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In dire financial spot, Aquinnah prunes budget July 1, 2004

By Nelson Sigelman

In a somewhat confusing end to an annual town meeting that began almost seven weeks ago, Aquinnah voters last week approved a balanced annual operating budget and avoided shutting down their town government beginning today, the start of the 2005 fiscal year.

Aquinnah selectmen working with town officials managed to close the \$260,000 budget gap left when voters failed to approve a Prop 2.5 override by cutting approximately \$180,000 from the budget and revising revenue projections.

A cornerstone of the revised budget is the expectation that the Wampanoag tribe will pay a total of \$48,000 to the town for providing past and present public safety services. Selectmen, however, said little to voters Thursday about the reasons \$8,000 in annual payments for five uncollected years and the new fiscal year would now be forthcoming.

Aquinnah leaders plan to go back to the voters again with a \$130,313 Prop 2.5 override request on Thursday, July 22. The expectation is that some of the cuts needed to balance the budget will then be restored.

Hanging on the override is the future of Aquinnah's popular summer camp program, which had its budget cut in half. Members of the community programs committee, which administers the summer camp, walked out of the meeting after voters refused to fund the camp by transferring money from the stabilization account.

The camp's immediate future looked brighter this week following the news that an anonymous donor had pledged to contribute \$5,000 to help get the camp rolling next week.

In a series of meetings last week leading up to Thursday's meeting, selectmen managed to pare approximately \$180,000 from a \$2,459,335 annual budget by among other things: eliminating cost of living increases for all town employees; cutting the selectmen's salary line item from \$11,973 to \$1,973; eliminating the \$66,664 salary line item for the currently vacant position of police chief; cutting all but \$10 out of the \$10,000 resident homesite committee budget; and cutting \$20,000 out of the \$23,575 Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group assessment.

Carl Widdiss, chairman of the Aquinnah board of selectmen, began last week's annual town meeting by telling voters that the obvious message in the failure of the Prop 2.5 override was that voters want to reduce spending.

Mr. Widdiss said that while a Prop 2.5 override would still be needed, the "good news" was that the amount requested would be approximately \$130,000.

Mr. Widdiss gave credit to town officials for working diligently to pare back the budget. He explained that the selectmen would be presenting one budget built



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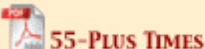
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on \$180,000 in cuts and another budget contingent on \$130,000 Prop 2.5 approval.

Bu the message town officials conveyed Thursday was clear. If voters did not approve a budget as of July 1, the start of the next fiscal year, the town could not write checks or operate.

The first order of business was a request to use the stabilization fund to pump money into the community programs account in order to get the summer programs up and running. That proposal was opposed by voters who said it was not an appropriate and proper use of the stabilization fund.

Camille Rose said Aquinnah was the only town to provide a free camp. She said the stabilization fund was not meant to fund "luxuries."

Mr. Widdiss agreed it was an improper use of stabilization monies but said it was one way to fund the camp program without waiting for a Prop 2.5 override election, something that would not happen until July 19 at the earliest.

Elise LeBovit, community programs chairman, argued strenuously that the camp program was as essential to the well being of the community's children as the school and library. Bristling at the suggestion that the camp charge a fee, Ms. LeBovit threatened to quit volunteering her services and leave the program altogether.

"The reason I work for free is so the kids can come for free," she said. "If you charge for it someone else can do it."

With a two-thirds vote needed, a vote to take the money from the stabilization fund failed 31 to 16.

With that business out of the way, voters followed Walter Delaney, town moderator, line item by line item through the adjusted budget and the contingency budget. But not without some confusion.

Peter Temple questioned how it was that town leaders had managed to balance the budget with only \$130,000 in cuts. "There is a cost adjustment and a revenue adjustment," Mr. Widdiss explained.

Marjorie Spitz, town accountant, provided a quick rundown of which departments had had revenue adjustments. Projected revenue totals from the sale of beach stickers, miscellaneous fines, tax title interest and penalties and tribal public safety payments were all revised she said. Unlike the budget cuts, selectmen provided no written breakdown of expected revenue, and no detailed explanation of what they had based their revised projections on.

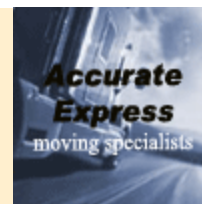
Mr. Widdiss explained that in the absence of free cash voters had the option of making significant cuts or approving an override.

"That is why we are here tonight," he said.

Free cash represents the difference, often a positive balance, between a town's budget and the amount of tax revenue raised, certified by the state Department of Revenue. It is a handy source of money for many towns.

For the past four years, Aquinnah selectmen used a free-cash cushion, which had been greatly inflated by the collection of the town's long overdue taxes, to fund the town's operating budget and blunt Prop 2.5 override requests, often at the last minute. This year, there was no free cash, only a budget without enough money to fund it.

In addition, because town officials did not learn there would be no free cash early enough to have the Prop 2.5 questions printed on the May 12 town election ballot, the town was forced to hold a special election on June 16, which left little time for town leaders to react when voters turned the override down.



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After walking voters through the budget line by line, Mr. Delaney asked for a vote, first on the operating budget as presented, then on the budget contingent on a Prop 2.5 override.

"We do have a budget," Mr. Delaney declared following voice votes in the affirmative.

Still standing at the podium, Mr. Delaney praised the work of the selectmen and department heads and urged voters to approve the upcoming override, warning them that if they did not they would face the same circumstances.

Mr. Delaney's comments urging voters to approve a ballot question, delivered immediately after he closed the meeting, were highly inappropriate, said one voter who asked not to be identified.

According to "Town Meeting Time," a handbook published by the Massachusetts Moderators Association, "The moderator may speak in the debate, but it is a great mistake to do so while presiding, unless it appears that the moderator alone is in possession of relevant and significant information of a thoroughly objective nature which ought to be imparted to the meeting. Otherwise, if the moderator must speak, he or she should step down and let someone else preside."



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