

**League of Women Voters of Scarsdale  
Comments on the 2019-20 School Budget  
March 25, 2019**

The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale (the “League”) thanks members of the Board of Education (the “Board”) and District Administration (the “Administration”)<sup>1</sup> for participating in a panel at the League’s General Membership Meeting and School Budget Information Session and addressing questions on the Proposed School Budget 2019-20 (the “Budget”) on March 4, 2019 at Village Hall.

The following statement reflects the consensus of League members at a Consensus Meeting held immediately following the Information Session.

***Position***

The League supports the Scarsdale School District Proposed Budget for 2019-20 and recommends that the community vote “yes” to approve the proposed Budget on Tuesday, May 21, 2019 at Scarsdale Middle School. The League offers its comments and recommendations regarding certain budgetary items as well as the budget process, which we hope will be considered as the Budget is revised and finalized.

***Budget Overview and Noteworthy Features***

The proposed Budget is \$160,782,597, with a budget-to-budget increase of 1.86% (\$2,933,190) and a tax levy growth of 2.27%.<sup>2</sup> Per the District, the estimated tax increase for an average assessed property valued at \$1,595,700 would be: \$422 for Scarsdale residents (representing a 1.77% increase) and \$1,259 for Mamaroneck residents (representing a 5.88% increase).<sup>3</sup>

According to the District,<sup>4</sup> the Budget accomplishes:

- The advancement of high-quality teaching and learning consistent with SET 2.0
- Support of teaching and learning initiatives in advancement of SET 2.0, including STEAM implementation.
- Staffing levels consistent with historical philosophies and community expectations
- Enhanced Safety, Security and Emergency management; and
- Additional air conditioning units to cool learning spaces on high heat days
- Facilities improvements and upgrades.

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<sup>1</sup> This statement uses “District” when referring to both the Board and Administration.

<sup>2</sup> As per the March 11, 2019 draft budget.

<sup>3</sup> Budget Book, March 11, 2019, Appendix C, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> As per Budget Study Session #1 and District answers to LWVS questions as can be found on the District website.

The proposed Budget increases staffing at the high school to 158.0 FTE, an actual budget increase of 3.0 FTE; including 1.0 FTE combined STEAM/ Math position, 1.0 FTE Science position and 1.0 FTE Special Education position. District-wide, the proposed staffing reflects a 2.0 FTE net increase from 2018-19. This includes 1.0 FTE, which was a transfer from SMS to a district-wide assignment, as well as 1.0 FTE Psychologist.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Commendations***

The League acknowledges, with appreciation, the substantial time and effort that goes into developing the proposed Budget and thanks the Administration and Board for their additional effort spent in preparing for our March 4 Information Session. The League would especially like to commend the panel -- the impressive team -- at this year's Information Session for their candid dialogue.<sup>6</sup> The information provided and the panel's responsiveness to the League conversation and questions at the meeting was well-received and much appreciated.

The League commends the Administration for making the Budget Book available early in the budget development process. The Budget Book allows a comprehensive view of the myriad components of the Budget and through this tool there is an enhanced understanding of the Budget itself. The League further commends the Administration for adding the League questions and Administration answers to the District website; we believe that this is a valuable resource for the community.

### **Comments and Recommendations**

#### ***General***

While the League appreciates the Board's efforts to manage the impact of tax increases on residents, we are aware that educational needs are constantly changing and therefore the League seeks to ensure that our school budgets not only maintain but also continuously enhance Scarsdale education. The League notes, with some concern, that overall, the 2017-18 and 2018-19 budgets, as well as the current proposed Budget represent very tight budgeting practices. The League continues to encourage the District to consider unforeseen expenditures and unpredictable cost increases in their budget planning process.

#### ***Security***

The 2019-20 Budget line for Security is \$1,294,031, which is an increase of \$824,418 over the current year, 2018-19.<sup>7</sup> Included in this Budget line is \$805,407 specifically for visitor

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<sup>5</sup> See p. 6 in Budget Book for the full Staffing Summary.

<sup>6</sup> Present at the March 4, 2019 LWVS Information Session: Dr. Thomas Hagerman, Mr. Stuart Matthey, Dr. Drew Patrick, Mr. Edgar McIntosh, Mr. Eric Rauschenbach and from the Board, VP, Ms. Pam Fuehrer.

<sup>7</sup> See p. 25 A in Budget Book for details on Security in the 2019-20 Budget.

management and building safety personnel.<sup>8</sup> The League acknowledges that the evaluation and implementation of security at Scarsdale Schools is an ongoing process, however, we hope through this process and in the implementation of enhanced security measures, that the District is able to mindfully maintain the warmth and community feeling that is an essential aspect of our schools. The League strongly recommends that the Board engage in increased outreach to solicit broader community feedback in order to understand how the community at large views and understands the complex issue of school safety and increased security measures. The League believes that there is much benefit to proactively obtaining more nuanced and qualitative community feedback in order to determine values and priorities, particularly with regard to such complex issues.

In addition to community outreach, the League requests that benchmarking information and other research be made public to educate and contextualize additional Budget funding in the area of security. The League hopes that through this information, the community will have the opportunity to better understand how similar schools in Westchester and beyond have approached increased security.<sup>9</sup> Further, by viewing District recommendations within the context of benchmarking and research, the community would be able to understand which measures have been considered and found to be most appropriate and effective for districts like Scarsdale. The League hopes that the goal of implemented security measures is that these measures not only incorporate best practices but also reflect and connect to the values of the entire Scarsdale community. The League further recommends that the District Safety Committee continuously seeks and receives input from local law enforcement as well as the community at large.

### ***Staffing and Class Size***

The League notes that a Scarsdale education has long been regarded as a leader amongst its peers and we recommend that the District continue to aspire to educational leadership. The League notes that the District continues to support the elementary class size policy and the Middle School house structure. The League also notes the District's commitment to High School student choice. However, the League recommends that the District ensure that there is adequate personnel to protect student choice at the high school. The League notes that this effort requires focus on many levels. The League values a high school where teachers have time for students -- to support the social, emotional and academic -- where there is small class size, and where students have flexibility both in and outside of the classroom for learning opportunities and support. To create and promote these opportunities for students, the League

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<sup>8</sup> Personnel includes a security guard immediately inside the entrance to the schools as well as additional "rovers" who will monitor school grounds.

<sup>9</sup> The Administration added a paper to the District website in response to LWVS Questions and stated: "The National Association of School Psychologists has published a paper called *Rethinking School Safety: Communities and Schools Working Together*, which is indicative of the District's thinking around the balance required in the implementation of School Safety and Security."

acknowledges the importance of protecting class load and scheduling for teachers and guidance counselors as well as preserving class size.

The League believes that the inherent flexibility required to meet student needs and the ability to reassess student needs are essential components of a Scarsdale education and that both are time and labor intensive for teachers and guidance counselors. Furthermore, the League believes that individualized instruction and the opportunity for student research are hallmarks of a Scarsdale education and make Scarsdale an educational leader.

In addition, and in light of the conversation on student social/ emotional issues at the high school, the League is concerned about the increased student per dean/ guidance counselor ratio at the high school and we ask the Administration to look more closely at the trend.<sup>10</sup> The League notes that classroom teachers are the first line of defense in regard to observing student social/ emotional issues and a teacher's ability to detect and address problems or refer the student to a counselor may be impeded by an increased student per dean/ guidance counselor ratio.

The League recommends that the Administration and Board continue to reflect on and provide appropriate staffing to protect the academic well-being of the high school. The League believes that staffing should be reflective of an underlying high school culture that supports academic choice, allows each student to forge a personal connection to an educator and provides a safe, healthy environment in which students can develop and grow.

### ***Leadership***

The League values Scarsdale Schools' educational leadership. The preservation of educational leadership requires a strong and proactive commitment to continuously enhance our educational program, K - 12, while keeping the community informed. As such, the League recommends that the Administration and Board provide clear and concise explanations of Budget decisions, in addition to a broad overview of what is physically needed at the building level so that our community will have the ability to make informed decisions on Budget priorities. In addition, the League believes that the Strategic Plan is critical to maintaining and enhancing Scarsdale educational excellence as it creates a path forward for the Administration and Board. It also provides an opportunity to inform the community of future plans so that they are given context for District-recommended Budget choices. The League recommends that any Strategic Plan long-range financial proposal include vision and future development not just for capital improvement, but as well for programmatic and curricular investment.

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<sup>10</sup> 2007-08 budget: 9 counselors/ deans for 1,455 students = 161-2 students per dean; 2019-20 budget: 9 counselors/ deans for a projected 1,539 students = 171 students per dean. As per the District in response to LWVS question, they are taking into account other mental health professionals in the building: SHS has 2.2 psychologists serving the general population, 1 psychologist for the Scarsdale Support Program, and 2 Certified Social Workers provided through the Youth Services Project. The ratio for students to mental health professionals in the building with the addition of these resources is 1:117.

With regard to the current strategic planning process, the League strongly recommends that the Board proactively solicit broad community input to better take the temperature of the community and to develop a full understanding of views on the variety of complex issues that face the District.

The League notes that our education system is what attracts people to Scarsdale, thus it is imperative that Scarsdale sustain its position as a leader in public education. The League appreciates that our new Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Edgar McIntosh, is doing a listening tour in the community, as he shared at our Information Session. We encourage and support his taking the time to learn, understand and know the community. The League encourages continued public presentations of initiatives, both for curriculum and facilities, that include benchmarking data and research, so that the community can better understand and know the type of curricular innovation that is taking place at other comparable public and private schools. The League supports and encourages the District's pursuit of forward-looking curricular initiatives and program enhancements that continue to provide opportunities and environments that stimulate innovation and educational excellence for both students and teachers.

### ***Plant and Capital Improvements***

The League notes that Plant Improvements are budgeted at \$1,459,000, representing a 7.16% budget-to-budget decrease; Capital Improvements are currently budgeted at \$1,085,000 representing a 16.54% budget-to-budget decrease from the 2018-19 budget. Given that several of our schools were built over a century ago, thoughtful facilities planning and capital improvement are of utmost importance. Our buildings must maintain and enhance student learning; and be safe, sustainable and flexible spaces able to support 21st century innovation and future programs.

Regarding District-wide air conditioning, the League looks forward to hearing about a sustainable, long-term plan and timeline for completing efforts to create safe, comfortable, learning-conducive environments for all Scarsdale students.

### ***State Calculated Tax Levy Limit (the 'tax cap')***

This year, the allowable tax levy growth under the New York State "Tax Cap" law is 2.94%, thus the current proposed Budget is .67% below the tax levy limit.<sup>11</sup> The League notes that the proposed Budget is \$967,017 below the tax cap. The League understands the desire to keep tax levy growth as low as possible; however, the League is concerned about being far below the tax

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<sup>11</sup> The tax cap serves as a threshold for determining the percentage of voters required to approve the budget. In the event that a district seeks an increase beyond the tax levy limit, 60% of voter approval is required to pass the budget. If a district requests an increase either at or below the cap, approval by a simple majority (over 50%) can pass the budget.

cap with regard to planning for next year's budget. If we are not spending up to the cap, our allowable levels for the following year are lowered. Furthermore, the League encourages the Board to be mindful about the upcoming legislation regarding the Tax Levy Limit Law.

### ***Advocacy***

The League reiterates our recommendation from the past several years that the Administration and Board take on a greater role in advocacy and leadership for our District. The League strongly recommends that the Administration and Board create a Legislative Advisory Committee in order to monitor the many legislative issues that currently affect Scarsdale Schools and public schools in general. Currently, there are opportunities for Scarsdale to advocate productively on issues including the Con Edison gas moratorium, the Tax Levy Limit Law and other legislation that directly impacts our community.

### ***Board Process***

In conclusion, the League recommends that the Board provide the community sufficient information and time necessary to view any Administration or Board member Budget recommendation within the larger context of District educational goals, a master facilities' plan and through the lens of Scarsdale's role as an educational leader. The League continues to recommend that the Board be more proactive and wide-reaching in soliciting input, feedback, and engaging in dialogue with various community members and groups in order to better and more fully understand the views of their constituents as well as broader community priorities. This may be achieved, for example, by Board coffees, focus groups, formal invitations to specific neighborhoods to attend certain Board meetings, etc.. The League believes that a more complete picture of community feedback, combined with relevant expert opinions and research, will serve to enhance Board decisions on complex issues and their implementation as well as facilitate community understanding and appreciation of Scarsdale Schools.

We thank all members of the Administration and Board for consideration of our statement. The League looks forward to the release of the Board's final Budget iteration resulting from having considered community comments.

Sincerely,

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League of Women Voters Scarsdale

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