

SCARSDALE COUNCIL OF PARENT-TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS

March 30, 2020

The PT Council Executive Committee and the PT Council Budget Study Chairs thank the District Administration and the Board of Education for scheduling this additional budget forum for the community to comment on the proposed budget without time restrictions. We also thank the Administration for responding to the many written questions we had submitted at the beginning of March and for posting the frequently asked questions and responses from other community groups and individuals on the budget page of the website for the benefit of the public.

The societal shutdown in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19 has not only permeated nearly all aspects of daily life but has also rendered obsolete many of the economic assumptions serving as the foundation for the proposed 2020-21 budget that had been presented to the community in February. We appreciate the great lengths to which the Administration has gone to keep abreast of latest developments and to adjust budget projections and recommendations accordingly. The fact that the third publicly aired and recorded budget study session was able to proceed with all members of the cabinet and Board participating remotely on March 18th, using technology that allowed for public participation, with only a nine day delay from the original timeline, is a testament to the nimble response and dedication of the Administration, the business office, and the technology and A/V department members.

Given the radical change to the economic landscape in the past few weeks and the Board's expressed preference to reassess and recalibrate budgetary expectations, we were both surprised and dismayed that, at the March 18th session, the Board failed to adopt a revised schedule of budget study meetings, including a postponed budget forum date, to provide the community with sufficient time to digest and respond to a reworked budget proposal. Likewise, following the presentation on March 23rd of the proposed reductions, posted only a few hours prior to the meeting (a practice that the PTC EC has repeatedly asked to be changed), we were surprised by the Board's limited discussion of the rationales for those proposed cuts and apparent decision on those changes prior to the second budget forum, particularly since the PTC EC had been told expressly that it was not expected to comment at that meeting.

With the remainder of the school year still in a state of flux and no date in sight for the easing of COVID-19-related restrictions, we encourage you to schedule additional meeting dates as placeholders for public discussion and feedback should there be any further adjustments to projected revenues and expenses in the proposed 2020-21 school budget. A rapidly changing economic outlook requires additional opportunities to weigh and discuss the economic assumptions and priorities underlying the proposed budget and for the community and community organizations to pose questions, receive answers, and offer public comment.

As we have stated before, because "the budget planning process essentially occurs year round, we respectfully continue to suggest that the District Administration and Board consider restructuring the timeline for publicly communicating potential budget drivers." While COVID-19 may be the biggest disrupter in recent budget study history, the community has seen other significant "eleventh hour" changes to the budget. We advocate direct communication and more proactive efforts to gather parent, student, and community feedback earlier in the year (perhaps

using the recent listening sessions on community engagement as a possible model) to present potential specific budget items. “Such engagement efforts are useful as a means to understand the community’s priorities and taxpayer tolerance for proposed spending increases to fund such plans. Earlier and more targeted outreach is also essential for obtaining community “buy in” on issues that, in some instances, may be either controversial or represent a dramatic shift from past practice” This shift will benefit all parties by leaving sufficient time in the process to refine plans if there is significant community resistance to a particular component of the budget.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak in New York and the market reverberations that followed, members of the PTC EC had been mostly supportive or neutral about the original budget proposal and the most salient of its discretionary features. However, now that the global economic outlook has changed dramatically, most members agree that a budget with minimal tax increase is the most prudent and the only fiscally responsible course of action. COVID-19 has altered the financial landscape and has already impacted the economic situation for many residents in Scarsdale.

A few members of the PTC EC, while not oblivious to the financial hardships that residents will experience, are optimistic that the community can sustain a budget closer to the original February proposal than what was suggested last week. These members are concerned primarily that certain cuts, including but not limited to the auditorium project, would negatively impact student safety and education, school facilities, and property values, and should be considered very carefully.

Several other members, in contrast, are less optimistic and do not believe that the community will be able to absorb anything beyond a minimal tax increase, if that much, in the face of the present economic downturn. These members favor cutting as many items that could be regarded as “wants” rather than “needs,” and approve of all of the cuts identified at last week’s budget meeting with the possible exception of the transportation study.

Notwithstanding those favoring more cuts, most PTC EC members strongly encourage the District Administration to explore using the balance allocated in the debt service reserve fund to make some improvements to the auditorium in 2020-21, assuming that using such funds would have no tax implication.

We all agree that the Board should act with the recognition that Scarsdale is a public school system funded by taxpayers who face an uncertain economic future. Yes, we value the educational investment in our students and do not want to diminish the caliber of our District’s innovation and academic instruction. Yet we cannot proceed with a “business as usual” school budget while bracing for potential job losses, savings losses, and a national recession. We trust the Administration’s recommendations presented last week as to what can be cut or delayed without incurring excessive future costs.

All members of the PTC EC are concerned that the deferment of items slated for next year’s budget will compound the delays of additional improvements and projects that have been on the District’s long wish list. Nobody relishes a significant cumulative impact on future budgets or the

postponement of budgetary items having educational value. Yet most have resigned themselves to that possibility in light of the current state of affairs.¹

With regards to the proposed reductions and savings suggested at the March 23rd meeting, we trust the District Administration to determine what can be delayed without incurring excessive future costs with the caveat that we cannot put off these expenses indefinitely. However, we should be careful to evaluate each expenditure with a lens for future budgets and understand if spending some money now could result in greater savings going forward.

One example is the transportation study, which could ultimately result in a favorable budgetary impact by identifying ways to improve efficiencies in current bus routes and practices. This study could also have a positive non-financial impact for our families if done in coordination with Village efforts to improve safety for student pedestrians and bicyclists going to and from school on Village roads. Other examples include identifying potential energy savings to be reaped with changes in heating, cooling, lighting, and other equipment. We look forward to presentations concerning the District Sustainability Committee's plans and thoughts on these matters and the appropriate funding mechanisms for implementing any changes (e.g., annual budget vs. energy performance contract). Nobody advocates spending more in this austere time, but we should continue to explore the feasibility of options that could yield cost savings in the long run.

With regards to special education, we support the tax-neutral introduction of the proposed 8:1:2 program so that some of the most vulnerable students in our community will have the opportunity to attend school in their home town. However, because it is a singleton classroom within our school system, we urge the Administration to undertake extra care to ensure a smooth and well communicated rollout, learning from past successes and failures. We hope and trust that the budget accounts for the professional development and training needs of this program's staff who will not be able to look for guidance from any peer classrooms within the district.

Thank you in advance for taking our comments and feedback into consideration and for being open and willing to hear our suggestions. We thank this Administration and Board again for your remarkable dedication and time in ensuring that our children continue to flourish in a district

¹ When the tide turns and the economy resumes, in order to not lose sight of previously stated priorities, we reiterate that "[w]e encourage the District to continue building-level and district-wide discussions designed to determine whether and how to address any of the remaining items that have been identified as building-level or community facilities priorities. The wish list has included items such as the A-School and CHOICE buildings, the high school auditorium, the high school learning resource center, . . . multipurpose space and fitness center expansion at the middle school, large group spaces for collaborative work between elementary classrooms, food preparation areas at elementary schools that lack kitchens, playground renovations, and classroom storage and furniture solutions that are portable and adaptable for different purposes, and the Heathcote office. As the Board has previously suggested, the district has a long 'wish list' of facilities and other projects -- not all of which may be appropriate for a public school district to undertake at taxpayer expense." We continue to advocate for a detailed timeline and cost estimate of those long-term facilities projects that have not been addressed in the last two bonds or in next year's budget. As stated previously, "[f]urther community education and engagement are appropriate to determine how to prioritize, further explore, incorporate, or eliminate those items from the district's future plans."

that is known for its educational excellence and innovation and for always raising the bar in securing a brighter tomorrow for our children.

Sincerely,

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