



League of Women Voters of Scarsdale
Comments on the Proposed School Budget 2016-17
April 4, 2016

Introduction

The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale (the “League”) thanks members of the Board of Education (the “Board”) and District Administration (the “Administration”) for participating as a panel and answering questions at the League’s General Membership School Budget Information Meeting, March 29, 2016 at Village Hall. The League acknowledges with appreciation the substantial time and effort that goes into developing the budget and applauds the clear presentation of information provided by the Administration over the course of the budget cycle. The League further appreciates this opportunity to comment on the preliminary proposed school Budget, dated March 24, 2016 (“the Budget.”) This statement reflects the consensus of League members discussed at a League consensus meeting held on March 29th.

Position

The League supports the Budget for the 2016-17 school year, which includes many positive features for Scarsdale students and the District and represents a prudent tax investment for the community. The League recommends that the community vote ‘yes’ to approve the Budget on Tuesday May 17, 2016.

Overview and Highlighted Educational Features of the Budget

The proposed \$150,207,826 Budget represents a 1.46% total budget-to-budget increase and overall tax levy growth of 0.63%. The Budget proposes using \$1.1 million from 2015-16 fund balance to off-set the tax levy increase.

The League appreciates the choices reflected in the budget that support *educational values* held by this community, including the decisions to:

- Add 8.8 FTE new teachers, which allows the district to maintain traditional class size practices and supports new curriculum growth in areas such as STEAM, technology, elementary language, and special education;
- Fund the various reserves at levels that are both fiscally prudent and protect the District’s AAA rating;
- Fund capital improvements as part of the operations budget at higher levels to ensure our facilities support student learning and safety;
- Fund a new emotional support program in the high school;
- Continue ongoing maintenance and investment in the busing fleet as recommended in the last transportation review;
- Continue to fund and/or expand professional development programs such as Education for Tomorrow 2.0 and Center for Innovation which represent hallmarks of the District’s approach;
- Fund ongoing technology needs that support and enhance student learning, teacher usage and District management.

Issue: New Budget Process

The League takes note of the change in approach to budget development, described by the Administration and Board to be a flexible process built out of educational and programmatic needs which are collectively defined by cabinet members and building administrators. Further, the League understands that, as budget items are defined, they remain open to adjustment as the budget package is built, using placeholders and regular vetting opportunities with the Board. The Administration and Board defined this process as more collaborative and productive than an additive process with ‘puts and takes.’

The League notes the following process changes, as items for future monitoring and review:

- The introduction of the Transition Plan, the de facto strategic plan, representing the goals of the Administration and Board, and described as a living document with increased accountability.
- The creation of a Portfolio System, based on a restructure of the central office and inclusive of the Board.
- Reliance on the Transition Plan as a primary budget driver.
- The earlier start of the budget process as part of the ‘Budget and Finance, Negotiation Portfolio,’ including regular reporting to the community in workshop meetings and in open presentations of programs under development.
- The use of ‘affirmations’ as a way for the Administration to gauge the Board’s willingness to consider funding items in question.

The League applauds the Administration’s stated desire for public input. Core to our mission, the League values transparency in governance and encourages information dissemination and community engagement in the processes that impact our lives.

Recommendation: Recognizing that the Budget process is starting earlier and is moving in an integrated manner, the League encourages the Administration to include ample opportunity throughout the process for input from community stakeholders in a timely way. For example, the League would welcome the opportunity to meet with representatives of the Administration and the Board at the beginning of the budget process next year (in December or January) in addition to our traditional information session in the early spring.

The League appreciates the Administration’s open posture regarding the future progress of the Transition Plan and acknowledgement that these changes are in an early phase of development.

Recommendation: The League recommends that the Administration and the Board reflect on the successes and challenges of this year with candor and develop, define and communicate the next phases of the Transition Plan, inclusive of community input. The League encourages the Administration and the Board to consider that whatever the next steps become, the plan will enhance transparency and provide clearly-defined and formalized opportunities for early dialogue with the community, beyond what already exists.

Issues: State Imposed Tax Levy Limit (the ‘tax cap’)

The League reiterates our continued support of the Administration’s and the Board’s stated policy of not budgeting to a state-calculated tax cap. Although the League values the assertion made by the Administration that it is not using ‘the cap’ as a budget guide because it is an arbitrary line

imposed by New York state law, we understand that it is a factor important to some in the community, and must be reported and addressed as part of the process. We remain concerned, however, that the tax cap is over-emphasized in budget discussions and offer that the tax cap is a more critical factor for the budget vote, and should be used only as a reference point in budget development.

Though New York officials and the press regularly refer to the State imposed tax levy limit as a 'Two Percent Tax Cap,' this is a misnomer. This year, the calculation for the projected tax cap levy limit is 0.81%. As we learned at our March 29 meeting, the near-zero tax cap rate this year caused significant concern earlier in the budget development process, and the fact that the Budget is under the tax cap by \$249,932, is due, in part, to fortunate circumstances, including a decrease in mandated pension contributions due to favorable market conditions, lower-than-estimated utility bills due to decreased fuel costs and a mild winter, and the retirement of 19 seasoned teachers, permitting lower salaries to replace higher ones. These factors may not repeat in the future.

Recommendation: The League recommends the Board and Administration adjust communication practices to both reduce emphasis on the tax cap as a single-point guiding metric and include more nuanced education about the tax cap impact. We recommend this change of emphasis in anticipation of any possible future need for the Board to request an override, and to be able to garner enough community support to approve a budget that exceeds the tax cap.

Issue: Capital Investment

After years of underfunding during recession years, the League commends the continued focus on funding for capital improvement projects in the annual operating budget, both as part of the initial budget projections and as a place for investing newly-identified 2015-16 budget surplus dollars. At minimum, our buildings must support student learning and be safe, welcoming spaces, and ideally, should be sustainable and flexible environments, able to support changing technologies and enhance current and future programs.

Recommendations: Considering the age of district facilities and the years of funding neglect in this area, we recommend continuing this trend to return regular, planned investment to nationally-recognized budget percentage norms for expenditure on capital improvements.

Issue: Advocacy for District Values in the State and Federal Landscape

The League understands that State and Federal policies impact the district in the form of unfunded mandates and other policies that do not always reflect our own community values or serve our students' best interests. While each year brings changes and the broader education landscape has new players, the League reiterates our concerns that challenges from the State continue to undermine traditional local democratic processes that have allowed Scarsdale community values to shape our schools.

The League appreciates that 'Political Outreach' has been included in the Portfolio system, with regular reports that inform the community on issues facing the District and of interactions with our local lawmakers, particularly in the areas of State testing, teacher evaluation mandates and State Aid.

Recommendation: The League reiterates our recommendation that the Board and Administration take on a greater role in advocacy in order to ensure Scarsdale schools continue to reflect our community values.

- We suggest the Board and Administration reinstate an Advisory Committee on Governmental Issues, or something similar, with broad community representation, in order to engage in dialogue on often-complicated issues that may impact the district;
- We continue to support Board involvement with outside advocacy groups, and recommend empowering participation at regional and state school board association meetings; and
- We continue to support the Board connecting with area districts to identify shared concerns and to make common cause with those affected to an even greater extent by the recent direction of State education policy.

Issue: Scarsdale Schools Education Foundation Policy

The League reiterates our support of public education funded by public dollars and therefore continues to monitor the Board's use of alternate funding sources outside of the budget.

Recommendation: In light of the size and nature of past and contemplated gifts from the SSEF, we again urge the Board to develop and adopt a separate policy regarding its relationship with and funding from the SSEF. The League recognizes the Administration's expressed willingness to undertake this item.

In conclusion, we thank all the members of the Board and the Administration for your ongoing stewardship of our beloved district and for your willingness to try new approaches in the service of this community's children. We trust you will take these comments into consideration as you deliberate on your final budget and as you reflect on ways to improve next year's budget process.

Sincerely,



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League of Women Voters of Scarsdale



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