

## SCARSDALE COUNCIL OF PARENT-TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS

March 22, 2021

The PT Council Executive Committee and the PT Council Budget Study Chairs thank the District Administration and Board of Education for once again incorporating the November budget overview/preview and today's community budget forum in the schedule. We also thank the Administration for responding to our many written questions about the preliminary budget proposal. We value the Administration's efforts to update the current budget development page on the District website, to post promptly the most recent recordings of Board meetings, and to maintain the historical files for the community's reference and edification.

We welcomed the Board's March 15, 2021, email to community group leaders on matters concerning the budget and appreciate the message as a first step in implementing the recommendation by the Board's Committee on Community Engagement. We encourage both the Administration and the Board to utilize additional proactive measures earlier in the budget development process to gather feedback, not just from community leaders, but also parents, students, and individuals in the community. We suggest earlier, targeted outreach to ascertain community priorities and taxpayer tolerance, particularly for new recurring or significant one-time expenditures. Such efforts are essential for obtaining community support and will benefit all parties by leaving sufficient time in the process to refine plans in the event of community resistance to particular components of the budget.

As we have expressed previously, the current practice of waiting until the date of the Board meeting/budget study session to post agendas and materials typically does not allow sufficient time for process-oriented community groups to digest and reflect on the information and craft a thoughtful response for the evening's public comment period and Board discussion. Reverting to past practice of posting agendas and supporting documents no later than the Friday before the Monday meetings would address that issue and perhaps foster a more informed and measured public response from all those wishing to be heard. Similarly, just as many teachers and students have implemented asynchronous learning opportunities this year, we encourage the Administration and Board to consider the utility to the community of recording and making the full series of budget presentations available on demand in advance of the budget study sessions.

We acknowledge the Administration's and Board's cautious approach to budgeting for the many unknowns of the pandemic school year. We also appreciate the attention to minimizing spikes and dips that would impact the taxpayers.

We support the continued use of fund balance only for non-recurring surprises and the calculated decision to discontinue past practice of relying on surplus to fund anticipated or annual costs. We encourage the District to restore the unassigned fund balance back to recommended levels of close to the 4% limit as soon as practicable.

The PTC EC fully supports the addition of the 1.0 elementary special education teacher, the 1.0 high school special education teacher, the .4 high school speech pathologist, and the .2 middle school psychologist secretary position to support our most vulnerable student population.

Given the many competing budgetary needs, we are not unified in opinion about the decision to prioritize the proposed addition of 5 full time elementary school cleaners as an annually recurring staffing measure after the pandemic is over.

We are concerned by the deferment of so many longstanding capital projects until the 2026/27 bond and the noticeable decline in the percent of the budget allocated annually towards capital projects. The District has an aging infrastructure and long wish-list of requested improvements.

The PTC EC thanks you for providing an updated plan for the high school auditorium. However, we continue to advocate for a public facilities master plan, updated in real time, consisting of a running list of the many other capital projects under consideration, projected costs, and rationales. The wish list of past years has included items such as the A-School and CHOICE buildings, 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, classroom casement, storage, and furniture, and the Heathcote office. More recently, additional building-level requests have also included lockers, ventilation improvements, outdoor group spaces for instruction, and technology classroom and library improvements at the middle school. The upcoming building conditions survey may identify yet additional items. District-wide public discussion is appropriate for ascertaining whether, how, and when to address these facilities wants and needs.

We encourage the District to identify potential energy savings from changes to heating, cooling, lighting, and other equipment. While we understand the decision this past year to pause the District Sustainability Committee's exploration of long term cooling solutions, alternative energy sources, environmentally friendly food service and waste disposal practices (e.g., feasibility and utility of reintroduction of dishwashers in lieu of compostable plates and utensils, composting on site), we are eager for the District to resume its efforts during the next year. We look forward to hearing the District's recommendations and proposed funding for these plans.

The PTC EC urges the Administration and Board to reconsider implementing the transportation study that had been recommended, included, yet ultimately removed from the budget several times in the past few cycles. This study could yield future savings by identifying potential areas for efficiencies and could likewise have a positive non-financial impact for our families if done in coordination with Village efforts to improve traffic congestion and safety for student pedestrians and bicyclists going to and from school on Village roads. These long standing problems have been exacerbated by the pandemic-related reduction in student use of bus transportation. A thorough exploration of efficiencies to be gained through incentivizing expanded bus ridership when safe to do so as well as adjustments to routes and mileage limits is overdue.

We encourage the District to collaborate with the Village on issues surrounding improved cellular reception in and around the schools and to reinstate the discussions that had been put on hold this past year.

We support the District's funding of a summer program and using internal experts and hiring external consultants to help evaluate the social-emotional and academic impact of the pandemic on students. We encourage the District to be transparent with the results of such evaluation and to ensure it has satisfactory staff to address the identified shortfalls and issues. Similarly, in light of pandemic-hastened changes to the use of standardized test scores in the college admissions process and the elimination of the College Board's SAT II tests, next year does appear to be an opportune time to review the AT program and revisit the AT vs. AP decision as the District has planned.

The District has benefitted from shrewd technology budgeting practices, securing favorable grants and leases to fund equipment needs. We hope the District's efforts to harness benefits and efficiencies born out of necessity during the pandemic, such as improved attention to digital literacy and increased collaboration and communication among the Administration, faculty, and staff, will have lasting effects after the pandemic ends.

The increases to the athletic expenditures of the past few years have undoubtedly enhanced safety and improved the experience for members of certain high school sports teams. Nevertheless, in light of the many non-athletic budgetary requests that did not make the final cut, further scrutiny may be warranted to ensure that extracurricular high school activities are funded appropriately relative to the needs of academic/curricular programs and non-athletic extracurricular clubs and that school teams are funded equitably across sports and genders.

Thank you in advance for taking our comments into consideration as you finalize the budget. We appreciate your openness to feedback, your increased focus on community engagement, and your impressive dedication and efforts in a year that has tested everyone's limits.

Sincerely,

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