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Aquinnah must axe \$260Gs from budget

June 24, 2004

By Nelson Sigelman

More than a month and a half after adjourning their annual town meeting, Aquinnah voters take up town meeting work again tonight. They have their work cut out for them.

Last week at the ballot box, voters rejected a Proposition 2.5 override needed to plug a \$260,000 shortfall in the town's 2005 fiscal year operating budget of \$2,459,335. The vote was 40-37.

The result sent the budget back to the chopping block in a series of meetings this week designed to trim costs where possible. Selectmen also look to raise additional revenue.

The search for funds has raised the issue of costs associated with the Wampanoag tribe, a politically delicate subject in Aquinnah where tribal and family loyalties cut across town affairs. Carl Widdiss, the chairman of the board of selectmen, is a tribal member. Selectman Mike Hebert is married to the tribal secretary.

One long-dormant issue raised by the budget crisis is the cost of educating children who live in the Wampanoag tribe's 34-unit housing complex, a cost now borne entirely by town taxpayers. The tribe, which is tax exempt, has not contributed to the town's education costs, which have risen to \$916,114.

At a meeting Monday night to discuss possible budget cuts, selectman Jim Newman suggested the town approach the tribe about helping with school costs. Any discussion was put off until a later meeting to discuss revenue ideas.

More than six years ago the town and tribe agreed to form a committee to seek outside sources of revenue to defray those costs. Nothing ever came of those meetings. The group ceased to meet, and the issue was dropped.

Reached by telephone Tuesday on her way to a meeting in Washington, Beverly Wright, tribal chairperson, said any contribution would need to be discussed between the town and the tribal council.

"I do not know how the council would react to that," said Ms. Wright.

Asked if the tribe should be contributing to the cost of educating tribal children, Ms. Wright said that the settlement agreement included a provision that the tribe not pay taxes. She noted that she is also a taxpayer in town and has no children in school yet she pays for children who are in school whether they live on tribal lands or not.

Ms. Wright said she had not thought a great deal about the issue but was willing to discuss it. "If the selectmen would like to come and talk to the tribal council we will certainly listen to them," said Ms. Wright.

On Monday and Tuesday evening, selectmen held back-to-back working

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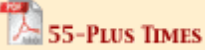
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sessions with department heads, members of the finance committee, and town employees. The goal was to come up with concrete ways to plug the budget hole and balance the budget. Carl Widdiss said that based on those discussions he would present a strategy designed to deal with the budget shortfall to voters this evening.

On Monday evening, Mr. Widdiss and Mr. Newman went through the town operating budget, chipping away at each department. The question to those present was always the same: "What can you cut?"

The town accountant said she could absorb a \$2,000 cut. The same for the treasurer. Building and grounds maintenance had \$5,000 cut out of \$36,246. Selectmen eliminated the police chief's salary line item, a budgetary sleight of hand made possible by the retirement of the police chief, that helped close the gap still further by \$61,000.

One of the first regional casualties of the town's budget crisis was the town's \$23,575 contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Regional Shellfish Group. That was cut by \$20,000.

The effort to balance the books brought a suggestion from Walter Delaney, town moderator, that the selectmen consider level funding the school budget as a way of sending school officials a message to sharpen their pencils, shaving approximately \$109,000 from the budget. That tactic was resisted by members of the finance committee and the town accountant as ultimately counterproductive.

John Walsh, finance committee (fincom) member, said the assessment was just like a bill. He said changing the town's budget would not affect the amount the town must pay.

"If we have got to find \$260,000, let's find \$260,000," said Joe Corbo, fincom member.

Also rising to the surface for the first time in years was the question of uncollected fees stemming from an agreement signed on June 5, 1995, between town and tribe officials under which the town was to provide police, fire, and medical services on tribe property in return for an annual payment. In a story published on Dec. 24, The Times reported that in the years following the signing ceremony, tribe and town leaders had largely ignored or forgotten the terms of the agreement. The tribe said it has not received a bill. Town officials disagreed over who was responsible for sending a bill.

The Times reported that in August 1999, the town received \$8,000, the last payment received.

On Monday evening, referring to the story in The Times, Peter Temple asked if the budget reflected an intent to bill and collect the unpaid fees and if not, "why not?"

Mr. Widdiss said it was his understanding that the tribe had paid in the past and the reason it had not paid was because no bill had been received.

In the conversation with The Times Tuesday, Ms. Wright said the tribe would pay once it received a bill.

Selectmen were also expected to discuss a variety of fees and revenue producing ideas. That could include charging a fee for children's summer programs and charging tour buses for parking at the popular Gay Head Cliffs.

Selectmen are expected to present a strategy to close the budget gap that combines budget cuts and an infusion of cash from the town's stabilization fund. Following Monday night's meeting, selectmen said they would meet again Tuesday, and if need be Wednesday, in preparation for tonight's town meeting.





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On Tuesday evening, selectmen agreed to forego their salaries, and discussed the possibility of closing the library and withdrawing from the Up-Island Council on Aging. Late Wednesday morning, town officials could not say with any certainty exactly how much two nights of cuts had trimmed from the budget.

In reality the annual town meeting began six weeks ago. Over the course of several hours voters approved a budget request of \$2,459,335 for the 2005 fiscal year, which begins July 1, 2004, and approved all but 2 of 16 warrant articles, including 7 Prop 2.5 questions.

The following day they went to the polls to elect town officers. That should have been the end of it, but it was not because none of the annual town meeting's Prop 2.5 questions appeared on the election ballot.

By way of explanation, town officials said they did not learn the free cash amount — zero — early enough to have the Prop 2.5 questions printed on the town election ballot.

As a result, the town was forced to hold a special election on June 16 and continue the annual town meeting to tonight.

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