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## Village Board works to keep Volvo dealership in Oak Park

### Business retention agreement would relocate dealership to Harlem and Garfield, retaining tax revenues, jobs

The Village has drafted an agreement with Shepherd Motors on Madison Street to retain the Volvo dealership in Oak Park by selling it the long-undeveloped property at Harlem and Garfield, where it would invest more than \$6 million in construction of a new and updated facility.

By keeping the dealership in Oak Park, the Village would preserve sales tax revenues that would grow to more than \$100,000 a year and create the opportunity for new property tax revenues estimated at \$585,000 in its first full year of operations. The new facility also is projected to more than double Shepherd's current 26 jobs.

"This agreement would accomplish two major economic development priorities for the Village – it would keep a significant business in Oak Park, generating tax revenues, jobs and economic activity," said Village President Joanne Trapani. "And it would finally provide a suitable, productive use for the Harlem and Garfield site, which has never generated property or sales tax revenues and been a blight on the neighborhood for years."

The Village Board is currently reviewing the proposal with residents of the neighborhood adjacent to the site. A community meeting is scheduled for June 26 at Lincoln School to discuss the proposal and an informational mailing has been sent to neighborhood residents. Trustees also have offered to meet with smaller groups of residents in neighborhood homes to talk about the plans and solicit ideas on ways to ensure that the operations and appearance of the dealership are compatible with the neighborhood.

Trapani said the Village already has worked with Volvo on issues such as traffic flow, hours of operation, lighting and noise, but seeks additional input on those and other areas such as streetscaping and landscaping.

Village Manager Carl Swenson noted that there have been several ideas proposed over the years for the Harlem and Garfield site, not all of which have been appropriate uses of the property from the standpoint of the neighborhood or the community as a whole.

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“Through the course of our discussions with the neighborhood, we believe we have a sense of the concerns regarding development of this property and have tried to incorporate them into the design and planning of this facility,” said Swenson.

The new dealership, renamed “Volvo of Oak Park,” would be located at the rear of the proposed new site, set back from Garfield and adjacent to the Eisenhower Expressway – where it would gain significant new visibility. Signage has been designed to be appropriate in both scale and look, and directed toward the Eisenhower. Noise would be minimized by the use of individual walkie-talkies and cell phones by employees rather than a loudspeaker system. The test drive route would use Harlem Avenue and streets in Forest Park.

The Volvo dealership is owned by West Suburban Automotive Corporation, which bought the property at 260 Madison in 1996. With the popularity of Volvo’s updated line of automobiles and sport utility vehicles, the dealership has outgrown its less than half-acre site and needs more space for expanded sales at the nearly 1.5-acre site at Harlem and Garfield. The national corporate leadership of Volvo has given the owners until September to conclude a relocation agreement with the Village or lose its franchise.

As part of the agreement to keep the dealership in Oak Park, the Village would sell the Harlem/Garfield site for \$750,000, which is \$142,000 less than what it paid for the property. The Village also would fund half of the environmental remediation at the property, up to a maximum of \$150,000. The site was formerly owned by CSX railroad and has been used as a trash dump and road-salt storage location.

Following review of the proposal with the residential neighborhood adjacent to the site and with the Madison Street Business Association, the Village Board will formally consider the business retention agreement.

As for the Madison Street site, Shepherd Motors hopes to use the property for a new aspect of its business that will involve leasing high-end automobile brands such as Mercedes, Lexus and BMW. The building may also be used to sell Vespa Scooters and associated clothing and accessories. Should Shepherd Motors ever decide to sell the property, the Village will have a one-time right to match whatever offer is made on the property from a third party.

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