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Summer Camp Cut as Voters Balance Aquinnah Budget

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Faced with the bleak prospect of shutting down the town when the fiscal year runs out six days from now, voters in Aquinnah balanced their annual budget last night by cutting salaries and expense accounts to the bone and eliminating a popular summer camp for children.

Voters also agreed to put another Proposition 2 1/2 override request on a special ballot later this month, but this time the request will be for much less money - about \$130,000. If the override is approved, some - but not all - of the cuts will be restored.

In a special town election two weeks ago a \$260,000 general override to the state-mandated tax cap was rejected by three votes. Without the override, the town budget adopted by voters at the annual town meeting in May was dead.

Last night the annual town meeting reconvened and the people of Aquinnah took up the thorny task of cutting \$260,000 from a \$2.4 million town budget. About 47 voters attended the meeting; town moderator Walter Delaney presided over the session.

It capped a marathon week of meetings with the selectmen and department heads, as they worked their way through the painful process of trying to figure out how to make deep cuts in a town budget that was spare from the start.

The meetings went for three straight nights beginning Monday.

By the time the annual town meeting reconvened last night the selectmen had prepared a budget that:

- * Eliminated their own salaries.
- * Eliminated a cost of living increase for all town employees.
- * Eliminated town participation in the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group.
- * Eliminated funding for the town resident homesite program.

- * Eliminated most of the funding for the Community Programs Committee, which operates a summer camp for town children.

- * Slashed funding for the police department.

"The obvious message from the election was that people wanted to reduce spending and firm up revenue projections - we have a workable proposal here for you to consider," said selectman and board chairman Carl Widdiss.

Mr. Widdiss thanked town counsel Ronald H. Rappaport and also town accountant Marjorie Spitz for their roles behind the scenes throughout the week, and he thanked acting police chief Randhi Belain for reworking his own budget.

At the outset Mr. Rappaport gave voters the unvarnished truth. "If you don't pass a budget tonight, as of July 1 you can't spend any money. That is just a reality," he said.

Mr. Delaney was even more blunt. "If you don't have a budget on June 30, the town shuts down," he said.

There was a game plan. Selectmen and their town counsel explained to voters that they were confronting two budgets - one that included draconian cuts and was absolutely necessary in order for the town to keep operating come next week. But there was also a second, contingency plan that restored some \$130,000 to the budget but will require an override and a new vote at a special election.

In the end both budgets were approved, but not before a two-hour discussion that saw voters become tied in knots more than once.

The first casualty of the evening was the summer camp, operated by the community programs committee.

The scheme for the meeting called for singling out community programs and preserving its operating budget through a one-time transfer from the town stabilization fund.

But the plan went off the track right away.

"The summer camp is a luxury that only this town has - a free summer camp that is paid for by the taxpayers," said planning board chairman Camille Rose. "We are the poorest town on the Island and the other towns don't have anything like this. It seems really wrong to use the stabilization fund for a luxury like this - the fund is for emergencies and to stabilize the tax rate. We're asking the police to cut their budget and we're asking the town employees to give up their

COLAs [cost of living adjustments] and it just seems terribly wrong to have this luxury program funded out of stabilization," she added.

Mr. Widdiss explained that the transfer would allow the camp to open on time next week; otherwise the camp money would hinge on the next override vote.

"July 19 is the soonest we can hold a ballot question and that is beyond the starting date of the camp. We can't have people working after July 1 unless we know that money is committed," he said, adding:

"If you want to ensure that the camp will operate, that is the only way."

Others spoke out passionately in defense of the camp, including the town accountant.

"The camp itself I think is a necessity, particularly for the lower income people who have to work and need a place for their children in the summer when nothing else is available," Ms. Spitz said.

Kristina Hook, a member of the community programs committee, said the committee had already begun to discuss charging fees.

"It's a big change for all of us philosophically - at the original town meeting we said quality of life equals who cuts down trees, well how we take care of our children is not a luxury item, it's a quality of life issue," she said.

"We don't question it about the school, we don't question it about the library, and we shouldn't question it about the summer program which is a whole different kind of education - it is creative and showing the children about the community they live in and are part of. We want them to know how to swim and the things we teach them are not luxuries, they are necessities for life," said Elise LeBovit, a member of the committee who volunteers her time to run the program.

But Ms. Rose used the speeches about children to remind voters about the reason for the override in the first place - mandatory school assessments.

"This whole meeting is about about the children. We are trying to find the money to pay this huge school budget that we have. . . . Everybody has been generous about cutting their budgets - every budget has been cut right to the bone. It is for the children, that is the reason for this meeting," she countered.

In the end the vote to save the community programs operating budget by transferring money from the stabilization fund failed by a single vote to muster a needed two-thirds majority. The

final count was 31-16.

Community programs committee members walked out of the meeting.

Finally voters approved without dissent the bare-bones budget and also the contingency budget which is still subject to an override.

"We do have a budget," Mr. Delaney said when the meeting concluded just before 9 p.m.

The moderator closed the meeting with words of praise for the town selectmen and department heads for their work.

"I feel personally as a taxpayer they did a tremendous job to go from \$260,000 to \$130,000 - it took a lot of work and I believe this is what the voters were looking for," he said, concluding:

"I do hope when you go to the polls you give some serious thought and vote in the affirmative [on the new override]. If you don't, we are going to be sitting here next year with the same circumstances."

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