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Areas

25 Cents



Altamont Enterpriser — Bob Hagyard

Guilderland Center firemen lay out lines minutes after the first alarm Tuesday night at Helderberg Reformed Church.

Church Leadership Regroups After Tuesday's Fire

By BOB HAGYARD

This Easter Sunday, the Helderberg Reformed Church congregation will worship at the Guilderland High School auditorium.

Less than 24 hours after fire tore through Guilderland Center's lone house of worship, the consistory met at the home of John Martin to sort out where the church goes from here. Mr. Martin, who is consistory vice president, reports that they:

—Accepted the school district's offer of the auditorium for March 30 and the four Sundays in April.

—Resolved to rebuild "on the same site as quickly as possible" after taking down what remains of the 1895 structure.

—Set up a temporary office in the parsonage at 117 Main Street. Consistory members hope to have the 861-8031 number transferred there as early as this Friday.

—Church clubs will meet at the Mynderse-Frederick House.

—The consistory is "still breaking ground" with insurance company representatives, Martin reports. Once a figure is agreed upon, they'll have to wait for demolition, cleanup and salvage operations before starting up any reconstruction project.

Arson Suspect

The fire appears to be western Guilderland's third major case of arson in less than two years. It follows last July's destruction of Altamont's village offices and before that, the May 1984 blaze that destroyed the frame rectory building at LaSalette Christian Life Center.

Wednesday, state police arrested Kenneth Donato, 20, of Guilderland Center. At his arraignment in Guilderland Town Court, Justice Kenneth Riddett ordered him held without bail at Albany County Jail pending a hearing on the arson charge. Donato, who was not a member of the church, may also undergo a psychiatric examination.

Damage

Roger Keenholts of Altamont was at the fire scene as member of the village fire police. A wearer of many hats, he is also Town of Guilderland and Village of Altamont historian and was active in the effort to reconstruct Altamont's records after last summer's fire-bombing incident.

His damage report:

—A highly prized stained-glass window dating back to 1895, the year the church was built, survived the intense heat.

—The other stained-glass windows and most of the other original furnishings, however, were lost.

—Church records dating back to 1780, locked up in a basement vault, are recoverable.

—A firewall installed during the 1960s between the community hall and the pastor's offices, Keenholts believes, was the reason why a portion of the contemporary church records may be recoverable.

First Alarm

Guilderland Center firefighters responded to the first alarm, turned in shortly after 10:30 p.m. and help from neighboring departments was summoned at once.

At first the blaze seemed most

intense in the center of the building. By the time firemen from Altamont, Fort Hunter, Guilderland hamlet and Westmere set up their lines, the flames had spread to the community hall in back and to the sanctuary and bell towers in front.

Then shortly before 11 the bell in the taller tower let out one last, loud peal—whether from the intense heat, no one could say. Many among the bystanders broke down and wept at the sound of the building's death knell.

Later, crews from Voorheesville, New Salem and Pine Grove (Rotterdam) arrived to assist while units of the Altamont Rescue and Guilderland and state police stood by.

Law enforcement officials suspected arson from the beginning: No activities were scheduled in the building that day or evening. Ar-

riving with the firemen were three state Bureau of Criminal Investigation officers who questioned firemen and spectators at the scene past 2 a.m.

By then, half the firefighters had gone home. Fifty feet overhead, a crew atop Westmere's ladder platform kept pouring water into the towers amid concern below that the still-burning towers might fall their way. (They didn't fall.)

Built In 1895

The congregation traces back to 1767 when religious services commenced at a site two miles to the west near modern-day Osborn's Corners, midway between Guilderland Center and Altamont. Later it organized itself as the Protestant Reformed Dutch Church of the Helleburgh on a lot between Route 158 and Stitt Road.

In the early 1890s the congrega-

tion's Altamont and Guilderland Center members opted to establish separate churches in their communities. Helderberg Reformed, the Guilderland Center offshoot, was constructed in 1895.

Many of today's members are descendants of the founding families. For some of them, the tolling of the bell was a horrible, heart-rending moment.

But daybreak offered an unusual and inspiring sight—in the form of what local residents call the Easter window, still catching the sun's rays, miraculously undamaged.

Created for the church by Louis Comfort Tiffany of the New York City firm, it interprets the Easter themes of regeneration and rebirth—perhaps a fitting symbol of what lies ahead for Helderberg Reformed Church this Easter season.

VCS Puts \$6.6M Budget Proposal On May 7 Ballot

By BOB HAGYARD

Voorheesville school taxes are expected to go up 5 percent under the 1986-87 budget plan adopted by the board of education Monday night.

The \$6.6 million package now goes before voters at the May 7 district election.

Passage would mean a 6½ percent spending increase over the budget okayed by voters last May. The tax levy increase, though, would be less than that, according to Superintendent Werner W. Berglas, because the district expects a

\$125,000 state aid increase plus a \$3 million increase in the assessed property value of the Town of Guilderland portion of the Voorheesville school district (that is, Weathersfield).

For the first time in years, the proposed budget calls for no staff cuts at the grade school. The junior high would add a foreign language teacher because the Regents Action Plan requires foreign language at the junior high level this September—something the district eliminated years ago.

The district will also add a social

worker position as proposed last January as well as a part-time student assistance counselor position, pending 60 percent funding from Albany County.

In the hearing audience were four district employees, two reporters and a parent. The hearing lasted 31 minutes, one of the shortest in years.

On May 7, polls at the high school lobby will be open from 2 to 9:30 p.m. Besides the budget, voters will also elect a school board member to a five-year term.