

Remarks of Jon Mark
to the
Scarsdale Citizens Nominating Committee
December 13, 2015

The purpose of my being here this evening is to share my thoughts with you on what I believe are the qualities this Committee should consider in searching for nominees for the positions of Village Trustee. Before focusing on that topic, I am going to take a moment to share my thoughts on our Non-Partisan system of which this Committee is the key operating body. I think commenting on the system puts into context the discussion of the qualities of the individuals to be chosen by this Committee.

From time to time, the wisdom of the non-partisan system has been questioned and in some years has been attacked. Critics have argued that a more traditional partisan approach to win elective office might result in a more effective governance structure by producing elected officials forced by a process to take positions on Village issues.

I respectfully disagree with views of this sort for the following reasons, among others:

The types of issues our municipal government generally addresses are not ones that are driven by political debates. The municipal government is charged with providing basic services: police, fire, maintenance of Village roads and property and sanitation. It also plays a role through zoning and other ordinances in overseeing the physical character of the Village and providing other desired services such as the Village Library.

To accomplish these tasks, the municipal government is charged with establishing a budget and setting local tax rates to raise the funds necessary for Village operations and capital improvements. The tax rate set by the Village Board also is also implicated in the Board of Education budget process although that Board operates independently of the Village Board.

In my mind there is little political debate that can profitably be brought to bear on these sorts of municipal matters. While there can be differences of view as to the scope and priority of the services to be provided or the amount of oversight to be given, these are not political debates. To take a matter that was considered several years ago as an example: whether or not changes should be made in the Village Code provisions governing Scarsdale's emergency generator law is not a discussion that breaks down on democratic or republican lines. Rather, considerations of safety, noise, aesthetics and fairness to Village residents are the focal points which drive the current discussion and which will ultimately be reflected in whatever action is taken.

Similarly, in deciding municipal budget issues, there is always a debate as to how precious tax dollars should be allocated among needed operational costs and between operational and capital expenditures. Presently, the Village Board is being asked to consider issuing a bond in a substantial amount to provide funds for an ambitious Library renovation and upgrade. A perennial, strongly communicated issue is the desire to

repave and repair more miles of road. These are not democratic or republican issues. Rather, these issues are balanced during the course of the annual budget process against other Village priorities such as storm water management, sewer maintenance and the like and the Board, with guidance from the Village staff exercises its judgment and deciding what budget allocations to make.

Secondly, the Mayor and the Village Board do not run the municipal operations of the Village. The Village staff does that job – and they do it very well. We are fortunate to have an experienced Village Manager, and a very able staff, that perform the tasks necessary day in and day out to keep the Village and the services it provides functioning. They are not perfect and the Board is very much aware of issues which trigger resident dissatisfaction. But even with the dissatisfaction that is expressed, the overwhelming evidence is that our Village is very well run as reflected by the continuing desire of many residents to remain here long after their children have completed school, and the arrival of new residents. My point being that it is the Village staff that keeps things running day-to-day. I see no basis for concluding that, a partisan system of electing officials overseeing Village staff work would bring any benefits how the Village staff carries out their day-to-day duties.

What the Mayor and the Village Board do in general terms is to oversee the staff; establish spending priorities through the budget process, appoint residents who express interest to the various Village Boards and Councils; and focus on areas of resident dissatisfaction with services and consider how improvements might be made.

In short, given the nature of the municipal issues to be addressed I am not convinced at all that a partisan system would produce a better governance structure than the one we have. Further, I could make the argument that under a partisan system elected officials could easily find themselves beholden to those who put them in office to the detriment of those who voted for their opponents. Such a dynamic could easily undercut the very strong principle that when acting, the Board must consider the interests of all residents when deciding on a course of action and not just those interests that put them in office. The ability of Board to approach issues without the pressures of partisanship gives it the freedom to balance competing concerns in exercising its judgment on the matters before it. It does not mean that the Board is always right. It does not mean that every resident is happy with every Board decision. It does mean that every resident who wishes to voice an opinion to the Board is heard and his or her comments are weighed in the balance. That openness of approach – the willingness to hear all sides of an issue -- is not something that I am convinced a partisan system would produce, much less improve.

Thus, I come to the reason for my being here today. In light of what I have just said, I believe that the characteristics to look for in a Trustee include the following:

- A willingness to listen to others – to residents, to staff, to fellow Board members.
- A willingness to work with others.
- A willingness to inform oneself on the issues presented – to do the homework

A willingness to make the commitment of time and effort to do the job properly.
In this regard I note that

The Board meets twice a month, 12 months a year.
The eight Committees of the Board meet more frequently and all Board members are expected to attend Committee meeting sometimes resulting in as many as four meetings in a given week
On a rotating basis, a Trustee reviews all Village bills and check authorizations every two weeks.

A willingness to exercise judgment – and to express that judgment to those affected by it.

A willingness to act professionally and courteously to residents, staff and fellow trustees.

A willingness to act in the best interests of all residents as I have previously explained.

Thank for your attention and best of luck in your search and deliberations.