



VILLAGE OF SCARSDALE

Open Letter to Scarsdale Community

COVID-19 Update: April 23, 2020

Dear Scarsdale Residents,

I hope you and your families are coping well and staying healthy. As we continue to be on “pause,” I am struck by what has not been on pause: the outpouring of generosity and compassion from our residents. I have heard about the PTA’s Art Drive to collect pictures of appreciation for the staff at White Plains Hospital, community members collecting clothing for needy patients being discharged from hospitals, residents sewing masks for frontline workers and medical professionals, families providing hundreds of meals for our first responders and frontline workers, students and teachers collaborating to 3D print masks for hospitals, as well as residents raising money and collecting supplies for those who struggle for access for the most basic of human needs. I have only highlighted a few examples of an extensive list of acts of goodness and love. Coretta Scott King once said, “The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.” Scarsdale, thank you for your extraordinary compassion, generosity, and magnanimity. We live in a great community and that is because of you, our residents. Keep doing what you are doing. We will get through this together.

Recreation

Westchester County announced that it is: (i) working to hold Bicycle Sundays on the Bronx River Parkway in May; (ii) reopening two of the County’s six golf courses as of Saturday, Mohansic and Hudson Hills; and (iii) opening marinas. The County Executive believes, as I do, that providing recreational opportunities inclusive of social distancing is important for residents’ health and well-being. Please continue to social distance while enjoying the nice spring weather. The County Executive stated that he will continue opening recreational facilities for public enjoyment as conditions permit, having cautioned that keeping them open requires public respect for social distancing mandates.

Land Use Boards

The Village is working to get the Land Use Boards - the Planning Board, the Zoning Appeals Board and the Architectural Review Board - back in service to residents via teleconference. Please look for announcements that are expected shortly.

NYS COVID-19 Antibody Testing

The NYS Department of Health has started antibody testing to assess the percentage of the population that has contracted COVID-19 and developed antibodies, which may impede reinfection. The State intends to test 3,000 randomly selected people per week. This is an

important tool to resume more normal activities and to reopen our economy. As Governor Cuomo stated, “Any plan to start to reopen the economy has to be based on data and testing, and we have to make sure our antibody and diagnostic testing is up to the scale we need so we can safely start to get people back to work.”

Village Budget

The Village Board is scheduled to vote on adoption of the Village budget on Tuesday, April 28, in accordance NYS requirements that Villages adopt budgets by May 1. A couple of high-level points about the budget I would like to make first. Village taxes represent only 18% of the total real estate taxes paid by Scarsdale residents – School (65%) and County (17%) taxes represent the remainder. I was speaking with the mayor of another Westchester village last week and he made a comment that resonated with me, “Residents understand village taxes very well because the benefit of the tax dollars come right back to them.” I admit that I hadn’t thought of village taxes in that way before, but the mayor is correct - we receive the benefit of the services we pay for, including police and fire protection, sanitation, parks, recreation, paved and plowed streets, and much more. Nobody likes to pay more taxes and the Village Board works hard every year to manage tax burdens, balancing those burdens with the service levels we enjoy.

The current public health crisis and its economic impact have only intensified the Board’s focus on managing the Village budget. While our top priority has been, and must continue to be, the health and safety of our community, the fiscal health of Scarsdale is always atop our priorities. That is why steps have been taken since February to ensure we are prepared. We have run initial scenario analyses and identified funding to protect us from the short-term threats associated with current economic conditions. We have also identified funding that has allowed us to responsibly lower the tax burden initially proposed in the budget. And, we have repeatedly affirmed our commitment to review our finances regularly and make as many budget revisions as needed as the pandemic unfolds. Our actions to date and into the future will be from an informed position, with the latest data and best visibility possible. We have taken quick, decisive action. We will not take actions out of panic or fear. And, we will certainly not make decisions based on any political interest. That is not who we are as a community. On the contrary, we have a long history of responsible, long-term financial stewardship that we will not abandon.

The Village has the ability to revise its budget continually throughout the year. As we work through the pandemic and gain better visibility, services and projects will be reevaluated. If we need to cut services in the future, we will do so carefully, thoughtfully, and with community input. Decisions may have unintended consequences and it is our job to consider those to the extent possible, and not to act in haste. Unfortunately, some view the current situation as an opportunity to create a political divide. They advocate that the solution to reducing Village property taxes is to penalize our first responders and to ask our Village Justice to forgo his salary. This is unacceptable, especially at the time when we need our first responders more than ever. We cannot penalize first responders working hard in extraordinary circumstances, or public servants who continue to perform the job they were elected to do. Degrading our professional police, fire department, or criminal justice services is not only unconscionable but also unwise.

Rather than divisiveness or political games, I prefer to look to two non-partisan, century-old local institutions – The Scarsdale League of Women Voters and The Scarsdale Forum. These organizations attended all of the Village’s budget meetings and prepared thorough reviews of the proposed FY 20-21 Village budgets. Both organizations asked probing questions about the budget and engaged in deep and thoughtful debate before coming to independent consensus statements that support adoption of the proposed FY 20-21 Village budget.

I hope we can come together and thank our village employees for working tirelessly and putting themselves at risk for our benefit. To our finances, we will continue to be proactive and make the best decisions for all of Scarsdale. And, we will do it together.

Village Election

Please disregard the June 16 date that I listed as the rescheduled Village Election date. Apparently, we prematurely announced the date as it has not yet been solidified. Please stay tuned for the updated election date and voting instructions.

Community

Yesterday was “Chalk your Driveway to say Thank You to Scarsdale’s Heroes.” We owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to our police, fire, sanitation, water department works, Village staff, and to Scarsdale Volunteer Ambulance Corp. They are all working on the frontlines of this crisis every day. Thank you for your outstanding service and dedication. Thank you to Dara Gruenberg for this outstanding idea. My wife, Cynthia, and I were very happy to join so many others to express our gratitude. If you don’t have chalk, print a “thank you” and post it in your window. We are so very fortunate to have such extraordinary and professional first responders - thank you to all of you!

There was a recent post on Scarsdale Buzz about people saying “hi” to each other as we are walking. While we may be in the midst of a challenging and awkward time, we are inherently a warm, kind, and welcoming community. Accordingly, I would like to run with an idea brought to me by Jeannie Rosenthal, a community building contest with periodic winners, starting with the “Say Hi Challenge.” Please say hello, wave, nod or otherwise acknowledge others as we are walking, jogging or bicycling around the Village (while at appropriate social distances, please). Email me at mayor@scarsdale.com with other suggestions and I will include some suggestions in future community letters.

Closing Remarks

While I haven’t mentioned many of the recurring themes of prior letters, please continue to join together and support our community by donating blood, plasma, personal protective equipment and more to our first responders and health professionals. We have already done so much, yet the needs are still great as we fight against this virus. As the weather continues to improve, please make a point of social distancing, wearing face masks, and driving carefully. Our safety is in our hands.

As quoted in the beginning of this letter, our greatness as a community is measured by our acts of compassion towards others and towards each other. Let's continue to help where the needs are great and small and be there for one another.

I am looking forward to the time in the not-to-distant future when we are together in a park, on a tennis court, walking, at the Scarsdale pool, watching a parade in the Village Center, or enjoying our annual fireworks spectacular. Our spirit is being tested and we will come through the other side stronger, more cohesive and better.

To those who are celebrating Ramadan, we hope you have a generous holiday.

Be well and stay strong.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'MS', is positioned above the typed name.

Marc Samwick
Mayor