



VILLAGE OF SCARSDALE

Open Letter to Scarsdale Community

COVID-19 Update: April 30, 2020

Dear Scarsdale Residents,

This week, Governor Cuomo announced phased guidelines to reopen New York State. I view this news with a number of reactions: hope, joy, and trepidation, among many others. As the weather continues to improve, we want to enjoy the outdoors; we want to be active; and most of all, we crave to be social and connect with friends, family, and neighbors. We also want to rebuild, get back to work, and regain a semblance of normalcy – albeit in our continually unfolding post-COVID world.

While it feels good to look forward with hope, it is important that we acknowledge our anxiety as well. Most importantly, our future path will depend, as it has over the past weeks, on how we conduct ourselves. The coming transitional period will be sensitive and require our ongoing diligence.

Continue to listen to Governor's Cuomo's direction, as his science-based approach will provide the best opportunity for us to walk that fine line between potential disease spread and resuming our lives.

Check in on our most vulnerable, as they continue to need our friendship.

Keep practicing social distancing, though it may be inconvenient or uncomfortable.

Importantly, our future is in our collective hands, so please keep doing what we have done so well to help flatten the curve and we will more smoothly return to normalcy in our lives, hopefully soon.

We had a busy week as a Village Board, and I would like to take this opportunity to bring you up to date.

Low Income Senior Exemption Renewal Deadline Extended

Although the deadline for filing all other types of property tax exemption applications is May 01, 2020, please note that the *renewal* deadline for an important exemption available to qualifying seniors, the Low Income Senior (RP-467) exemption, has been extended by the Village Board to June 16, 2020; as required by NYS law, *new applications* for this exemption (as opposed to renewals) remain due by May 01, 2020.

Both [new](#) and [renewal](#) Low Income Senior (RP-467) Exemption applications are available online, as are the [application instructions](#).

For more property tax exemption information, please review our [press release](#).

Village Budget

The Village Board passed the fiscal 2020-21 Village budget on Tuesday evening.

Throughout the pandemic, the Village's top priority has been, and must continue to be, the health and safety of our community. The fiscal health of Scarsdale, however, also remains atop our priorities. That is why steps were taken as early as February to ensure that the Village is prepared to manage its fiscal affairs; our important work in this area has been continuous since then, as well.

Actions Taken To-Date

Village efforts were initiated quickly and decisively to implement austerity measures, having limited spending to operating costs associated with the current state of emergency, safeguarding the health, safety, and welfare of residents and Village employees. Then, we quickly moved to running initial scenario analyses based on current and projected economic conditions, including identifying the adequacy of primary and alternative funding sources necessary to support continuity of operations and appropriate service levels against a backdrop of various degrees and types of fiscal threats.

Inherent to that planning process, the Village actively sought to develop alternatives for providing fiscal relief to our residents. We were successful in that endeavor, having identified an opportunity to responsibly lower the tax burden contemplated in the initially proposed FY 20/21 budget. The tax levy increase was thus reduced to a 1.45% increase, which amounts to a \$95 annual increase in taxes based on the average Village assessed value.

Future FY 20-21 Budget Plans

Although the budget has been adopted with a reduced increase to the levy, our job is not done.

The Village Board has repeatedly affirmed our commitment to maintain aggressive surveillance of Village finances as the fiscal implications of the pandemic continue to unfold, and to amend the budget as may be necessary in response to variations from our revenue projections. Any actions taken will be from an informed position, with the latest data and best visibility possible.

We do not believe it prudent to 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 very long history of responsible, long-term financial stewardship that we will not abandon. This long-term focus on financial stability and strength is widely recognized, including the distinction achieved through our long-standing AAA credit rating, and our demonstrated

financial acumen has provided us with the financial flexibility to more effectively manage the economic impact of the pandemic than many other communities regionally and nationally.

Of note, the Village also benefits structurally from 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, as conditions may warrant. If we need to cut services in the future, we will do so carefully, thoughtfully, and with community input. Budget decisions may have unintended consequences and it is our job to consider those to the extent possible, and not to act in haste.

Non-Partisan Budget Reviews and Comparable Community Information

Personally, I take comfort in the extensive work done by two non-partisan, century-old local institutions: The League of Women Voters of Scarsdale 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 Budget. 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 asked staff to review the tax levy changes that are proposed or implemented by other Westchester villages. We selected villages because villages are all on the same fiscal timeline with the fiscal year starting on June 01. Please note that cities and towns have different fiscal years and are therefore not comparably positioned with respect to their potential to adjust to the current economic conditions. Of the 15 villages surveyed, there were four with increases below 1.5%, which includes one village below 1% and Scarsdale with a 1.45% increase. Notably, 10 of the 15 villages surveyed, or 2/3's of them, have tax levy increases of 2% or higher, with five of those, 1/3 of all villages surveyed, having an increase above 3%. Again, nobody likes to see taxes increase – neither the residents, nor the Village Board.

Nature of Village Operations

It is important to recognize that operating a village is different in many ways from operating a business. An important element to immediately note is the essential nature of much of the work that is done by the Village, featuring many services and activities that the private sector is unable to provide reliably or cost-effectively. Providing governmental services is also a hands-on endeavor, with about 75% of the costs being personnel-related. Further, a meaningful majority of personnel-related costs are subject to collective bargaining agreements, which are contractual obligations that may not be unilaterally reopened during the term of the labor contract.

The Village has a number of other costs that are fixed or relatively fixed, such as debt service, utilities, facilities maintenance, trash disposal fees, and more. To the educated eye, the picture quickly emerges that villages operate with a high proportion of fixed and quasi-fixed costs. What do we get in exchange for these relatively fixed costs? Public health, safety, and welfare – the stable delivery of essential and other services, including police and fire protection, sanitation services, road maintenance, and much more.

So, as I mentioned in last week's letter, Village residents receive direct benefit from the taxes we all pay, with a meaningful percentage of the services that we receive deemed to be essential.

Budget Summary

The Village Board will continue to be proactive and work to make, in its judgment, the best fiscal decisions for all of Scarsdale. And, we will do it together with the community to balance, as optimally as possible, the tradeoffs between costs and services delivered.

Late Westchester County Tax Payments

Two programs have now been authorized to assist property owners unable to make full payment of their Westchester County tax bill, otherwise due today, April 30, 2020.

Hardship-Based Late Fee Waiver Program

The first program, authorized by Governor Cuomo's Executive Order #202.22 and being implemented locally, waives all late fees for eligible taxpayers, including owners of single-family homes, owners of multi-family buildings of six or fewer units, and businesses, provided the taxpayer:

1. Meets the established hardship criteria; AND
2. Completes and submits, under penalty of perjury, the required Certification Form; AND
3. Remits full payment on or before July 15, 2020, accompanied by the necessary Hardship Certification Form – the completed form must accompany the payment.

For the forms and more information about either of the aforementioned late fee reduction benefits, please review *page one* of our [press release](#).

Late Fee Reduction Program

A second program authorized by Westchester County and adopted by the Village Board offers the following reduced penalty schedule for County Tax late payments, with all taxpayers (regardless of hardship status) eligible to receive the benefit automatically based on date of payment receipt:

- If paid prior to June 01: One-half percent penalty
- If paid from June 01 through July 15: 1% penalty
- If paid from July 16 through July 31: 5% penalty
- If paid during the months of August and September: 7% penalty

For more information on this program, please see our *page two* of our [press release](#).

Moving beyond Village Board actions taken this week, there are a few other matters that I would like to briefly touch on.

Census

I know I mention the census regularly, but only because of the importance of completing our census surveys. Please remember to complete your census questionnaire, which may also be completed [online](#) quickly and easily. The Census results determine the allocation of an enormous amount of federal disbursements, so please be counted to help our state, county and Village.

New York State of Health

I mention this with great frequency as well. Again, because of its importance. New York State's health exchange, [New York State of Health](#), has reopened to provide coverage for those that have recently lost health insurance. Residents must apply for health insurance coverage by May 15 and within 60 days of losing their prior coverage. For more information, go to www.nystateofhealth.ny.gov.

Communication

Communication is always a priority for our Village, but of the utmost importance at this difficult time. The Village has deployed the following tools to help keep you informed, listed in order of how frequently messaging occurs:

- [Our Twitter presence](#) (@ScarsdaleGov – which can be accessed via the Twitter app or www.Twitter.com/ScarsdaleGov). This has been an active source of community announcements and I encourage all residents to follow us on Twitter;
- [Notify Me](#) (Press Releases by subscription, but also [available online at the Village website – www.Scarsdale.com](#));
- Weekly letters to the community from the Mayor; and
- [Weekly Updates to Our COVID-19 Webpage on the Village website](#).

People regularly ask where they can get more information from the Village. Please forward this letter to your friends and neighbors and ask them to follow the Village on Twitter and to sign-up for [NotifyMe](#) on the Village website. NotifyMe is a powerful tool to help people stay informed.

Community

Last week, we implemented the “Say Hi Challenge,” as recommended by Jeannie Rosenthal. We continue to seek community-building ideas. I heard from Jeannie again this week. This time, she conveyed an idea from a former neighbor, Kasama Star. We are benefitting from the hard work and diligence of workers we do not regularly recognize – our grocery and delivery workers. These

dedicated people are keeping our stores filled and are delivering us food and essential items (as a lighter aside, please post any known sources of paper towels or toilet paper on social media). Please make cards or write notes for our grocery and delivery workers that they can post in their stores or vehicles to remind them that they are appreciated and that we are thinking of them.

I hope you enjoyed the flyover on Tuesday that honored our healthcare and first responder heroes. It was very meaningful to see our military acknowledge our local heroes.

Email me at mayor@scarsdale.com with other community-oriented ideas and I will include some suggestions in future community letters.

Closing Remarks

As we enter May and begin to think about returning to a more normal routine, please take time to appreciate small things that we often overlook. This time of restrictions has also been a time for us to open ourselves to things that we have previously taken for granted. While it is very hard to say that there are silver linings to this pandemic and the losses it has inflicted on us, we can take some of these new-found perspectives with us as we return to fuller, more harried lives.

I have become more profoundly aware of my appreciation for genuine human interaction. I know that I will hold onto the joy I will have when walking into a room and seeing friends and neighbors together in the same space. We were always told that every cloud has a silver lining. Well, this is one of the darkest clouds we have seen as a society and I believe that it also holds the biggest silver lining that we may ever see – deep appreciation and genuine gratitude for one another.

Please stay safe, social distance, and be well.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Marc Samwick', with a stylized, cursive flourish.

Marc Samwick
Mayor