FMBA Local 40 and 240, the firefighters that protect South Orange, issued the following statement:

Over the last few days there has been much internet chatter about the issue of the dissolution of South Orange Fire Department and consolidation with the Maplewood Fire Department. Though we have no way of knowing whether or not those making comments or putting out falsehoods on the internet on this matter are even real people, we, as the men and women that are responding to fires, car accidents, and other emergencies on a daily basis, must speak out.

First and foremost, we have asked to be part of this conversation for well over a year. While the Mayor of Maplewood has responded to the questions of his firefighters on several instances, Village President Collum has continuously hidden behind a veil of secrecy, saying publicly that she was unable to speak on this matter as negotiations were ongoing and confidential. We believe that if there is any matter that the residents should be fully kept abreast of it is that of their own public safety and full transparency on this issue is the only way to pursue a safe and fair consolidation.

We are grateful to Village Trustee Deborah Davis Ford for bringing this issue to the forefront, and we are hopeful that it will now be seen as not just a vanity project but also a meaningful strategy for greater public safety.

After resisting our requests for a meeting in the summer of 2018, and making it clear that she had no intention of discussing the matter with us directly, Village President Collum was finally cajoled into a meeting that included union leadership from both Maplewood and South Orange, our statewide union leadership, and Governor Phil Murphy’s Shared Service Czars. This meeting took place on March 18.

During this meeting we expressed our concerns about the study the townships jointly undertook and developed largely without the input of our firefighters, the document that is seemingly forming the foundation of the Collum Consolidation Plan. That plan clearly states that in order to achieve the more than $1 million in savings the number of firefighters stationed in South Orange will be reduced to three.

This means that there will not be an appropriate amount of firefighters, based on federal safety standards, to respond appropriately to working fires. To put it bluntly, if a resident is trapped in their burning home, our members will be hindered in their efforts to undertake a rescue safely.

The study also dictates that in order to maintain safe response times to incidents with the majority of firefighters being stationed outside of South Orange, emergency vehicles will be moving through both Maplewood and South Orange at 35 miles per hour. Like other members of the community our firefighters cannot recall a time they have travelled through Downtown South Orange, at any time of day, at that rate of speed.

Under the Collum Consolidation Plan, by her own admission, the authority to manage the finances and operations of the Fire Department will be with the Maplewood Town Council. While there will be an advisory board established to review decisions, there will be no recourse available if South Orange residents are not satisfied with the manner in which their tax dollars are being spent on this endeavor.

All hiring and promotion decisions related to the new department will also be left in the hands of Maplewood, a township that does not use civil service, which is a set of NJ State standards of ensuring that such important decisions are made without the undue influence of politics, nepotism, or favoritism.

To be very clear, we believe under the right scenarios consolidating the South Orange and Maplewood Fire Departments can work, and, in fact, believe that by employing a greater vision even more savings can be realized.

However, this is not a plan that deserves to be debated under the microscope of a political campaign. It deserves thoughtful discussion and analysis, transparency, and, most important, constructive input from all involved.