

December 9, 2013

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SCARSDALE
STATEMENT IN CONNECTION WITH THE
SCARSDALE SCHOOLS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Background

In 2010, the League of Women Voters of Scarsdale (the League) completed a study and evaluation on whether an education foundation should be established in Scarsdale as a source of funding to supplement the taxpayer-approved school budget. Although we were unable to reach consensus at that time on whether an education foundation should be established, we issued a statement in which, among other things, we made certain observations, including the following:

“If an education foundation were to be established, significant checks and balances must be addressed in defining the role of an education foundation and its governance.”; and

“It is important that the board of education be involved in the grant process of the foundation to safeguard the priorities of the school district as formulated by the board of education and the superintendent of schools.”

It is with those observations in mind that we make this statement.

It should be noted that we are not commenting on the composition, governance, mission, or process of the Scarsdale Schools Education Foundation (SSEF) nor do we ask that private deliberations of the SSEF be made public. We understand that the SSEF is a private entity, which does not have the same obligations to the public as does the Board of Education (BOE). The BOE has a responsibility to the community to act with transparency, including providing relevant information to the public, subject to any legal restrictions that may limit disclosure by the BOE, which restrictions are beyond our purview. Further, the BOE is duty-bound to engage in public deliberation and public discussion, and to give the public an opportunity to observe the BOE’s decision-making process and to weigh in on its deliberations. As elected officials, school board members are accountable to the public.

The presentation by the SSEF and acceptance by the BOE at a BOE meeting in October of an aggregate gift of \$90,000, although generously given and gratefully accepted by the BOE, was a surprise to the League, and we understand to many in the community as well, given the absence of meaningful public deliberation by the BOE prior to the presentation of the gift.

Observations

To our knowledge, since the establishment of the SSEF, there has not been a meaningful public discussion by the BOE of district priorities with regard to the SSEF, how gifts from the SSEF will be consistent with the district priorities as formulated by the BOE and the Superintendent, or what procedures are in place for the safeguarding of those priorities. Nor has there been public disclosure of the BOE’s formal relationship to the SSEF or explanation as to how gifts from the SSEF fit within existing gift policies adopted by the BOE.

The foregoing observations are based on a review of accounts of BOE meetings as they appeared in the *Scarsdale Inquirer*, scarsdale10583.com, and other electronic media. We did not undertake a review of the minutes of the BOE meetings. We have reviewed BOE policies relating to gifts as posted on the district's website.

Recommendations

As a nonpartisan political organization dedicated to promoting the informed and active participation of citizens in government, we seek, among other things, to ensure that all levels of government keep their citizens informed. Given the nature of the newly established foundation, we ask the BOE for clarification regarding the following matters to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the BOE and district administration and the SSEF:

- the priorities of the district as currently formulated by the BOE and the Superintendent and how determination will be made as to whether gifts from the SSEF are consistent with those priorities, and whether the gifts are appropriate for funding by a private entity versus the school district;
- the process for vetting projects proposed and approved for funding by SSEF, including criteria to be utilized and consideration of the impact of implementation of a project on the school budget in subsequent years, and assessment of the project following its implementation in the schools;
- how current policies adopted by the BOE in relation to gifts to the district apply to gifts to the district by the SSEF, paying particular attention to the BOE's policies regarding "any semblance of influence over programs or activities sponsored or conducted" by the district and policies in relation to community fundraising;
- the role of the Superintendent vis à vis the SSEF; and
- the role of the BOE liaisons to the SSEF and their reporting obligations to the BOE and to the public.

In addition, we recommend that a formal presentation to the BOE by the SSEF be included as an agenda item at a BOE meeting in the near future and that the BOE engage in a public discussion regarding its relationship to the SSEF and its philosophy regarding consideration and acceptance of gifts by the SSEF to the district, including the items identified above. We urge the BOE to publicly disclose the memorandum of understanding between the two entities formally setting forth their relationship and obligations.

We also suggest that the BOE consider developing and adopting a new policy, specific to gifts given by the SSEF to the district, in light of the new and unique relationship between the BOE and the SSEF.

The League recognizes that current and past members of the BOE have likely expended considerable energy in exploring the establishment of an education foundation in Scarsdale. The League believes, however, that the school district and the community would benefit from a more transparent process and one that schedules opportunities to engage the community.

To that end, the League hopes that the BOE will promote an ongoing dialogue with residents as the BOE had envisioned when it began considering an education foundation and provide

the public the benefit of hearing board members' thinking as the BOE moves forward in defining its relationship with the SSEF and safeguarding the formulation of the district's priorities. The League encourages the BOE and district administration to remain committed to the high standards of openness and transparency that we have come to expect.

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SCARSDALE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

By: _____

Susie Rush, President