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Aquinnah Fails to Pass Override; Budget Faces Cutback of Ten Per Cent

By JULIA WELLS
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Voters in Aquinnah dealt a heavy blow to the town selectmen this week, rejecting a \$260,000 Proposition 2 1/2 override and sending a tough message about government spending that reverberated around the Island.

The general override failed by three votes in a special town election held Wednesday afternoon.

The final tally was 40-37 against the override.

Five separate override questions for a hefty spending package relating to emergency services in the town were all approved, but an override request for \$30,000 for a new police cruiser was also rejected, 47-28.

Voter turnout was extremely light.

Selectmen must now find a way to cut \$260,000 from a \$2.4 million town budget. A special meeting has been called for Monday night, and all town department heads plus the town finance committee will be asked to attend. The meeting begins at 6 p.m. in the selectmen's room in the town hall.

Recommendations from that meeting will be brought in front of voters on Thursday, June 24, when the annual town meeting will reconvene.

"People want to reduce spending, so that's what we will do," said Aquinnah selectman and board chairman Carl Widdiss yesterday.

"I see this as the town making a statement as to where it wants to be in its financial responsibility. I don't see it as hurting the town, I see it as a good exercise for the town," he added.

"At this point I don't have any comment to make," said selectman Michael Hebert, who appeared to be stunned at the election outcome.

Last week before the election Mr. Hebert told the Gazette: "I don't even know where we would begin to try and cut \$260,000 from our budget - that's 10 per cent of our budget. If we had to comply with Proposition 2 1/2 we would probably have to discontinue just about every town service there is."

The general override was needed this year because after years of using free cash to stay under the state-mandated tax cap, this year the town found itself with no free cash. The problem was compounded by an increase in regional assessments, including a large increase in the town's share of the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School budget due to a jump in the number of students attending the high school from Aquinnah.

Most regional assessments, such as high school assessments and assessments to the Martha's Vineyard Commission, are mandatory, once they are approved by four of the six Vineyard towns.

At the annual town meeting last month there were some questions about school spending, which has skyrocketed in recent years.

The rejection of the general override came just one day after the selectmen gave a green light to the town police department to hire two new summer officers, bringing the total number of police officers in town to five. The board also gave the town community programs committee approval to hire an enthusiastic group of college students to help run a summer day camp which has been a fixture in town for many years.

The future of every town program is now uncertain.

The fiscal year begins July 1.

Voters agreed to exceed the tax cap to spend money for emergency services, including:

- * \$4,391 to pay for the town's share of operating costs for a new ambulance.
- * \$6,611 to pay the town's share of a third EMT for the next two summers.
- * \$4,067 to pay for the town's share for EMT night duty for two summers.
- * \$21,880 to pay for costs to upgrade the ambulance to paramedic level.
- * \$10,486 to pay for the town's share of training two paramedics.

Two ballot questions - a request for money to build a garage to house the new ambulance and a

request for money to buy a new tank truck for the fire department - were rejected by voters on the town meeting floor. Here voters were consistent, and both ballot questions were also rejected.

Mr. Widdiss downplayed the repercussions from the override election for Aquinnah, the second smallest town in the commonwealth.

"I don't see it as a problem, it's just an issue that needs to be resolved," he concluded.

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