

To: Town of Holland Residents and Property Owners in the Cedar Grove Fire District

Re: Negotiations with the Village of Cedar Grove Regarding the Sharing of Costs for the Operation of the Cedar Grove Fire Department

From: Town of Holland Board

The Village of Cedar Grove and the Town of Holland have jointly funded the Cedar Grove Fire Department for many years. The most recent agreement for the operation of the fire department was signed on October 20, 2003, which became effective January 1, 2004 with an initial four-year term and a provision for an automatic additional three-year renewal. Many of you are probably aware that this agreement is being renegotiated. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information on the progress of these negotiations, to advise you on how to obtain additional information, and to reaffirm our appreciation for the services of the volunteers in the Cedar Grove Fire Department.

Prior to the agreement being formally opened up for renegotiation, there was some correspondence and one joint meeting of the boards to discuss the Village concerns about water and firehouse rent. In February 2008, the Town offered to pay an additional 50% for water, but also stated that we respected the right of the Village to request a renegotiation of the agreement if they chose to do so.

The Town Board received a letter dated May 12, 2008 notifying us that the Village wanted to renegotiate the joint fire department agreement. The Village specifically listed paragraphs 5 and 8 of the current agreement as being of greatest concern to the Village, namely firehouse rent and the cost for water and hookups. The Town agreed to the renegotiation of the agreement, and asked for changes to more fairly share costs for training exercises and mutual aid calls.

Each board worked independently in drafting suggested wording for the revised agreement, and shared the drafts with each other. The first of three joint board meetings was held on January 26, 2009. The purpose was to allow each board to present their positions with the supporting facts and logic. Following each presentation, there was time for questions and discussion. Each board needed to meet separately to discuss the information obtained in this initial meeting, so we adjourned.

The second meeting was held on February 16 to begin working through the agreement paragraph-by-paragraph. Open and thoughtful discussion followed each point, in which both boards were able to express their thoughts. Both boards seemed to agree with the equal sharing of costs for training and mutual aid. More data was needed to address the firehouse rent paragraph, and each board needed to have private discussions with regard to information that was shared in this meeting. The boards also jointly identified additional information required to make decisions on the remaining items.

The third meeting was held March 10. With respect to rent on the firehouse, the results of separate appraisals procured by the Town and the Village were presented. Agreement was reached on virtually all points, including the two most critical items to the Village – rent for the firehouse, and water and hookup fees. Most people present, including members of the public, recognized that we essentially had an agreement. But the Village Board then expressed an interest in a “simpler” approach. The Village needed time to develop their idea, so the meeting was adjourned. A date for the next meeting was not set due to vacations for both the Village president and the Town chairman.

The Town Board subsequently received a spreadsheet from the Village Board that was a summary of their concept. The two boards have not had an opportunity to jointly discuss the new approach. But on April 13, the Town chairman received a “draft” letter that was presented in an e-mail as “the current mindset of the Cedar Grove Board and we are all in agreement on the contents of this document.” The document called for the dissolution of the joint fire department, but had not yet been approved by the Village Board.

The Town Board believes that operating independent fire departments would degrade the emergency services and significantly increase the costs for both the Village and the Town. The Town presently pays 68% of the operating costs for the Cedar Grove Fire Department.

On April 27 the Village provided three possible meeting dates for the next joint meeting and the Town replied the same day accepting May 5. The Village responded on April 30 that the date was confirmed with all board members. The following day, the Village notified the Town that the meeting was cancelled because several Village board members could not attend.

In closing, the Town Board reaffirms our appreciation to the members of the Cedar Grove Fire Department for the excellent emergency services provided to the Town. We understand and appreciate that the members of the fire department tirelessly give of their time and talents, and risk their own safety, to protect our community.

You can find a timeline and a very complete listing of meeting minutes and documents exchanged during this negotiation process on the town’s web site at www.townofholland.com. Select “Cedar Grove Fire Department” on the left hand side of the screen.

The Town Board sees no reason not to continue with the negotiations. As of the afternoon of May 4 when this letter went to press, the Town is awaiting word from the Village on possible meeting dates.