Why Teaneck Is Sitting Pretty

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Aviation students push Teaneck High School's training plane back to its hangar after a regular instruction period.

TEN years ago the town of Teaneck in northern New Jersey was tottering toward civic chaos. Taxes were ceiling high. Credit was so low that Teaneck bonds at 6% found no takers in New York City. The town's debt was as large; police and fire service was poor; private business and real estate was suffering, and the public was getting hotter under the collar every minute.

Today this same section of suburbia is sitting pretty. Its 16,000-odd citizens enjoy lower taxes, better civic services. Business is booming, real estate values rising and Teaneck 2% bonds are being snapped up as fine investments in a solvent, pay-as-you-go town always are. In 1930 each Teaneck citizen paid $48.49 for municipal control that was a headache; in 1941 each citizen pays $33.07 for municipal control that is a joy.

Teaneck citizens are willing to share this joy with other towns and cities. They hold no patent on the devices that worked their civic miracle. "It is simply an example of what people can do if they get interested in their town and buckle down to improve it," they say. Or, if they happen to be slightly more realistic, they say: "Teaneck had a party and we washed the dishes."

Dish washing didn't get underway until 1931 in Teaneck. But the town kitchen was prepared for action some months earlier. The Teaneck Taxpayers League drove the opening wedge in 1930. This league had as its nucleus a group of commuters who met on trains discussed their town's trials and tribulations and decided that the best medicine would be to interest as many people as possible in an efficient form of government about which each taxpayer would be told everything he wanted to know.

SOME months of ringing Teaneck doorbells and distributing pamphlets and printing articles in the local papers by the energetic members of this league paved the way for an election. The league wanted the people to vote for a new form of government, including a city manager, a non-political council and an open-book government. This the people obligingly did. The majority was only fifty but league members said they could have gotten 75 additional votes if it had not rained.

First result of this election was a new town council of five members. This new council, in turn, selected a township manager, Paul A. Volcker. Manager Volcker previously had run Cape May, New Jersey, before that had graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, worked as a New York State engineer, as a highway department official and Secretary of the Lebanon, Pennsylvania, Chamber of Commerce. Thus Mr. Volcker brought to Teaneck wide experience in things civic.



Paul A. Volcker, Township Manager, who directs Teaneck's civic activities.

FIRST concern of Mr. Volcker was good roads at fair prices. Knowing both roads and prices he saved the town the equivalent of his yearly salary in this department alone. Next he seconded the selection of Francis A. Murray as fire chief. Previously a teacher and lecturer on fire prevention, Chief Murray keeps up the good work in Teaneck. His ideas have renovated the whole department. They continue to instruct firemen from 20 other towns in addition to any citizen interested enough to attend his lectures.

But Chief Murray's ideas don't indicate their fullest flowerings in lectures. Talk is fairly cheap. Fire insurance is fairly expensive. Or it was until Murray's new fire department raised Teaneck's fire insurance rating from Class E to Class B, thus saving that town's citizens $25,000 a year on fire insurance premiums alone.

Just as proud of their new police force are Teaneck townspeople. Its members are schooled at Rutgers College and the New York State Police School. Then they operate in all-motorized units with two-way radio systems keeping them up to big city standards. Teaneck's unemployed act as special traffic guards. Tickets are sometimes given careless motorists, but never fixed. Every child adds his or her fingerprint to the detective bureau's comprehensive gallery. Peddlers and solicitors are similarly checked on. Residents are encouraged to report all odd characters. "And so," says Manager Volcker, "we have little robbery in our city. But there would be none at all if every citizen co-operated fully."

THIS last—full co-operation—is the basis of Teaneck's present improvements, the hope for its future success. Every citizen is encouraged to interest himself in the town government and to voice his suggestions for its improvement. Each year's proposed budget is well publicized by a pamphlet called "How the Dollars Go." An outline, complete with diagrams, that is delivered to the door of every taxpayer before the new budget is adopted.

More interesting to outsiders is Teaneck's pistol range and high school. On the former the biggest pistol tournament of the East is held. In the latter the earliest high school aviation course in the country is taught. Started seven years ago, this aviation course gives ground instruction at the school and, by a special arrangement with the Bendix Aviation Corporation, flying instruction is provided when the pupil is ready. Teaneck girls tend more to archery, a sport which is vigorously practiced along the edge of the high school athletic field.

While making these and other improvements Teaneck cut its yearly cost of government from $800,000 to $721,000 in two years. "We had to keep up regular living," Manager Volcker explains, "while renovating our home town. But we didn't have to do anything very drastic. No real houses were taken over by the city because of non-payment of taxes. Each citizen knew what was happening and managed to hold on to his property, knowing that it would increase in value. We took down a few shacks on land people couldn't possibly hold, but we turned many of these lots into parks."

AIDING Manager Volcker in his work are men of well-diversified interests. Teaneck's Mayor is Milton G. Votee, a railway express executive. Councilmen are: Henry Dreissler, railroad man; Louis G. Morten, lawyer; Samuel S. Paquin, editor; Karl D. Van Wagner, textile expert. These men represent the citizens—although the citizens themselves are often consulted directly between elections. Manager Volcker represents trained ability in public service. Together they work to keep the town of Teaneck sitting pretty and to prove "what people can do if they get interested in their town and buckle down to improve it."

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