

Highwood & Highland Park Fire and Ambulance Service Partnership

Frequently Asked Questions

I heard Highwood and Highland Park are talking about partnering to provide fire and ambulance services. What is going on?

For several years Highland Park and Highwood have discussed working together to improve services and create efficiencies. Highland Park recently outsourced its 911 communication center to create efficiencies reducing redundancies in 911 services. It makes sense to work together to provide fire and ambulance services because both departments assist each other through Auto and Mutual Aid agreements. The staffs from both departments have worked for years to develop a plan together to deliver services better and more cost effectively.

What is the plan?

Highland Park has a much larger fire department with more resources that will benefit the residents and businesses in Highwood. Highwood's department is spread much thinner due to less funding. The plan is to have Highland Park respond to all incidents including fire and ambulance calls from their station located at 1100 Half Day Road. The Highwood fire station on Green Bay Road will close.

Won't it take longer to respond in an emergency?

The response times are remarkably similar. Many areas of town will receive a faster response from this arrangement. In total, the large majority of homes in the community will receive a response time of under three minutes.

What happens if the station on Half Day Road is responding to another call?

Highland Park can provide coverage from other stations in the event one station is committed to another incident. In addition, Highland Park has Auto and Mutual aid agreements with surrounding communities that will provide necessary coverage to serve both Highwood and Highland Park.

What about the Town of Fort Sheridan?

Right now, the Town of Fort Sheridan is the furthest location for both departments. The response times for the Town of Fort Sheridan will be very similar to the current setup, mainly because emergency vehicles from the Highland Park station can cut quickly down Summit Avenue, a wide street, whereas Highwood's station requires tighter turns on narrower roads.

Will Highland Park give their own calls preferential treatment?

No. They will respond to calls as they are received and the level of urgency. Because of the way the stations get backfilled as explained above, there is sufficient staffing to serve Highwood and Highland Park.

Why does the Highwood station need to close?

If the Highwood station does not close, there are no financial savings.

Is the Police Department included in this agreement?

The Police Department is not included and police services will remain the same.

How much money will Highwood save if the agreement is approved?

Next year, the fire department is projected to cost \$1,309,124. The agreement with Highland Park is for \$625,000, with annual increases based on inflation with a cap of 3%. Over ten years, the total savings for

Highwood are projected to be \$9,301,096. That doesn't even include the dramatic reduction in pension costs.

Why would Highland Park want to provide us fire service?

All local governments are looking to work together to save money. Highwood would give them annual payments starting at \$625,000 for the first year. Highland Park has an exceptional department that covers twelve square miles completely surrounding us and we fit very nicely into their response zone.

How are Highland Park's services?

Highland Park's department is internationally accredited and recognized for exceptional service. They are very well known and firefighters in this department went through a very competitive process to insure only the best are accepted. Their management team makes sure they are well equipped for any emergency and are constantly evaluating and improving services. Highland Park strives to improve every year and just recently improved its Insurance Service Organization (ISO) rating and went from a four (4) to a three (3). For an insurance company knowing the capabilities of a fire department is important. The better the fire department, the better protected a building is from fire damage and loss.

Doesn't this cause Highland Park to stretch their resources?

Highland Park is already equipped to provide response to our area, as there are Auto and Mutual Aid agreements that have them responding to our area in so many cases already. Really, this helps both areas become more efficient by eliminating unnecessary redundancy.

What about Highwood's fire employees?

The local union is in full support of this agreement. Each employee is doing something different: one will work for Highland Park, one is retiring and some are taking buyouts or additional payments.

So what's the next step?

In order for this move to make financial sense, the station on Green Bay Road must be closed. Under Illinois law, a referendum must pass to close the station. If a majority of residents vote 'Yes' on this question on the March 2016 ballot, the station will be closed and Highland Park provided services will begin July 1, 2016.

What happens if the referendum does not pass?

The City of Highwood has a proposal from PSI, a company who provides fire employee staffing, to provide employees to fill many of the slots. This is a very reputable company with very good employees, but it would cost several hundred thousand dollars more than the agreement with Highland Park, though it would still save some money over keeping internal fire staff.

Will my tax bill go down?

With over \$9.3 million in savings over ten years, some good things will happen! As you know, the City of Highwood has many major infrastructure needs. The money saved each year could go towards many of the projects put off for many years that cannot wait any longer.

Where can I find more information?

If you would like to discuss this further, you can visit City Hall or call Highwood City Manager Scott Coren at 847-432-1931.