

Vineyard Gazette Online

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Aquinnah Leaders Discussing What Next After Override Fails

By JULIA WELLS

Money is tight these days in the town of Aquinnah - extremely tight - but town officials say they plan to soldier on with a drastically reduced operating budget for the current fiscal year.

For the second time in four weeks, town voters rejected a Proposition 2 1/2 override request last week.

The override failure means that town employees will go without a cost of living raise, selectmen will forfeit nearly all of their salaries and the town contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group will be slashed from \$23,000 to \$3,500.

A town summer camp for children will continue to operate thanks to a series of last-minute donations.

"I am going door to door to collect donations - we are going to cut back on some things, but we are going to make it work," said Elise LeBovit, a member of the town community programs committee who organizes the camp.

Meanwhile, town employees are watching their pennies.

"I would say that we definitely need to cut back on our expenses and as quickly as possible come up with some additional sources of revenue," said Aquinnah town accountant Marjorie Spitz this week.

Expense cuts are clear enough, but revenue adjustments are a trickier issue.

Last month after the first override failed, Aquinnah selectmen held meetings to devise a budget that would not exceed the state-mandated tax cap. The original town budget was \$2.4 million and the original override request was for \$260,000. The second override request was for \$130,000. Mandatory school assessments were way up this year due to a jump in the number of students attending the regional high school from Aquinnah.

Selectmen chipped away at some expenses - the bulk of the cuts came from the town police

department - but in order to balance the budget on paper, revenue projections were also adjusted upward on several fronts.

Parking fees for beachgoers were hiked and estimates were revised for penalties and interest collected on overdue tax and excise tax bills. The largest change in revenue projections came from money that is owed the town by the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) for emergency services provided to the tribal housing project.

The town signed an agreement with the tribe several years ago that called for annual payments to defray the cost of providing emergency services to the housing project.

Aquinnah is home to the only federally recognized tribe in the commonwealth.

There has been considerable confusion about the arrangement. Tribal leaders claim that the town never billed the tribe for the services; some town leaders say that the tribe was billed while others say they have no memory of the agreement in the first place.

But this much is now clear: In order for the town to continue to operate in the black this year, some \$48,000 must be collected from the tribe.

Town executive secretary Beverly Widdiss said yesterday that the bill went out on June 22 and to date there has been no response.

Ms. Spitz said the accuracy of the revenue projections is important.

"We're going to have to rely pretty closely on the amounts that we projected," she said.

Selectmen met this week to set a date for a special town meeting, but the date will be revised at the regular selectmen's meeting Tuesday afternoon. The meeting is now expected to be held in late September.

The warrant for the meeting has not yet been decided, but selectman and board chairman Carl Widdiss said last week that he expects it will be largely housekeeping articles.

Mr. Widdiss downplayed the town's financial problems.

"For the time being we will operate on the budget which contains some significant cuts - we're going to explore our options between now and the next regularly scheduled selectmen's meeting. In the meeting time I will talk to the [state] department of revenue and identify some options - I think we do have some options," he said. Mr. Widdiss said the options could include taking excess money from some accounts and moving it into other accounts where it is needed. "We may be able to shuffle some things around - we'll keep talking about it," he said, adding:

"The fact is that the town itself is really not in that bad a financial position." He also said:

"It's not so much about money, it's about timing and we'll keep working on it. But the town's not destitute or in bankruptcy."

Ms. Spitz had a slightly different view.

"It is tight and it may involve cutting back on services. What we really need now is a careful analysis of what we're going to do," she concluded.

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