



Scarsdale League of Women Voters Comments to the Preliminary Proposed 2013-14 Budget April 1, 2013

The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale (the "League") thanks the members of the Board of Education (the "Board") and the Scarsdale School District administration (the "Administration") for speaking and answering questions at the League's 2013-2014 Budget Informational Meeting held on March 18th, 2013 at Village Hall. We recognize that substantial time and effort has gone into the development of the budget and as community members, we appreciate the commitment of the Board and the Administration in providing budget study sessions open to the public and engaging the public in the 2013-14 budget process.

The League appreciates the opportunity to comment on the preliminary proposed budget dated March 4, 2013 (the "Budget"). In the spirit of the Board and the Administration's continued open dialogue with the community, the League offers our views on certain discretionary budget items, which we believe merit further analysis and a more detailed explanation before inclusion in the final budget.

Executive Summary:

- The League supports the approach that was used by the Board and the Administration to develop a 2013-14 school budget with the primary focus on maintaining an excellent school system, while also recognizing the current economic pressures on residents.
- The League believes that reduced use of surplus (\$4.2mm vs \$6.3mm in 2012-13) is both more transparent and fiscally prudent.
- The League commends the Board and the Administration for their foresight in undertaking a preliminary long-term facilities plan for the district (the "Preliminary Facilities Plan"). However, the League would like to see a comprehensive master plan to address the immediate and longer term needs identified at the High School before the District commences with any material part of that plan.
- The League believes that additional analysis and explanation need to be given for certain staffing changes including (1) the impact of the reduction (by attrition) of two librarians (\$200,000 savings), (2) the need for two (one existing and one additional) communication officers (incremental cost of \$90,000), and (3) the benefits derived from adding three security aides at the High School (cost of \$101,000).

Budget Growth: The \$146.2mm Budget results in a 3.1% growth in the budget (or \$4.4mm) and 4.78% tax levy growth for Scarsdale residents, 4.88% for Mamaroneck Strip residents. We understand that the difference between the

percentage growth in the Budget and the tax levy increases results primarily from the proposal to limit the use of surplus revenue and reserve funds to reduce the tax burden. We agree that it is fiscally prudent and more transparent to reduce the reliance on surplus and reserve funds as a means of managing the budget and support this course of action, even while we recognize that there is an economic impact on taxpayers in the years in which this decreased reliance is carried out.

The League acknowledges that the Board and the Administration face significant challenges in preparing a budget that both meets the community's needs and is fiscally responsible, particularly when the cost of state-mandated and contractual obligations (salary steps and benefits) represent an increase of \$5mm over the prior year's budget. State-mandated increases in pension costs alone account for approximately 79% of the budget growth, which necessitates making difficult budgetary decisions. Consistent with last year's budget process, we again commend the Board and the Administration for proposing a budget which focuses on educational goals and fiscal prudence and not on a state mandated tax limit.

Fitness/Wellness Center: The League commends the Board and the Administration for its commitment to investing in facilities, particularly in the context of the Scarsdale Education for Tomorrow, in order to provide students with opportunities for growth in academic, athletic and extracurricular areas. The League further commends the Board for undertaking the Preliminary Facilities Plan. We understand this plan was in part responsible for the re-imagining of the High School 2nd floor space to accommodate present and future educational needs and the proposal to move the fitness center to the undeveloped space under the new gym (together with the planned construction of a classroom, referred to as the "Wellness Center").

The League is concerned, however, that the Budget presents only a plan to relocate the existing fitness center and construct a new Wellness Center without addressing the other immediate needs and solutions for the High School contemplated in the Preliminary Facilities Plan. The Wellness Center should be part of a comprehensive master plan for the High School, designed to address all the needs of the High School over the near, middle and long terms. The League agrees with the Board and the Administration that in addition to the inadequacy of its fitness center, the current High School facilities lack adequate dining facilities, library space, independent and collaborative study space and envisioned classrooms of the future needed to accommodate current and anticipated enrollment. A comprehensive master plan is needed to address all of these issues and will further the community's understanding of how and when each of these issues is intended to be met.

The League believes that the Administration should provide the community with a comprehensive master plan, which would include a clear rationale for each component of the project, timeline(s) for implementation, contingency plans for serving students and staff while space is under construction, and the source of

financing for each part of the master plan. By presenting the Wellness Center in the context of a comprehensive master plan rather than solely in the context of the Budget, the League believes the Board will be in a position to better educate the community regarding its vision for meeting the High School building needs for today and for the 21st century. This articulated vision will provide a context for each component of the project, leading to greater transparency, community understanding of, and support for, all aspects of the master plan.

The League believes that it is preferable for the Board to work to build community support for the whole concept (even while phases of the master plan may be initiated and funded independently of one another), rather than to proceed with a piece of the concept that may not have the full support of the community. The League notes further that if the Board were to propose a bond issue to finance the construction and renovation contemplated in a master plan, the proposal would require a simple majority vote of approval of the community; however, inclusion of the construction of a new Wellness Center in the Budget, requires a 60% approving vote to pass.

In the absence of a comprehensive master plan, the League recommends that the Board explore the feasibility of reallocating the monies earmarked in the Budget for the relocation of the existing fitness center and construction of a new Wellness Center to other needs that have been identified by the Administration (such as deferred plant improvement items).

Staffing: The League understands that at the outset of this year's budget process, the Board was faced with a \$5mm increase in staff salary and benefit costs. Further, we recognize that the Board asked the Administration to make \$2mm in cuts to the budget in February by the next meeting and the Administration complied with that request. While the League agrees that natural attrition, such as retirement, may allow the Administration to re-evaluate the staffing needs of any given program or department and can be useful in managing budgets in tight times, we caution the Administration not to use attrition to make curricular decisions which are inconsistent with the district's mission.

- *Librarians:* The Budget does not replace two positions left vacant by the retirement of two librarians which reduces the staff at the Middle School and High School by one librarian each. The League believes that additional analysis should be done to assess the impact of this reduction. The loss of a Librarian at the High School may have particularly negative consequences in light of the anticipated increases in enrollment & existing overcrowding in the Library, especially when coupled with the district's desire to promote collaborative work and independent learning.
- *Communications Officer:* The League agrees that the Administration would benefit from dedicated resources who can apply both the traditional and emerging communications expertise; however, we are not convinced that the combined work load of the external and internal communications functions

as presented in the Budget warrant two FTE. Without sufficient justification, the League cannot support the additional FTE.

- *Security Aides:* The League believes that the proposed addition of the Security Aides at the High School requires further study. The League would like a better understanding of the types of security risks that our High School faces and has faced in the past and how the proposed Security Aides will protect against those risks. A more detailed job description of the Security Aides and explanation of how the function will make the High School safer is necessary to assist the League in assessing the value of the Security Aides. To the extent that the benefit of adding the Security Aides is demonstrated following adoption of the 2013-14 budget, the League suggests that the cost of the aides might be funded from available reserve funds.

In conclusion, we thank all the members of the Board and the Administration for your dedication to our community's children and facilities. We hope that you will take these comments into consideration as you deliberate and continue to revise and finalize the budget. The League looks forward to the release of the Board's final budget iteration and tax levy resulting from having considered comments made by the community at which time we will reconvene to determine our position on the final budget.

Sincerely,

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LWVS School Budget Chair

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