



**League of Women Voters of Scarsdale
Comments on the Proposed 2018 School Facilities Bond
January 22, 2018**

Acknowledgements

The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale (the “League”) thanks members of the Board of Education (the “Board”) and District Administration (the “Administration”) for their presentation and responses to League questions on the Proposed 2018 School Facilities Bond (the “Bond”) at the League’s General Membership Meeting held January 10, 2018.

The League acknowledges that much time and effort have gone into developing the Bond and we thank the Administration and the Board for their additional effort spent in preparing for our meeting and for providing the audience with informational handout materials on the Bond. The League also appreciates that members of the Board and Administration allowed additional time to respond to numerous audience member questions that extended the public information session past the scheduled time.

The League appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Bond. This statement reflects the consensus of League members at a meeting held immediately following the public information session on January 10, 2018.

Position

The League does not support the 2018 School Facilities Bond. To be clear, the League struggled with this statement because we do support investment in Scarsdale school facilities in order to maintain and enhance Scarsdale educational excellence and to ensure the health, safety and security of our students and staff. Moreover, we support a bond as a means of funding projects that address major facilities needs. We disagree with this proposal for substantive reasons and for the way in which it was conceived and presented to the community. Should the Bond be voted down, the League hopes that the Board and Administration will begin a new bond process without delay and with a more fully integrated long-range vision. In short, we support a bond but not this particular Bond.

Major Objections & Concerns

While we recognize that no bond process is perfect, the process for the development of this Bond was flawed and thus undermined the League’s confidence in the result. The League notes that the process did not provide:

- Timely, structured and thorough outreach to identify broad community values and priorities early on;
- Timely, thorough and broad community input on such issues as elementary school cafeterias and kitchens, district-wide classroom air conditioning, and sustainability;
- An opportunity for the community to thoroughly explore and vet all cost/value options;
- A full cost/benefit analysis to justify the Administration’s recommendation and Board’s decision to renovate and expand versus building a new Greenacres School; or

- A clear and compelling explanation of the Board’s decision that the scope of the bond should be “tax neutral” (i.e., resulting in no associated tax increase to homeowners), especially given the long list of identified work and current favorable borrowing climate.

Furthermore, most conspicuously and significantly absent from the process that produced this Bond was a long-range vision for all of our schools. The process did not provide a coherent picture of what our buildings need in order to preserve and enhance a high quality Scarsdale education or a plan to address all facilities needs moving forward. The League believes that an opportunity was missed to develop a long-range master facilities plan and to present a framework for the future that could bring the community together in support of all of our school buildings.

The League acknowledges that ultimately:

- In late fall 2017, the Board did shift the bond vote date forward to include additional meetings that involved open Board member deliberation and opportunity for public input on key priorities and values;
- In October 2017, the Administration did articulate educational goals for the Greenacres School project; and
- In late December 2017, the District did provide the public with new informational materials that now present the Bond projects in a more digestible format and are readily accessible on the District website.

However, the League maintains that each of these positive actions were taken too late in the process. We therefore reiterate several concerns with the process expressed in various public statements at School Board meetings since July 2017 by the League School Bond Study Committee and League Board, including:

- The overwhelming volume of data presented at each public meeting;
- The constant shifts in narrative following real-time District decision-making;
- The absence of a clear statement of the Board’s overall objective as it relates to the quality of our schools and Scarsdale’s educational values; and
- The insufficient opportunity for public input and insufficient Board deliberation to fully inform the public in a manner that allowed the community more timely opportunity to engage, question, challenge and/or support the School Board’s educational rationale and fiscal assumptions in deciding the key parameters of the Bond.

The League further concludes that the District’s presentation of how the proposed Bond project would address Greenacres School’s educational needs lacked specificity. In the end, we lacked a sufficiently detailed picture of how students would experience the proposed new addition and changes to the existing building, and how the project would connect to the District’s larger educational vision not only for Greenacres but for all District schools. There was also no clear answer provided as to how long we could expect the \$35 million investment to serve the community.

The League remains uncertain that the Bond’s plan for Greenacres School represents the best investment of the community’s resources. The League recognizes that the Bond’s proposed project for Greenacres School would realize some long-awaited improvements and address some of the District’s stated educational, health and safety goals for that building; however, the League has concerns that key spatial, health and safety needs are not being adequately addressed.

Recommendations

In order to produce a bond that maintains and enhances Scarsdale educational excellence in a fiscally responsible way that is in the best interests of the community, the League believes that the Board should implement an improved bond process that:

- Begins with more timely, effective and thorough outreach to identify broad community values and priorities;
- Articulates a clear vision as to the purpose of the bond;
- Presents to the community a coherent picture of what our buildings need in order to preserve and enhance a high quality Scarsdale education, including sharing with the community the District's benchmarking method and results;
- Develops the bond as part of a long-range facilities plan that provides a framework for the future of all of the schools; and
- Is collaborative and builds community consensus from the ground-up.

The League believes these process recommendations align with the Board's statements highlighting the importance of acting in partnership with the community. We agree that a successful bond process and proposal that makes sense for our community requires us to work together. To this end, a bond process must ensure that we all start from the same place and proceed forward together in a methodical manner, with a shared understanding of the basic underlying assumptions and overall District goals and educational values driving the process that a proposed facilities bond would address.

Conclusion

While the League does not support this Bond, we support investment in our school facilities and a collaborative bond process that builds community consensus from the ground-up and results in a shared long-range vision for maintaining and enhancing our excellent Scarsdale schools.

The Bond vote will take place on Thursday, February 8, 2018 from 7 am to 9 pm at the Scarsdale Middle School. Information on how to register to vote and/or to obtain an absentee ballot is available by clicking either the "New Bond Website" link on the homepage of the District website (www.scarsdaleschools.org) or the "Voter Information" tab on our League website (www.lwvs.org).

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Beth Evans, Chair, School Bond Study Committee
Linda Doucette-Ashman & Janice Starr, Co-Presidents
League of Women Voters of Scarsdale