billing department to identify unusually high-water use, equipment failure, system outages, and other anomalies real time, which reduces expenses and prevents unnecessary water loss—a significant cost and resource savings to our customers. The average municipal water system water loss is typically around 16%. Olympia Fields is down to approximately 3 to 5 per cent. This has allowed us to "How The Line one Water Rates".
- Let's talk capital projects—our Board of Trustees, Treasurer, Finance Committee, Finance Department, and other members of the Administration come together annually for two separate workshops, to discuss the

budget and capital projects plan. These workshops are open to the public, and I encourage interested residents to attend to get a birds-eye view of the Village's financial decision-making. I instituted the capital project workshop seven years ago, to provide a transparent platform to identify and plan for multi-year projects and operational spending, with the ultimate goal of building resiliency in the Village's infrastructure. This process continues to position us to execute identified capital projects without borrowing and with no additional cost to residents. The following capital projects have either been completed or are scheduled for the 2024/2025 fiscal year, all without borrowing a dime :

Completed:

- Replacement of pumps at the Graymoor and Wysteria sanitary sewer lift stations
- Upgrades to the Village's water plant to create redundancies and replace old/worn equipment
- Purchase of a trackhoe mini-excavator for in-house repairs of water main breaks and swales
- New hybrid police cars and a new all electric pool car which have cut fuel cost by 2/3
- Village Hall Board Room dais repairs
- Village Hall walkway repairs

In the Works:

- Phase I Street Improvement Project (covering sections of Graymoor Lane, Corinth Road, Oakwood Drive, and Brookwood Drive)
 - Phase II Street Improvement Project (covering sections of 203rd Street)
 - Swale Repair and Flood Remediation (some of this repair work will be completed in conjunction with the Phase I Street Improvement Project; however, much of this work will be completed internally by our DPW staff)
 - DPW garage roof repair
 - Rehabbing of the Old Village Hall
- Speaking of flood remediation, our DPW staff is now equipped to repair and cut new swales to alleviate water overflow in our Village neighborhoods. Once a job that had to be outsourced at a hefty expense, our staff can now do some of this work in-house, at significant cost savings, thanks to their newly purchased trackhoe, mini-excavator (affectionately known as Lucille). Many of our older subdivisions rely on an above-ground swale and culvert system (as opposed to an underground sewer system) for water flow and drainage. This new equipment will help facilitate the maintenance of swales throughout the Village (property owners are responsible for culverts), and to that end we have begun the process of repairing poorly functioning swales and creating new swales, as needed. This work is central to the Village's overall stormwater management program. Look out for more information about swales and culverts and their care and feeding, over the course of the next few months.
 - Did you know that the Village also implemented a grant program to assist property owners with obsolete poorly functioning sewage systems? The Backflow Prevention Grant provides 10 grants per year to eligible property owners for up to \$5,000 to offset the costs associated with the installation of a backflow prevention system. Homeowners experiencing basement backflow flooding issues during heavy storms should consider applying for this cost-sharing program instituted by our Board of Trustees. The application is available on the Village's website. Additionally, every homeowner is eligible for a one-time \$200 grant to help pay for a high usage household water audit by a professional plumber. I strongly encourage property owners to take advantage of these two cost saving opportunities.
 - Within the past two years, we have employed a number of cloud-based platforms that have streamlined workflow and the way we manage many of our most important functions:

- *BS&A Software* – an enterprise resource planning system designed specifically for local government comprising budgeting, licensing, permitting, and utility billing components.
- *ClearGov* – a public-facing budget and financial management software, also designed with local governments in mind, that provides transparency in financial reporting.
- *Laserfiche* – a searchable content management program that has the capability to interface with BS&A and enables us to archive important records including contracts, invoices, purchase orders, personnel files, ordinances, and resolutions.
- *InTime* – a scheduling software specifically designed for law enforcement agencies to track time and attendance.
- *iWorQ* – a task management program used by the Department of Public Works that tracks the assignment and completion of daily projects.
- *Paylocity* – an all-in-one human resource program that manages benefits, time and labor, and payroll functions.

Notice that these facilities are all cloud-based, which is a more efficient and secure means of managing, processing, and archiving sensitive information. Moreover, these programs have increased staff productivity exponentially. BS&A also comprises a public-facing facility that enables residents to make and manage online payments more efficiently, and Laserfiche offers similar add-on components that could eventually enable our residents to interface with us more seamlessly. As the saying goes, we are working smarter.

- Helping us manage all of this technology are Trustee Howard White, the Village Technologist, and ProvenIT, our IT provider. ProvenIT provides full service, 24/7 hardware, software, network security, and help-desk support, which has enabled our staff to resolve tech-related issues in a fraction of time, reducing the amount of staff down time and boosting productivity.
- Relationship building is a crucial component of effective governance. With that in mind, we are proud of the strategic partnerships that we have established with key community stakeholders, including Rich Township, Cook County, Metra, Franciscan Health Olympia Fields, the Olympia Fields Park District, the Park Forest Library, and neighboring municipalities. Whether we are talking about clean-up along Vollmer Road, contracting for fire, ambulance, and library services, collaborating on tax exemption programming, or the myriad other matters affecting our community, leveraging and sharing resources, and brainstorming solutions to common problems is essential for the overall success of not only Olympia Fields but for the entire Southland region.
- Effective communication about the work we are doing is essential. In an effort to meet our residents where they are, we disseminate information across several platforms. We rolled out our Facebook social media platform in August 2023, so remember to follow us on Facebook. As always, our website at www.olympia-fields.com continues to be a valuable and transparent resource for important announcements, alerts, news, and information. Our Code of Ordinances, public meeting calendar, Board of Trustees and committee agendas and minutes, and various license and permit applications are all available on the website. Budget and other financial reports are also available for viewing and download on the website through our new ClearGov transparency portal. The *Field Notes* newsletter, available digitally and in hard copy, is another source of good information about Village happenings and events. Additionally, we send out email blasts with news you need-to-know, and the Message Center on your monthly water bill is yet another source of vital information.

Finally, in the event of emergency, we rely on the CodeRed notification system to communicate urgent emergency information via telephone, email, and text. Our Code Red enrollment initiative has been well-received; resident enrollment numbers have increased substantially thanks to the diligence of our

community resource officer, who made numerous phone calls and went door-to-door in every subdivision over a six-month period to enroll residents in this essential safety program. If you have not already signed up, or need to update your CodeRed contact information, I implore you to do so immediately. Application forms are available on the Village website and at the Village Hall or you can go directly to the CodeRed website at <https://www.onsolve.com/information-center/codered-community-hub/>. So, whether in paper form, online, or digital, we have a communication delivery system for everyone.

- Despite all of the technology at our fingertips to make our work lives more efficient, at the end of the day, we are powered by people—people who roll up their sleeves and lend a hand for the greater good of their community. People like our trustees, the residents who populate our committees and commissions and other volunteers, and last but certainly not least, our staff. This is your community; your home is your single largest investment, and we encourage you to get involved. I am pleased to report that many have heard the call to action and have given of their time and talents. Jennifer Beasley, Victor Blackwell, Sandra Finley, Kelvin Oliver, Kenneth Smith, and Howard White—the six trustees charged with the governance of the Village of Olympia Fields—bring a wealth of experience to their roles as stewards of your tax dollars. Our trustees are intimately involved in the life of our 2.94-*plus* square mile municipality. Further, our volunteers work hard on behalf of their fellow residents in myriad ways. It is volunteers who guide the planning of large-scale events like OctoberFest, who pitch in on the annual Village-wide cleanup event, who participate in decisions affecting public safety, such as revising the Village’s Emergency Operations Plan and developing a Neighborhood Watch placard, and who weigh in on matters affecting the planning and zoning of our community. I cannot stress enough the importance of getting involved.

Our executive team comprising seasoned management professionals with broad experience in a variety of disciplines, are doing a yeoman’s job of keeping the village on course. Jessica Washington is a seasoned lawyer and long time resident of the village is our Village Administrator. The Finance Department led by Lisa Fifer-Smith a former Auditor and former Comptroller. The Building Department is led by John McDonald, DPW staff led by Art Jones, and Derrick Blasingame, our police chief all embody the people-driven nature of Olympia Fields. I cannot thank them enough for their commitment to our Village. I stand by my words, that the work of the Village requires serious people, with top-notch credentials—whether elected, appointed, or hired.

Investing in our staff is important to us. With this in mind, we strongly encourage all staff at every level to seek continuing education and training in their respective job areas. A knowledgeable and well-prepared staff pays dividends: the quality of work product improves, employees are incentivized to take advantage of opportunities for advancement, the talent pool expands, and high-quality candidates are attracted to our Village. But most importantly, our residents are well-served.