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## Aquinnah Leaders Make Painful Budget Choices After Failure of Override

By JULIA WELLS  
*Gazette Senior Writer*

Swinging the proverbial budget ax, selectmen and town department heads in Aquinnah took their first whacks yesterday at trying to cut \$260,000 from a \$2.4 million town budget.

"We're here tonight to try and come up with some cost savings," declared Aquinnah selectman and board chairman Carl Widdiss.

Mr. Widdiss chaired a strategy meeting called by the selectmen following a special election last week when voters rejected a \$260,000 override to Proposition 2 1/2, the state mandated tax cap. The general override failed by three votes, and selectmen must now find a way to reduce the town budget by 10 per cent.

For more than two hours last night the group went over the budget line by agonizing line, chipping away at an array of programs from legal protection to the police department to the library. A number of town department heads stepped forward and offered to shave dollars from their already lean budgets. The town's contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group was eliminated entirely, and proposals to reduce education spending by \$109,000 and cut or eliminate a cost of living increase for town employees are all now under consideration.

But in the end it was still not enough, and the meeting will be continued again tonight in the selectmen's room in the town hall at 6 p.m.

The final decision on how to make the cuts will rest with voters on Thursday night when the annual town meeting reconvenes. The meeting begins at 7:30 p.m. in the Aquinnah town hall.

Last night the discussion strayed beyond the subject of government spending and into a companion topic: What can the second smallest town in the commonwealth do to increase revenues?

"We're going to have a meeting to talk about that," Mr. Widdiss said.

"The exercise tonight is to cut this side - the outgoing - but if there are some ways to raise revenues before the end of next year, why not figure that out before the town meeting on

Thursday night?" said Joe Carbo, a member of the town finance committee.

More than once the discussion also turned to the subject of town fees, and whether the monetary contributions to the town from the well-funded Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) are enough.

The tribe, the only federally recognized tribe in the commonwealth, makes its home in Aquinnah. Town-tribe relations have been strained this year by the sovereign immunity case which is now waiting for arguments before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

At the outset last night, town accountant Marjorie Spitz presented the board with an up-to-date ledger showing how much money is in various town bank accounts, one week before the close of the fiscal year.

As Aquinnah faces its first budget crisis in many years, education spending is a central theme. The number of children attending the regional high school from Aquinnah jumped from nine to 13 this year, and regional assessments are up both for the high school and the up-Island regional school district, which includes the West Tisbury and Chilmark elementary schools.

Town moderator Walter Delaney proposed that the town school budget be reduced by some \$109,000. "That's the difference between last year's school budget and this year's school budget," he said.

"It's too bad no one is here from the school committee," said Ms. Spitz, who earlier had volunteered to cut \$2,000 from her own budget, possibly shortchanging a badly needed new computer system for her office.

Town membership in the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish group - a \$23,000 line item - was almost the first thing to go.

"What will the impact be if we do not participate in the shellfish group for one year?" asked selectman Jim Newman.

"They are not going to close their doors if they don't have our money," Mr. Widdiss replied.

A six-town nonprofit program that operates on a shoestring of its own, the shellfish group helps to seed the Vineyard ponds with quahaugs, oysters and scallops grown in a solar shellfish hatchery on the Lagoon Pond. The group also monitors water quality in the ponds.

The Aquinnah town report for 2003 shows that the shellfish group distributed 1.6 million seed quahaugs and more than 600,000 scallops in Aquinnah last year.

Selectmen agreed to cut \$10,000 from the legal budget for the coming year.

The town police department was also able to give up some money because of an unusual situation - Aquinnah police chief Doug Fortes has been on an extended medical leave and is now expected to retire on disability. Mr. Widdiss said he had spoken to town counsel earlier in the day and had learned that the town could eliminate most of the police chief's salary from the upcoming budget. Acting police chief Randhi Belain offered some more cuts of his own, because he will hire only two summer officers this year while the budget calls for three.

Mr. Newman and others worried out loud that the move may be shortsighted because in the long run the town will need to hire a new chief.

But the need to cut \$260,000 from the town budget has forced the selectmen into a short-run mentality.

"The police department is functioning, and we need to do something now to get us through this year," Mr. Widdiss said. Some extra money will be transferred into a special account to compensate Mr. Belain, who is the former sergeant, for his extra work.

The meeting saw moments of humor.

As he looked at a budget line item for \$16,000 for data processing, Mr. Widdiss said, "Can't we throw away all the computers and buy notebooks?"

During a discussion about utilities, one member of the finance committee asked about the new solar panels at the town comfort station.

"How is that working, have the electric bills gone down?" the committee member said.

"The electric bill has something very odd happening to it, it has a negative balance," Ms. Spitz replied.

"Sounds like it's working to me," Mr. Widdiss concluded.

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