



February 8, 2010

Ms. Susan Ross
Chair, Administrative Committee
21 Ardmore Road
Scarsdale, NY 10583

Dear Susan,

The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale (the "League"), itself a nonpartisan organization, favors the concept and recognizes the value of a nonpartisan system for the selection of Village and School Board candidates in Scarsdale. We continue to monitor these election systems to encourage the informed and active participation of our citizens.

We would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with us to share information on behalf of the Administrative Committee (the "Committee") at our membership meeting on January 25, 2010 to evaluate the School Board Nominating Committee ("SBNC") election held on January 6, 2010 (the "Election").

The League recognizes the efforts of the Committee to obtain nominees to, and administer the election of, the SBNC. We further commend your diligent efforts as chair of the Committee, particularly in view of your acceptance of the position on short notice. We have the following recommendations and comments:

Overview

- 1. Develop strategies to better educate residents about the nonpartisan system and the role of the SBNC.** The lack of awareness and understanding by many in the community of the nonpartisan system and the importance of the election of SBNC members for the selection of candidates to the School Board continues to be a concern. The League recommends that the Committee identify a range of methods and venues to reach out to and educate our citizens about the SBNC and the election process.
- 2. Improve voter turnout by facilitating the use of mail-in ballots.** While the League is pleased that voter turnout for the Election was on the high side compared to the turnout for SBNC elections over the past few years, the League believes that voter turnout can be increased through the use of mail-in ballots. We commend the Committee for proposing changes to the SBNC Resolution (the "Resolution") that provides for a mail-in ballot procedure that is not dependent on the absence of an eligible voter on the day of the SBNC election, which changes were approved by the voters in the Election. We recommend that the Committee (i) clarify the procedure,

including that voters may deliver the mail-in ballots in person as well as by mail, and (ii) continue to publicize in a comprehensive manner the availability of the mail-in ballot.

3. **Establish a partnership with the Procedure Committee.** The Committee and the Procedure Committee face common challenges in the discharge of their respective duties and, we believe, share the paramount objective of increasing voter awareness and voter turnout. The League urges the Committee and the Procedure Committee to engage in discussions in the spring to explore solutions to problems confronted by both committees so that agreed upon initiatives may be implemented prior to next year's elections.

As the League considers the active participation of our citizens in the School Board and Village election processes our collective responsibility, the chairs of the League's committees on the school election system and the village election system will make themselves available to meet with you and the chair of the Procedure Committee. Through the meaningful exchange of ideas, we believe that efficiencies and creative strategies can be generated that will foster greater voter awareness and improve voter turnout.

Obtaining Nominees and the Election

The Committee. Pursuant to the Resolution, the Committee is charged with assembling nominees for the SBNC and administering the election of the SBNC. The League commends the chair of the Committee for utilizing the entire Committee to carry out its duties. We admire your efforts to communicate with Committee members, invite discussion regarding policies, delegate yet oversee tasks to be performed, and promote collaboration among the members. The League notes that, contrary to the Resolution, there were no appointees to the Committee by the Town and Village Civic Club.

Obtaining Nominees. At least two candidates for each vacancy were nominated in each elementary school district, except in Fox Meadow.

We understand that because of the last minute withdrawal by the fourth candidate in Fox Meadow, the Committee did not have the ability to add another candidate before the deadline to submit nominating petitions.

It should also be noted that while there were four candidates for two vacancies in Greenacres, it was reported after the election that there was an additional vacancy to be filled as a result of the resignation of a sitting SBNC member. Because of the timing of the resignation, the Committee was unable to add two additional candidates for the vacancy. To ensure that at least two candidates for each vacancy are nominated, *the League suggests that the chair of the SBNC communicate with returning members of the SBNC in the fall -- well before the deadline for new SBNC candidates to submit petitions, providing returning members with the scheduled dates of upcoming SBNC meetings.*

The League applauds the Committee's efforts to identify potential candidates and to encourage community members to become candidates through the publication of notices and points of view pieces in the *Scarsdale Inquirer*, the posting of notices on public access cable television, the local website, www.Scarsdale10583.com, and our *Bulletin*, outreach to neighborhood associations and PTAs, including attending meetings, e-blasts on the websites of all seven schools, the placement of flyers at locations in the community, and personal contact by Committee members.

The Brochure. The League supports the Committee's initiative to cut costs by reducing to a single page the Notice to Vote brochure for mailing to residents prior to the Election. By using an 8 ½ x 14 inch double-sided sheet and eliminating the fundraising envelope, the Committee saved \$1,100. Despite the density of the information presented, the Committee was able to provide a focal point to the Notice that made clear pertinent information such as the date, time and location of the Election, who is entitled to vote, and the availability of absentee ballots. For future mailings *we recommend:*

- *including in the Notice*
 - *a clear description of the mail-in ballot and its use as an option to voting in person*
 - *a reference to a description of the nonpartisan election system, i.e. a fact sheet, and where the fact sheet may be obtained (we would suggest the fact sheet be posted on the SBNC website, www.scarsdalesbnc.com (the "Website"), and made available in hard copy in public venues such as the Scarsdale Public Library and Village Hall). Mindful of the need to save money, the League nevertheless believes that educating the community about the nonpartisan system is of vital importance.;*
- *consideration by the Committee of placing a limit on the number of characters permitted to each candidate for his or her biographical information rather than allowing the Committee to edit such information;*
- *the use of clear stickers to seal the Notice to avoid covering candidate or other information.*

The Vote. A total of 416 votes were cast in the Election, as compared to 392 in 2009, 494 in 2008, and 230 in 2007. The League notes that a joint evening meeting of the Scarsdale PT Council and the PTAs of the seven schools was held at the Scarsdale Middle School, the polling place of the Election, which led to a number of citizens casting votes. *The League supports the continued coordination of the date of the SBNC election with the date of the joint PT Council/PTAs meeting.*

Polling. The League believes that the Middle School is an appropriate venue for the Election and commends the Committee for adequately staffing the polls. *The League recommends extending the voting hours by one-half hour from 9:30 AM to 10 AM to allow voters with children in preschool or elementary school time to vote after "drop-off."* *The League further recommends that the Committee investigate obtaining the large "Vote Here" sign from the District Administration, the School Board or the Village to place at the entrance to the Middle School on Mamaroneck Road to alert citizens of the vote.* We appreciated the numerous and visible signage immediately outside and on the doors to the Middle School, and were pleased to see designated parking for voters.

Mail-in Ballots. Sixty-five citizens voted by mail-in ballot, compared to sixty last year and four in 2008. While the increase is slight, we continue to believe that the mail-in ballot is a valuable tool to increase voter participation. To facilitate its use, *we recommend the Committee undertake a comprehensive plan to make citizens aware of the mail-in ballot as an alternative to in-person voting and to clarify the procedure for using the mail-in ballot so that it is simple and convenient for citizens. In particular, the League asks the Committee to make clear:*

- *mail-in ballots may be delivered in person to the chair of the Committee as well as mailed. This appears to be the intent of the Committee as reflected in the amendment to the Resolution set forth in Article II.C.3(i)(iii)(B).*
- *whether a separate “certification” must accompany the mail-in ballot, and if so, provide a sample form and provide clear instructions as to how the certification must accompany the ballot. Article II.C.3(i)(iii)(B) provides that a voter must “attach to the outside of the sealed envelope containing the voter’s ballot or include in such sealed envelope a certification stating that the voter (1) is eligible to vote and (2) has not yet voted in the election.” It was unclear from our meeting whether the Committee in fact contemplated receiving a separate certification or whether the ballot alone would constitute a certification. The League underscores the need to establish procedures to identify the validity of the ballot to guard against voter fraud.*
- *who is an eligible voter. The provisions relating to mail-in ballots in the Resolution as amended refer to “eligible voters”; however, the Resolution only defines a “qualified voter” (a citizen, 18 years or older who has resided in the school district for 30 days prior to the election). We assume that a qualified voter is an eligible voter.*

The League urges the Committee, in refining the mail-in ballot procedure, to do so in accordance with the terms of the Resolution and consistent with procedures applicable in general elections, and which will allow the greatest flexibility to the voters without undermining the integrity of the voting process. The League further proposes that the Committee ensure that the mail-in ballot is used in a neutral manner, as a vehicle to increasing the participation of citizens in the SBNC election, not as a campaign mechanism for candidates. We also urge the Committee to take primary responsibility for educating the community about the mail-in ballot rather than rely on SBNC candidates to publicize its merits. Further, the League recommends that the Committee provide a “fact sheet” explaining the SBNC election and the nonpartisan system wherever mail-in ballots are made available.

Finally, *the League suggests the Committee and the Procedure Committee collaborate to develop mail-in ballot procedures incorporating our recommendations that will be used for both SBNC and Citizens Nominating Committee elections.*

Public Relations. In addition to the Committee’s efforts to attract candidates for the SBNC described above (see “Obtaining Nominees”), the Committee publicized information regarding the SBNC nominees, the date, time and location of the Election, and the availability of absentee ballots, in the *Scarsdale Inquirer* and in the *Bulletin*, on public access cable television, and through e-blasts on the websites of the seven schools. The Committee also posted information regarding absentee ballots on its Website and placed absentee ballots at Village Hall and the Scarsdale Public Library. In addition, results of the Election were published in the *Scarsdale Inquirer* and on the Website. The League believes greater community awareness is integral to improving active participation of citizens in the election

process. To enhance the Committee's work in reaching out to the community, *we recommend the Committee:*

- *identify venues* in addition to meetings of PTAs and neighborhood associations to educate the community
 - we suggest the Committee *provide a script* regarding the SBNC, its role and the election process, to community organizations which may be used by the leaders of such groups in the event that a Committee member cannot attend a meeting of the group. It is critical that citizens be made aware of the importance of the SBNC election to the election of School Board members who are charged with, among other things, the crafting of the budget for the school district. We note that on our website, www.lwvs.org, there is an explanation of the school and village election processes. We encourage the Committee to utilize the explanation in its communications with community organizations and/or to provide a link to the League website on the Website.
 - *consider reaching out to students* such as (i) students in Scarsdale High School social studies classes and members of Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops who may appeal to parents to participate in the process, (ii) Scarsdale High School students who are qualified to vote, (iii) college-age citizens who are home for the holidays. It should be noted that twenty of the 416 votes cast in the Election were by college-age voters.
- *expand the utility and the use of the Website*, including: posting basic information such as (i) candidates and current members in tabular form, as was provided in the Notice to Vote brochure prior to its reduction to a single page, (ii) candidates' biographical information, (iii) the date, time and location of the SBNC election, and (iv) the mail-in ballot and the procedure for using it; and investigating linking to the Website from other websites such as the official website for the Village, particularly since the SBNC election is a village-wide election and we are told that Village staff often receive questions regarding the election.
- *explore the use of other media*. We understand that students in the Choice program at the Scarsdale Middle School created a video about the nonpartisan system. We also encourage the Committee to inquire whether a student in the A-School or a senior options student may be interested in designing a multimedia project.
- *increase the use of e-blasts*. In particular, we encourage the Committee to send e-blasts with information regarding the mail-in ballots before the deadline to submit mail-in ballots and again before election day.
- *publicize* among Committee members and the community *who is qualified to vote* in an SBNC election. We urge the Committee to give prominence to this information in all communications, including on the home page of the Website.

Finances. The League is pleased that the Committee appears to be in a healthy financial position primarily through its reduction of costs and securing a substantial donation from the Scarsdale Volunteer Fire Co. 1. Because the Committee has a cushion of approximately \$3,200 to fund expenses for the election in 2011, you have advised that the Committee believes it is appropriate to spend down its balance and does not plan to fundraise in the coming year. You also informed us that the Committee may explore seeking additional substantial donations from other organizations and/or corporations.

The League is sensitive to the struggle the Committee goes through each year to raise funds from a finite pool of residents flooded with requests for donations from other local community organizations, the task made even more difficult in the current economic climate. While securing donations from a handful of corporate organizations may seem the ideal solution, the League encourages the Committee to reflect carefully upon the use of corporate "sponsors," giving thought to whether the acceptance of such donations would be construed as endorsements by the Committee of the corporate donors, their products and/or their policies. If the Committee elects to go forward with such donations, the League believes the Committee will need to develop guidelines for determining, among other things, whether a donation can be accepted, whether an acknowledgment will be included on the Notice to Vote and/or on the Website and the prominence given to it.

The League suggests that the Committee keep in mind that fundraising efforts serve more than the single purpose of raising money to cover costs; they also serve to raise awareness in the community of the SBNC and its importance in the election of School Board members. In light of the educational benefit of a fundraising effort and knowing that a lesser amount is necessary to be raised due to cost-cutting, the League hopes that the Committee will not dispense altogether with fundraising from community members.

Conclusion

The League applauds the Committee's work in administering the election of the SBNC. In order to safeguard and improve the functioning of the nonpartisan system for the election of the SBNC, it is critical that Scarsdale citizens actively participate in all aspects of the election process, from agreeing to be a candidate for the SBNC to voting -- whether in person or by mail-in ballot -- for candidates for the SBNC. The League believes that by increasing awareness of the importance of the nonpartisan system to the governance of our community, citizens will be more encouraged to serve on the SBNC and to vote in SBNC elections.

Sincerely,

/s/

Susie Rush
Chair, School Election System
League of Women Voters of Scarsdale

/s/

Jane Veron
President
League of Women Voters of Scarsdale

cc: Stephen Fridakis, Vice Chair, Administrative Committee
Members of 2010-2011 Administrative Committee