



February 7, 2025

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Re: LWVS Consensus Statement re 12/2024 SBNC Election

Dear Ms. Weston and Dr. Zhang:

The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale ("LWVS") thanks Christine Weston and Meng Zhang for your service in your respective roles as election chair and election vice chair of the School Board Nominating Committee Administrative Committee (SBNC AC) and for the work undertaken by all active members of the SBNC AC in recruiting candidates and running the election. LWVS further thanks Ms. Weston and Jen Zola, SBNC vice chair, for attending LWVS's information session on January 21, 2025, to discuss the December 4, 2024 SBNC election, and for your thoughtful responses to LWVS's questions.

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In its independent oversight capacity, LWVS monitors the SBNC elections to ensure transparency, organization, and legitimacy of the elections, as those elections are the democratic component of Scarsdale's nonpartisan school election system. Immediately following the information session, LWVS held a consensus meeting for members only as part of its annual study. LWVS's comments and suggestions are set forth below.

1. **SBNC AC Functioning and Leadership Transition**

LWVS commends the SBNC AC for successfully filling all previously defined leadership roles (election chair/vice chair, resolution chair, secretary, treasurer, webmaster) and for securing sufficient participation from the remaining members to cover all election-related responsibilities. LWVS appreciates the SBNC AC's maintenance and use of electronic records and older paper files as a means of preserving institutional knowledge to pass on to successors. LWVS continues to encourage the next election chairs and those filling AC leadership positions to consult with their predecessors of prior years to onboard successfully into their roles next season.

Per the election chair's comments, multiple members of SBNC AC were involved in discussions last spring to change the election date from its traditional mid-January timeframe to an early December date. That decision was made, in part, because of the lack of a PTC speaker event with which to coordinate for voter turnout at SMS, and the belief that additional time was needed in the schedule for new SBNC member orientation. While the earlier date may have benefited the SBNC, it compressed the time available to the SBNC AC for pre-election outreach and may have contributed to low voter numbers in this election. LWVS appreciates the rationale for this change in timing but notes that the communication to the community about the plan to deviate from past practice was lacking.

LWVS suggests coordinating with the PTC and the schools in the spring, while the calendar is in development and before it is set, to determine if an event likely to attract a large crowd can be scheduled to coincide with the SBNC election. In addition, the SBNC AC members may wish to compare notes with their counterparts on the Scarsdale Procedure Committee to establish best practices with regard to community education about, awareness of, and engagement in the nonpartisan election systems.

LWVS notes that both the election chair and vice chair were serving the first year of their two-year terms on the SBNC AC, and were therefore new to the experience of running the SBNC election. LWVS had previously expressed concerns about the impact of prior SBNC Resolution changes on leadership transition and

institutional knowledge, particularly the amendments that eliminated the SBNC AC succession plan from vice chair to chair. Regardless of whether the practice is codified in the future, LWVS continues to recommend that the SBNC AC return to a more formalized leadership transition process by which the election vice chair trains under an election chair for a season and then steps into the role of election chair for the second year of the two-year term. Having a staggered term pairing of chair and vice chair should facilitate retention and transfer of institutional knowledge and also flatten the learning curve for the incoming election chair.

LWVS recommends conducting a comprehensive post-election debrief to review this year's election, reflect on the changes instituted over the past few years, and plan for next year's election season, including a review of finances.

As referenced during the information session, the election chair of 2023 had developed a detailed timeline/checklist for running the election. LWVS commends the SBNC AC for utilizing that timeline/checklist and its plans to update it. LWVS suggests that the frequency, timing, and methods of publicity efforts be adjusted in the timeline/checklist, particularly to account for the lack of the Scarsdale Inquirer as a means of announcing any planned changes to the election schedule.

While LWVS appreciates the verbal explanations offered during the information session, LWVS values continuity and preservation of institutional knowledge in writing and, to that end, encourages the SBNC AC to resuscitate its longstanding practice from 2023 and before of generating a formal written report at the end of the election season to describe the process and to memorialize lessons learned for the benefit of future SBNC AC members.

2. Policies, Procedures, Guidelines, and SBNC Resolution

This year's election included a referendum on 15 amendments to the SBNC Resolution, all of which passed, though the election chair acknowledged that the amendment substituting the name Scarsdale Forum for the Town and Village Civic Club ("TVCC") was insufficiently researched, deemed inappropriate at a time that was too late to remove it from the ballot, and will need to be reverted in the next election cycle. LWVS appreciates the election chair's stated plan to revisit that issue next season.

LWVS's position concerning the 2024 amendments to the SBNC Resolution were detailed in LWVS's consensus statement dated November 26, 2024. At that time, LWVS was concerned by the limited extent of public outreach to solicit input concerning plans to amend the SBNC Resolution and the insufficient publicity to inform the community about the nature and purpose of each change proposed. After

the vote, the actual results of the referendum were not made available publicly until January 10, 2025, when the yes/no tabulation for each numbered amendment was posted solely on the SBNC website, without any clear indication as to the subject matter of any particular amendment.

LWVS maintains that proposed amendments need to be finalized as they will appear on the ballot and distributed widely through multiple avenues along with their rationales with ample time before the election occurs. LWVS again recommends increasing the timeline and publicity requirements for proposing amendments in the future. Likewise, the results of any referendum also should be communicated clearly so as to explain which amendments passed and their impact through as many channels as possible in a timely fashion after the vote. Such publicity efforts – on proposed amendments and with regard to all SBNC pre- and post-election publicity in general – should begin with but not be limited to the SBNC website and include other means such as announcements in PTA eblasts, press releases to local online news media, posting on social media, outreach to other community organizations, and the development of an SBNC mailing list starting with the existing contacts in SBNC's files (e.g., past and present SBNC members, donors, and prospective SBNC and Board of Education candidates).

Among other items mentioned in prior consensus statements, LWVS reiterates its rationale for and recommendation that the SBNC AC seriously consider adding an amendment to allow the use of drop boxes for the collection of completed mail-in ballots at the polls. LWVS strongly encourages next year's SBNC AC to move forward with that discussion and to conduct a full review of the efficacy of prior amendments.

3. Recruiting Candidates for the SBNC Election

As described during the presentation, candidate recruitment efforts started in the fall and included announcements at several PTA meetings and PTA and SMS events, press releases in Scarsdale10583.com, posts in neighborhood Facebook groups, and submissions in the PTA weekly eblasts. LWVS commends the SBNC AC for reviving the practice of in-person attendance at PTC/PTA and school events to raise awareness and for its “three touch” approach to messaging. LWVS also commends the SBNC AC members for conducting extensive personal outreach through direct phone calls and emails. Unfortunately, as expressed by the election chair during the information session, interest in serving on the SBNC appears to have waned, perhaps because there was no particular controversy motivating residents to join the committee at this time.

While LWVS acknowledges the difficulties in recruiting candidates for the SBNC, LWVS notes that in this year's election, none of the five elementary school districts had a fully-contested election (i.e., two or more candidates per vacancy), only one district (Fox Meadow) had a partially contested election (i.e., less than 2

candidates per vacancy), and neither Heathcote nor Quaker Ridge had sufficient candidates to fill all vacancies. In addition, for the first year since the elimination of the three-year staggered term system, Greenacres did not have any open seats and nobody from that election district cast a ballot with regard to the proposed amendments to the SBNC Resolution.

LWVS continues to strongly encourage the SBNC AC to maintain the goal of fully-contested elections (i.e., two or more candidates per vacancy) in order to provide voter choice and ensure a democratic process in the SBNC election, a process wherein nonpartisan SBNC members are elected by the voters. The ideal of a fully-contested election has been the central democratic part of the SBNC process. While there may be individual elections or periods of time when contested elections are not possible, LWVS affirms that this aspirational goal should remain.

4. Election (Pre-Election Publicity, Election Brochure, Polling, Tabulation, Voter Turnout)

The SBNC AC chose not to mail an election brochure or postcard, due to time and finance considerations. At the same time, members of the SBNC AC have acknowledged that there is a lack of understanding in the community of what the SBNC does. LWVS supports and promotes informed citizenship and views the election brochure as the SBNC AC's most effective tool of community outreach for purposes of raising awareness of the SBNC's and the SBNC AC's roles and of the date, time, and place of the SBNC election. To that end, LWVS emphasizes the continued importance of ensuring that full candidate biographical information and any proposed Resolution amendment information be made accessible to the public in multiple formats, including a mailed brochure. While LWVS understands the costs of producing and mailing a brochure, the benefits are considerable, including educating residents about the SBNC. In the absence of the Scarsdale Inquirer, reaching all residents through some mechanism becomes all the more important.

LWVS suggests that the SBNC AC:

- Resume mailing a full brochure with candidate biographies to residents within the Scarsdale School District, and
- Create/utilize an SBNC mailing list (as described in Section 2) as an additional way to communicate with voters.

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Signage around the polling site was absent, in contrast to prior years. LWVS encourages the SBNC AC to look into past practice of coordinating with the SMS custodial staff and take steps to ensure that “vote here” type signs are posted wherever allowed on the day of the election in high visibility areas to catch the attention of passers-by.

LWVS commends the SBNC AC for staffing the polling site and ensuring the integrity of the process by verifying eligibility when confronted with confusing voter rolls. LWVS suggests notifying the School District census officer of the problems identified, exploring the possibility of obtaining an electronic, sortable voter roll or a better organized hard copy, and discussing how the voter roll confusion may be addressed in the future.

Voter turnout for this year’s election was at an all-time low, as reflected in the table below, and yielded zero participation through mail-in ballots. The election chair suggested that one possible cause was that this year’s election did not coincide with a large draw speaker event at the Middle School, which typically allows for greater voter turnout, though it was scheduled intentionally to overlap with an SMS 7th Grade band concert. When contrasted with the voter turnout trends for the CNC election, the SBNC’s lack of contested elections, the limited awareness and publicity surrounding the change to the traditional timing of the election, and the relatively short time period prior to the election when the mail-in ballot was made available on the SBNC website cannot be ruled out as contributing factors.

The following table is included as a means of tracking voter turnout trends historically:

	12/2024	1/2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Edgewood	*13(0)	*70 (?)	41 (5)	+130 (22)	+(119)	*21 (?)	*25 (?)	96 (?)	+39 (?)	*22 (0)	+34 (5)	+50 (17)	58 (6)	101 (?)	65 (?)	92 (?)
Fox Meadow	+31(0)	*10 (?)	*39 (1)	103 (17)	+(151)	*26 (?)	*38 (?)	+161 (?)	107 (?)	+69 (5)	*107 (93)	85 (36)	73 (24)	138 (?)	+84 (?)	+90 (?)
Greenacres	**0(0) ¹	*54 (?)	+115 (44)	+83 (4)	+(149)	*19 (?)	*61 (?)	*46 (?)	+115 (?)	*23 (4)	+41 (10)	92 (29)	+49 (6)	76 (?)	103 (?)	69 (?)
Heathcote	*8(0)	*32 (?)	*17 (5)	*31 (5)	*(32)	*37 (?)	+73 (?)	+101 (?)	*20 (?)	*30 (4)	73 (21)	85 (19)	+42 (19)	108 (?)	+31 (?)	74 (?)
Quaker Ridge	*11(0)	*22 (?)	85 (109)	101 (21)	(104)	*34 (?)	*43 (?)	*56 (?)	+74 (?)	*30 (0)	*42 (5)	78 (34)	57 (6)	+105 (?)	98 (?)	91 (?)
TOTAL (mail-in)	63(0)	147 (42)	461 (164)	448 (69)	(555)	137 (?)	240 (?)	460 (?)	355 (?)	166 (13)	297 (134)	390 (135)	279 (61)	528 (?)	381 (?)	416 (?)

Data in parentheses () indicate the number of mail-in ballots

* indicates uncontested election

+ indicates fewer than twice the number of candidates for each vacancy

** indicates that no candidates ran for election in that unit

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¹ This table reflects voter turnout numbers as tabulated and reported by SBNC AC. LWVS notes, however, that several league members from Greenacres have reported that they voted in person on the proposed resolution amendments even though Greenacres did not have a dedicated collection box for those ballots.

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5. Finances and Fundraising

At the time of the information session, financial information requested for the past two SBNC AC seasons had not been made available to LWVS. Although the election chair was unable to provide unofficial estimates of SBNC AC's income or expenses, she reported that SBNC AC did receive some donations before and during the election, that there was no concern about whether there were sufficient funds to cover this year's copying costs of less than \$500, and that the SBNC AC could do more to educate the community about the school election system so that they would understand the importance of supporting it with monetary donations.

LWVS encourages the SBNC AC to:

- Create a budget every year with revenues and expenditures and create a full accounting as part of their fiduciary duties to pass along as an historical record to the incoming SBNC AC.
- Undertake whatever fundraising is necessary to afford the expenses associated with the physical mailing of an election brochure.

For reference, the chart below shows information assembled from prior years.

TYPE OF EXPENSE	12/2024	1/2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Printing (mailer)	(?)	(?)	\$1,560	^\$812	^\$731	^\$839.91	\$1,288.50	\$1,199	\$1,287	\$1,061.62
Postage	(?)	(?)	\$1,226	\$1,131	\$1,064	\$1,066.97	\$1,038.36	\$976	\$988	\$988.16
P.O. Box Rental	(?)	(?)	\$126	\$126	\$114	\$118	\$118	\$118	\$126	\$110
Web hosting	(?)	(?)	\$13	\$13	\$13	\$13	\$13	\$13	\$13	\$13
Other	(?)	(?)			#\$252				+\$3	*\$60.68
TOTAL	(?)	(?)	\$2,925	\$2,082	\$2,047	\$2,037.88	\$2,457.86	\$2,306	\$2,409	\$2,233.46

Scarsdale Inquirer ad

+ PayPal transaction fees

* Website domain

^ Postcard mailer

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6. Conclusion

LWVS appreciates the SBNC AC's stewardship of the nonpartisan school election system, an outstanding example of civic participation. LWVS hopes that the SBNC AC will view this letter as a tool to facilitate discussion of strategies for continuing to improve the system. LWVS respectfully requests the dissemination of this statement to all members of SBNC and SBNC AC for their consideration and thanks all members for their volunteer service to the community.

Sincerely,



Seema Jaggi
School Election System Portfolio Chair
League of Women Voters of Scarsdale



Heedan Chung
President
League of Women Voters of Scarsdale

Cc: Ms. Sarah Bell, 2024-25 SBNC Administrative Committee Resolution Chair
Mr. Jonathan Lemle, 2024-25 SBNC Administrative Committee Resolution Chair
Ms. Valerie Phillips, 2024-25 SBNC Administrative Committee Resolution Chair
Lisa Gans, 2025 SBNC Chair
Anne McCourt Bates, 2025 SBNC Vice Chair
Jen Zola, 2025 SBNC Vice Chair