

**May 15, 2014**

**THE SCARSDALE FORUM, INC.**

**Report of the Sustainability Committee  
on  
The Village of Scarsdale Leaf Collection Practice**

The Sustainability Committee (the “Committee”) proposes the following resolution for the adoption by the Forum:

**RESOLVED**, that the Report of the Committee on the Village of Scarsdale Leaf Collection Practice be approved.

**Summary**

The Committee urges the Village of Scarsdale, starting in fall 2014, to require leaves and grass-clippings to be bagged or mulched year-round, to heavily promote leaf mulching on an on-going basis, and to eventually eliminate leaf pickup by the Village. This new practice would result in significant cost savings to Scarsdale taxpayers, would be easy to implement, better for the environment, and based on the experience of several neighboring towns, would be accepted by the community.

**Preliminary Statement**

Each year the Village of Scarsdale spends approximately \$750,000 collecting and disposing of autumn leaves.<sup>1</sup> Despite the best efforts of Village Staff, until leaves are collected they remain on the roads and sidewalks, obstructing traffic, blocking storm drains, and creating a safety hazard to pedestrians and vehicles. Collecting and transporting leaves rather than using them as a valuable resource is also an environmentally harmful practice. Carbon emissions from trucks making numerous trips back and forth to dispose of the leaves in upstate New York, Rockland County and Connecticut, unnecessarily pollutes the air. Removing leaves depletes our ecosystem of vital nutrients and organic matter. Piling leaves leads to flooding from blocked storm drains, causing unsafe levels of phosphates and carbon in our water. By continuing to collect un-bagged autumn leaves, Scarsdale is promoting both a fiscally unsound and an environmentally unsustainable practice.

The good news is that there is a better way. The immediate solution is twofold: Scarsdale needs to amend the Village Code to require leaves and grass clippings to be bagged year-round, and must heavily promote the on-site mulching of leaves and grass clippings. On-site leaf mulching is the practice of finely shredding leaves by mowing over them and leaving them on the lawn where they then dissipate into the soil. Mulching of grass clippings (“grasscycling”) is

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<sup>1</sup> Fall leaf collection costs are expected to rise to approximately \$800,000 next season as per the 2014/2015 Adopted Budget Scarsdale. See <http://www.scarsdale.com/Portals/0/Treasurer/Adopted%20Budget%202014-15.pdf>

merely leaving grass clippings on the lawn after mowing. For more than two years many of our neighboring communities have discontinued the practice of picking up loose leaf piles, and have required instead that leaves be bagged or containerized for pickup. At the same time residents and landscapers in these towns have been encouraged to mulch on-site instead of disposing of their leaves. Mulching on-site is friendlier to the environment, should be neither harder nor more costly to a homeowner than traditional landscape care and has the potential for significant cost savings to our Village. As Scarsdale continues to look for ways to reduce expenditures, requiring that leaves must be bagged or mulched is one of the few service “cuts” that could actually promote a safer and more environmentally friendly community. For these reasons this Committee is recommending that: 1) for fall 2014 implementation, Scarsdale should adopt a bagging or containerizing requirement; 2) Scarsdale should heavily promote on-site leaf mulching both leading up to fall 2014 and should continue doing so yearly thereafter; and 3) Scarsdale should, as soon as is reasonable, cease to collect year-round leaves and grass clippings.

### **Prior Steps Taken in Scarsdale to Promote Leaf Mulching**

In December 2011, the Scarsdale Board of Trustees passed a Resolution in support of the premise of “On-Site Leaf Mulching and Composting of Leaves in the Village Of Scarsdale” (copy attached).

The Resolution sets forth three main objectives: 1) that the Village should endorse and encourage “all Village property owners and residents within the Village to help reduce the costs of leaf collection and disposal by the Village and make optimal use of this rich organic resource by mulching and/or composting leaves on their own property”; 2) that the Village should encourage “all local landscapers working within the Village to implement leaf mulching techniques on their clients’ properties”; and 3) that the Village should resolve to “promote on-site leaf mulching through a public education campaign utilizing the Village website, newsletter, brochures, handouts and workshops.”

In response to the Resolution, in 2012 the Office of the Village Manager created a public education page on the Village website containing instructional video material and hyperlinks to additional online resources to encourage on-site leaf mulching by residents and landscapers; held a demonstration workshop for local landscapers to encourage the practice on residential property; and required the Village’s own landscape contractor to perform on-site mower mulching in the two designated Village owned demonstration properties in the Village center, Chase Park and de Lima Park. Beginning in 2013, the Village expanded the demonstration program to include all Village owned green space properties, including all recreation fields and passive parks. In the fall of 2013, the Forum’s Sustainability Committee created banners promoting on-site leaf mulching which were installed at the Village Hall public display signpost and at Chase Park.

These efforts have proven to be inadequate. The Village has continued its practice of weekly, labor intensive pick up and disposal of un-bagged leaves, using hand-rakes and vacuum trucks. There is no evidence that our community has widely embraced leaf mulching in any way

other than in its parks and schools<sup>2</sup>. Additional evidence that very little has changed is that the Village has in fact increased its allocation for fall leaf collection from \$750,000 per annum to over \$800,000 per annum for the 2014 season. It should be noted that this expenditure is most likely even higher during rainy fall seasons, when leaves flowing into and blocking storm drains must be cleared by Village crews.

Loose leaf piles are also hazardous. Wet loose leaves are slippery and dangerous. Children playing in leaf piles that spill into the street can risk being hit by cars driving through them. Cars parked on loose leaves risk catching on fire from the hot exhaust on the leaves. Loose leaf piles are also inconvenient and unsightly. They take up parking spaces and block sidewalks and road lanes. They are hard for Village workers to get to when cars are parked in front of them. They blow off piles and into streets and neighboring yards. If snow falls early in the season, Village snow removal crews have a greater burden to plow and haul away a combination of leaf and snow piles.

### **Leaf Bagging Policy and Success in Greenburgh**

The attached report of the Southern Westchester Energy Action Consortium Municipal Case Study: Environmental Best Practices in the Town of Greenburgh, New York (N. Orville, 2014) (“SWEAC Report”) provides a solid example of a pragmatic roadmap for the next steps in Scarsdale’s adoption of a more effective organic material collection policy.<sup>3</sup>

The Town of Greenburgh, which is comprised of six villages (Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Elmsford, Hastings-on-Hudson, Irvington and Tarrytown<sup>4</sup>) and Unincorporated Greenburgh (Edgemont, Fairview and Hartsdale), enacted an ordinance in 2012 which requires residents to bag or containerize fall leaves for pickup by the Town. This approach was adopted and put into effect in a period of well under one year in order to achieve “significant cost savings and environmental and safety benefits without resulting in a significant change in services to residents.” (SWEAC Report at 3). In just its first year of operation, the Town of Greenburgh’s progressive leaf bagging ordinance yielded significant cost savings which continued into the 2013 leaf collection season. (SWEAC Report at 4-5). Greenburgh saved \$100,000 in labor costs alone in each leaf collection season. Savings were also realized with respect to equipment and property damage, fuel usage and wear and tear on equipment. In addition to savings from the elimination of pickup services, Greenburgh also saved over \$100,000 in overtime costs during

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<sup>2</sup> All schools in the Scarsdale school district currently mulch in place as does the Village in all parks and recreation fields.

<sup>3</sup> SWEAC’s website describes itself as “a collaboration of municipalities addressing energy and other sustainability concerns in Southern Westchester. We benefit from participation from elected officials, municipal staff and/or environmental committees from the following municipalities: Bronxville, Dobbs Ferry, Eastchester, Greenburgh, Hastings-on-Hudson, Irvington, Mamaroneck (Town), New Rochelle, Rye (City), Rye Brook, Scarsdale, Tarrytown, Tuckahoe, White Plains and Yonkers and participation is growing.” It states its mission as follows: “Consortium members collaborate to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, save money for our municipal governments, residents and businesses, increase energy efficiency in our communities, promote renewable energy generation, foster vibrant local economies, and align our efforts with county, state, and federal sustainability initiatives.”

<sup>4</sup> All listed Greenburgh villages require bagging or mulching of fall leaves except for Tarrytown.

the 2012 leaf collection season across three departments (Highway, Sanitation And Repair), despite the debris cleanup from Hurricane Sandy.<sup>5</sup> (SWEAC Report at 4).

Greenburgh implemented its change in policy with little to no public outcry. This was documented by the Greenburgh Nature Center (GNC), which took telephone inquiries from Greenburgh residents regarding the new policy. The GNC took on average only five calls per week for a period of two months and according to the SWEAC Report, “[o]nce the environmental and economic rationale for the bagging requirement was explained and callers were informed of the opportunity to avoid bagging leaves through mulch mowing, callers were typically satisfied.” (SWEAC Report at 3).

In addition to significant cost savings, Greenburgh reported the following environmental and other rewards resulting from their change in policy, all of which would provide similar benefits for Scarsdale and, in particular, its Public Works department:

- Fewer leaves in catch basins to clean or cause flooding;
- Ability to prepare for snow removal operations earlier;
- Ability to use street cleaning equipment year-round;
- Reduction in equipment and property damage;
- Reduction in fuel usage, promoting a smaller carbon footprint;
- Reduction in heavy equipment wear and tear. (SWEAC Report at 5).

Greenburgh’s expeditious timeline is instructive as to how Scarsdale’s transition to a new leaf collection policy can be achieved in the next few months’ time:

#### **October 2011**

- Town council heard GNC leaf mulching presentation;

#### **December 2011**

- Town Supervisor is advised by the mayors of some villages within the Town that “their municipalities [already] require leaves to be bagged or containerized for pick-up”;
- Responses from mayors were then shared with residents of the Town, soliciting feedback from residents;

#### **April 2012**

- Public hearing scheduled to discuss a proposed change to local law to require leaf bagging or containerizing for sanitation pickup;
- Public hearing is widely publicized, rationale again articulated;

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<sup>5</sup> Westchester towns pay Westchester County a per ton tipping fee to accept their leaves, whether loose or bagged. As curbside piles tend to be more moisture laden than bagged leaves, towns which require bagging also save money with respect to the tipping fees paid to the County.

- Greenburgh Town Council adopts revision to local law to require bagging or containerizing by residents. (SWEAC Report at 3; see copy of model law attached to SWEAC Report).

Both preceding and following the change in policy, with the help of the GNC Greenburgh promoted the new program and alternatives to bagging or containerizing leaves by informing residents about on-site mower mulching techniques. The campaign included:

- Sending an educational flyer to every resident (see copy attached to SWEAC Report) explaining the change in policy and the environmental and fiscal benefits;
- Offering four free mulch mowing demonstrations with training for residents and landscapers in various local neighborhoods and parks;
- Providing free lawn signs promoting mulching via the “Love ‘Em Or Leave ‘Em” Westchester County Initiative to reduce organic yard waste (“LELE”)
- Offering a demonstration at the GNC for Spanish speaking landscapers;
- Residents were provided with GNC contact and website information;
- During September and October 2012, GNC staff fielded calls, with additional calls placed by residents to the Department of Public Works to discuss the change in policy; and
- As an ongoing reminder, the current Greenburgh Sanitation Department website page continues to post the following notice to residents:

**“IMPORTANT NOTICE REGARDING LEAF PICKUP: THE TOWN IS NO LONGER PERFORMING CURBSIDE LEAF PICKUP OF LOOSE LEAVES. RESIDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO PLACE LEAVES IN BIODEGRADABLE PAPER BAGS OR OPEN CONTAINERS FOR PICKUP.”**

The few Greenburgh residents who initially failed to follow the policy were prompted to comply when they realized that the pickup service had indeed terminated, and it was their own responsibility to remove the leaves that they or their landscapers had left in piles.

Greenburgh not only managed to communicate its new policy goals effectively to all its residents, but it did so efficiently by working with the support of the GNC, a resource which may also be available to Scarsdale. Scarsdale’s mulching outreach campaign could be further aided by Westchester County’s LELE website which provides all the necessary materials in its communications “tool kit.” See <http://www.leleny.org/p/lele-toolkit.html>.

The Committee believes that the experience in Greenburgh provides a practical template for the process Scarsdale should follow to transition to new policies and procedures for fall leaf collection, and eventual phase in of mandatory on-site leaf and grass mulching.

The Committee would also like to point out that New Rochelle and Irvington recently announced leaf bagging requirements effective for the fall 2014 season. There are now 10

municipalities within southern Westchester County, representing 65% of its population,<sup>6</sup> which have successfully instituted a fall leaf-bagging or containerizing requirement: Unincorporated Greenburgh (Edgemont, Fairview and Hartsdale), Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Elmsford, Hastings-on-Hudson, Irvington, Rye, New Rochelle, Mount Vernon and Yonkers. (see spreadsheet annexed hereto)

### **Current Village Practice and Proposed Changes**

The Village's fall leaf collection procedure continues to require crews over a period of many weeks in autumn to rake, vacuum and make multiple transportation rounds to dispose of leaves. The Village Code and Sanitation rules continue to permit leaves to be "raked to the area between the curb or pavement edge and property line for collection by Department of Public Works crews. Bagged leaves will be collected with yard organics." In the 2011/2012 Adopted Budget, Scarsdale allocated \$742,125 towards its fall leaf collection (cited in Fiscal Affairs Scarsdale Committee on the 2014-15 Village Budget, dated March 4, 2014, "Forum's 2014-15 Budget Report"). In the 2013-2014 fall season Scarsdale spent \$759,587 on leaf collection. And in the 2014-2015 Adopted Budget, Scarsdale allocated \$804,782 towards its fall leaf collection.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Village's website acknowledges the many environmental and economic benefits of the practice of on-site leaf mulching<sup>8</sup>:

- Significant reduction in the costs to the Village for fall leaf collection and disposal;
- Reduction of localized flood risk resulting from clogged storm drains, as well as diminishment of the cost to the Village to clear clogged storm drains;
- Reduction of the traffic and pedestrian hazard caused by piles of leaves in roadways;
- Reduced phosphate runoff into our waterbodies;
- Improved quality and health of turf, as on-site mulching improves the capacity of soil to absorb water and germinate seed;
- Improved resiliency of turf and plantings;
- Virtually free, high-quality, nutrient-rich and attractive mulch for lawns, gardens and planting areas; and
- Reduced noise and air pollution from leaf blowers.

Despite these positive cues promoting on-site mulching, and the potentially large financial incentive to the Village, little progress has been made. The failure to motivate residents and their landscapers to adopt better practices underscores the inadequacy of

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<sup>6</sup>2010 U.S. Census Bureau, secondary source of local municipal data available online at [http://planning.westchestergov.com/images/stories/Census/populationdensity2000\\_2010.pdf](http://planning.westchestergov.com/images/stories/Census/populationdensity2000_2010.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Information obtained from the office of the Village Manager.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that some of the benefits of eliminating loose leaf piles can also be obtained through bagging leaves.

past efforts to communicate information to the community about both the benefits of mulching and the unsustainable costs of maintaining the current municipal practices.

This Committee therefore urges the Village to take the following next steps, similar to those taken by other municipalities in Westchester, to ensure the realization of these goals.

The first phase, to be adopted immediately and implemented no later than fall 2014, requires bagging or containerizing autumn leaves and all-season grass clippings. Currently the Village Code (available online) provides instructions to residents regarding the proper, **non-autumn** disposal and pickup procedures in its 2014 Sanitation & Recycling Schedule and the 2014 Yard Waste Collection Schedule: "Leaves, grass clippings and other organic material shall be placed in biodegradable paper bags, not weighing more than fifty (50) pounds. Limit of six (6) bags per collection." These instructions are equally applicable to the fall protocol, and should be incorporated into phase one of the Village's new leaf collection practice.

The second phase requires eliminating all pickup of leaves and grass clippings year-round, whether or not bagged or containerized. This will allow the Village to both fully realize cost savings, and incentivize residents to mulch their leaves and grass clippings year-round. The Committee does not recommend a target date for the implementation of this second phase. Rather, the Committee recommends that the Village should first focus on phase one, and in particular on continued education and advocacy for on-site leaf mulching and grass-cycling, as well as utilizing whole leaves to support our ecosystem. This education and outreach should continue year after year until the ultimate goal of on-site mulching is realized. The Committee's hope is that the aforementioned phase one bagging requirement, along with significant outreach regarding the benefits of on-site leaf mulching, will cause residents to mulch in increasing numbers. If this result does not materialize at most within two to three fall seasons following phase one implementation, the Committee recommends that the Village should proceed to eliminate fall leaf pickup entirely as a means of ensuring that residents will mulch their fall leaves.<sup>9</sup>

The Committee welcomes any additional outreach the Village might undertake to familiarize residents with the implementation of these progressive new collection and leaf mulching/grasscycling policies and procedures. We encourage the Village to continue dissemination of pertinent information to residents on the Village website. Additional beneficial ways to inform residents and promote public support of the new regulations should include scheduling an immediate public meeting on this issue, making robocalls,

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<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that if fall leaf pickup were to be eliminated, residents would still have the option of having their leaves taken away by their landscapers. The Committee, however, is not promoting this wasteful practice.

providing free, temporary lawn signs, installing banners at high visibility locations throughout the Village and sending a mass mailing to residents about the benefits of the program. We believe these and any other steps deemed necessary for public notice and education should be taken immediately to ensure the initial implementation of the new policies and procedures by fall 2014.

This accelerated implementation schedule is achievable. It is consistent with the rapid pace of implementation which was successfully realized by Greenburgh two years ago and more recently by New Rochelle and Irvington. It is now timely for Scarsdale to graduate from the piecemeal promotion to the vigorous adoption of on-site mulching, and to make implementation of the practice a top priority.

### **Conclusion**

The view of this Committee is that the time has come for the Village to amend the Village Code by implementing a more cost-effective and environmentally friendly leaf collection and bagging practice, and to encourage residents to mulch and thereby use the abundance of fall leaves as a natural resource, instead of treating it as waste to be disposed of.

The recommendations of the Forum's 2014-15 Budget Report (citing one of its own previously issued reports), are in accord with our view:

“We join members of the Forum’s Sustainability Committee in encouraging the Village to adopt these changes. The annual leaf pick-up program will cost the Village \$750,000 for the coming year. We propose that the Board of Trustees require that all homeowners bag leaves. These leaves would be placed in recyclable bags and placed at the homeowners’ curbside for pick-up. This is the same requirement, which has been in place in the Town of Greenburgh for the past two years. Supervisor Paul Feiner, of the Town of Greenburgh, has reported that this program is currently saving his Village over \$100,000 per year. We believe that the savings for the Village of Scarsdale would be greater than those seen by the Town of Greenburgh. Furthermore, we believe that this change may encourage more mulching in the Village.”

In addition, at a joint Meeting of the Whole with the Board of Trustees on February 25, 2014, a majority of the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Scarsdale Parks, Inc. endorsed the immediate implementation of a similar change in Village organic materials collection practice.

In light of the current yearly allocation of over \$800,000 for fall leaf pickup services, and the practical alternatives already in use and cost savings attained by neighboring municipalities, we believe that the Village’s current leaf collection practice, and the absence of robust advocacy for residential mulching on-site, is both fiscally and environmentally unsound. We strongly recommend that the existing Village leaf collection practice should be discontinued and replaced before fall 2014 with a new regime which would, in the initial phase, require residents or their landscapers to bag or containerize autumn leaves for pick up by regular sanitation services, and

in a subsequent phase may require termination of all leaf and grass pickup by the Village. We also recommend that the Village should develop a comprehensive, ongoing educational program to promote residential on-site leaf mulching and grass-cycling. By enacting these changes to its fall leaf and grass collection practices, and by rigorously promoting mulching of organic materials, the Village can both achieve significant savings and operate in a more environmentally sustainable manner. The time to begin is now.

Respectfully submitted,

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