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Aquinnah Camp Gets a Chance with an Anonymous Contribution

By JULIA WELLS
Gazette Senior Writer

It's a camp that has no formal name but in the last two weeks some possibilities surfaced. Camp Yes? Camp No? Camp Maybe?

"Camp Hope-So," declared Aquinnah selectman Jim Newman yesterday.

The Aquinnah town summer camp, a creative program that serves some 40 children, was eliminated by voters last week during a severe budget-cutting exercise on the town meeting floor.

Due to begin July 5, the camp was set to shut down after an emergency funding plan failed by one vote.

But by late yesterday the name had improved to Camp Definitely - at least for now.

An anonymous contribution of \$5,000 will help keep the camp open until late July, when voters in Aquinnah will decide whether to approve a \$130,000 general budget override for the coming year.

The donation will be funneled through the Permanent Endowment Fund for Martha's Vineyard, and is contingent on the fact that the camp will in fact be able to operate in the short term as a result of the money.

"We are pleased to inform you that we have received an anonymous donation of \$5,000 which we will donate to this program, provided that such a contribution will enable the program to operate until the town election," wrote Deborah L. Hale, chairman of the Permanent Endowment Fund, in a letter sent to the Aquinnah selectmen late yesterday.

"We think it's great that we can facilitate this process because we hate to see the camp end and the kids and parents lose the benefit of this program," Ms. Hale said from her office in Edgartown.

In a special town election three 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 Aquinnah voters at the annual town meeting in May was dead.

Last week the annual town meeting reconvened and the people of Aquinnah took up the difficult task of cutting \$260,000 from a \$2.4 million town budget.

The second, smaller override request will come before voters at a special election now set for July 22.

Meanwhile, town employees will go without a cost of living increase, the town police department will reduce its spending, the town library will operate with no money for new books, and Aquinnah will drop out of the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group.

"We just have to hope that the override passes. The future is predicated on the override," Mr. Newman said.

The summer camp is operated by the town community programs committee.

The annual budget for community programs is \$31,000. In addition to the summer camp, the committee sponsors holiday parties for town families at Halloween and Christmas.

After the town meeting last week the committee was left with about \$3,000 in its wage account and another \$2,000 in its expense account. Town accountant Marjorie Spitz said the money is enough to meet about one week of payroll for the camp.

A meeting of the committee will be held tonight at 6 p.m. in the Aquinnah town hall to review the short-term budget with the town accountant.

Camp director Elise LeBovit vowed yesterday the camp will open. "We're going to make it happen. We are having an open house on Thursday from 1 to 5 p.m. and camp will open on Monday," she said, adding: "We've talked to the counselors and they have agreed to stay on and work without pay for a couple of weeks if they have to."

The comments were made before news of the donation surfaced.

Ms. LeBovit takes no salary and said she puts about \$3,000 of her own money into the camp.

"It is my belief that for the peace of this town all the kids should have the same opportunity and all be together," she said. "I was really upset with what happened this week because I felt like the kids didn't have a say in what happens with the money and their budget."

The summer camp serves about 40 children, both year-round and summer residents. Admission to the camp has historically been free, although the community programs committee is now discussing charging some kind of fee.

Three weeks ago selectmen interviewed a small group of college students for counselor positions at the camp. The students were bright-eyed and enthusiastic and displayed an array of talents from lacrosse to graphic arts to CPR. Camp activities include swimming, sailing, pottery, dance and natural history field trips. Local artists and musicians are brought into the camp to do projects with the children, and during the last week of camp the older children have a wilderness experience where they live outdoors and learn survival skills, including making their own food and shelter.

The camp runs for seven weeks, with one week for training counselors and an eighth week for the wilderness program. During the final week the younger children in the camp are taken to the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society Livestock Show and Fair.

At the town meeting last week one voter said the camp was little more than a babysitting service, but Ms. Spitz said yesterday that the camp is a valuable asset and not only because it provides care for children of working parents. She recalled her own experience as a child in a summer camp on the Vineyard. "When I was a child I benefited very much from meeting kids who lived here year-round when I wasn't year-round - and friendships were established that lasted a lifetime," the town accountant said.

Mr. Newman, who is also an ex-officio member of the community programs committee, agreed.

"I think it's a good program. I've never heard anything negative in terms of children. Elise puts a lot of time into it and I think she does a very good job," he said.

Mr. Newman said if the override election fails, the camp will be forced to shut down.

If the override is approved the camp budget will be restored, along with raises for town employees and money for the shellfish group.

Ms. LeBovit said when the camp first started, its operating money came from bottle redemption and a contract for soda machines at the cliffs.

Later the town provided the camp with a modest budget.

Ms. LeBovit said she will do whatever is needed to keep the camp operating this summer. "We're going to fund raise, we're going to put out donation buckets," she said.

She countered the claim that the camp is little more than a babysitting service.

"It's pretty high-quality babysitting to have sailing and tennis and pottery and dance," she said. "We want to send the kids a message that we're not giving up, that here is something fun to do for two or three weeks and we love you and we're going to try and make it work," she concluded.

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