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## At Aquinnah Town Meeting, the Emotions Frame Museum Debate

By JULIA WELLS  
*Gazette Senior Writer*

The subject was a plan for a cultural museum in a historic homestead high on a windswept bluff in the town of Aquinnah. But the discussion that swirled for more than an hour and a half at a special town meeting Tuesday night was layered with the emotion of a town torn down the middle.

Underneath it all lay the central topic of the day: the recent court ruling on sovereign immunity for the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).

"I don't think we can disagree with the statement that this is an amazing town with amazing people and amazing history," said Derrill Bazy, who read an eloquent passage from Helen Manning's book *Moshup's Footsteps* at the outset of the meeting.

Attended by 85 voters - a huge turnout in a town where the quorum is 37 - the special town meeting was colored by the events of an hour earlier, when an overflow crowd had packed the selectmen's meeting to urge an appeal of the court decision on sovereign immunity.

Mr. Bazy and Mary Elizabeth Pratt are co-chairmen of the town community preservation committee. At the town

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meeting on Tuesday night they presented a summary of the plan for the Edwin Vanderhoop homestead.

Purchased earlier this year by the town and the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank in a joint acquisition, the homestead includes six acres and a historic house in the area known as the Circle near the famous clay cliffs.

The current plan calls for leasing the homestead to the Aquinnah Cultural Center for use as a seasonal museum. The cultural center is a charitable organization that is separate from the tribe, although all the members of the center are members of the tribe.

The plan to lease the homestead to the cultural center has the support of the town selectmen and has been the subject of several public meetings in the last six months.

This week voters were asked to approve the plan. The vote was nonbinding, but the discussion was nonetheless heartfelt, and at times emotionally charged.

Because the property is owned by the town and the land bank and was purchased with public money, any lease must go through a public bidding process. Mr. Bazy and Ms. Pratt described the plan to tailor a request for proposals (RFP) aimed at handing a lease to the Aquinnah Cultural Center.

The plan also calls for a comparatively low-key renovation of the homestead, estimated at a little over \$200,000. The homestead will also be used for town-sponsored events and may be rented out for weddings or concert events to help generate income to cover the cost of upkeep.

Community work days for projects like brush cutting and shingling are also planned.

Few voters objected to the plan for a museum, and many fondly recalled the old museum that was located at the cliffs many years ago.

Mr. Bazy and Ms. Pratt said the homestead project will be



a shared venture between the town and the cultural center.

"The ACC is made up of tribal membership, but it is a separate entity. This is going to be a cooperative venture," Ms. Pratt said.

"This is not a them and us thing, this is a joint effort, and I think it is particularly important now," Mr. Bazy said.

But some voters questioned the wisdom of turning the newly-purchased town building over to a private entity with such close ties to the tribe.

"Because it is public money you cannot exclude people, and it is my personal feeling that this excludes people. We can walk around the outside of the building, but the building itself is leased and controlled by an entity outside of the town. I am happy with the plan to do a museum as long as it is a joint venture," said Russell Smith.

"When you talk about town history, Russell, you are talking about family - particularly your family. I feel we are speaking the same language, but going about it in a different way," said Berta Welch, who is chairman of the cultural center.

"It's exciting to see all these people come out - we all worked to acquire this property for the town," began Michael Stutz, who is the town representative to the land bank. He continued:

"I think the museum is a great idea, and we should try to bring the somewhat polarized sides of this town together - and this could be an opportunity to do this. But I am a little concerned about the selectmen these days for their unwillingness to appeal the lawsuit. I hope that this is not a 99-year lease, and I hope this doesn't turn into another land claim."

Town moderator Walter Delaney quickly called Mr. Stutz out of order.

"I do think this town needs a project to bring it together. I

think that is missing, but I don't think this is the project," said Deborah Moore, who is an elected member of the Martha's Vineyard Commission from Aquinnah.

"We are taking our land bank money and converting one of our most beautiful properties into something for tourists - it seems a mistake to take all that public money and turn it into something for tourists," said John Walsh. Mr. Walsh said he would prefer to see the homestead reserved for use by town residents.

Ms. Pratt said the building is too small to accommodate multiple functions, and she pointed to a budding plan to build a community center behind the town hall.

But Mr. Walsh was undaunted.

"My preference as a town resident would be that the museum be built behind the town hall and that the prime space at the cliffs be reserved for us," he said.

Beverly Wright, who is chairman of the tribe, urged the town to use the homestead project to mend its divisions.

"This is a good time for the town to come together," she said. "When I was growing up here I was a Wampanoag and a member of this town but I don't remember the separation - we were all one. This would be a good opportunity tonight for all of you to come together. It's not going to be just Native American culture there [in the museum], it's going to be everything that's gone on since this town became a town."

Jo-Ann Eccher agreed.

"This is like a gift to us. It is a beautiful place to celebrate history and this would truly be a missed opportunity if we don't say yes tonight," she said.

In the end the town voters did say yes - overwhelmingly - to the plan for the homestead.

Voters approved seven other housekeeping articles with no





discussion, including appropriations and transfers for an array of unpaid bills, plus two large transfers from the town community preservation fund.

When it was all over, the town moderator applauded the work of the voters.

"This has been the most interesting discussion I have ever heard at a town meeting in all my years as moderator," Mr. Delaney said.

Originally published in The Vineyard Gazette  
edition of Friday, December 5th 2003

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