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Aquinnah Officials Ask for Public Input on How to Raise Revenues, Hold Taxes

By JULIA WELLS

How to boost revenues without raising property taxes in the second smallest town in the commonwealth - Aquinnah selectmen will tackle the topic at a public meeting this week.

The selectmen voted to schedule the special session during their regular board meeting last week.

"The selectmen have a number of ideas about how to enhance revenues, both the short-term stuff and the long-term stuff, so we'll see what comes out of it," said Aquinnah selectman and board chairman Carl Widdiss yesterday.

The meeting is set for Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the selectmen's room in the Aquinnah town hall.

The meeting to talk about revenues has been under discussion for several months.

The discussion took on more urgency this summer after a general override to Proposition 2 1/2 was rejected twice by town voters at separate special town elections.

The town will now operate on a shoestring budget for the remainder of the fiscal year; among other things town employees will get no cost of living raise and selectmen have forfeited their salaries.

On a related topic, Mr. Widdiss said the selectmen also turned their attention to an old memorandum of understanding between the town and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). Signed by the town selectmen and tribal leaders in 1994, the agreement was aimed at softening the financial impacts on the town from the tribal housing project. Construction on the housing project was about to get under way when the agreement was signed.

The agreement called for an advisory committee to be set up that included one member of the Martha's Vineyard Commission, a representative from the superintendent of schools and also the local school committee.

The advisory committee was apparently never formed, and the memorandum of understanding became a forgotten document.

The memorandum surfaced again this year when the town faced a budget crisis after the first override failed at the ballot box.

Last week selectmen said they would reconstitute the advisory committee and also revive the notion of finding some kind of outside funding source to help defray municipal expenses, which are on the rise. The bulk of the budget increase in Aquinnah this year can be tracked to a jump in regional school assessments - the number of high school students from Aquinnah went from nine to 16.

"We're going to reform the advisory committee and maybe this will help to address some of the ongoing issues between the town and the tribe," Mr. Widdiss said yesterday.

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

The tribe is involved in a much-watched court case over sovereign immunity that began last year.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court is now set to hear arguments in the case on Sept. 8. The case will ultimately test the strength of a historic 1983 land claims settlement agreement signed between the town and the tribe.

Mr. Widdiss said Jim Newman, another selectman, will serve as the board's appointed member of the advisory committee. The committee will include a spokesman from the tribe, and Mr. Widdiss said letters will be sent to the MVC and Vineyard schools superintendent Kriner Cash inviting them to make appointments to the committee.

The decision to revive the advisory committee and heed the old agreement was hailed by Peter Temple, a member of the town planning board who regularly attends the selectmen's meetings.

"The selectmen have made a significant decision that can have tremendous impact on the future of our town," Mr. Temple said, adding: "We probably won't see any benefit for a year or more, but by working together the town and the tribe can combine their political clout and will hopefully get some changes made at the federal and state levels that will permanently relieve the financial pressure on the town."

Mr. Widdiss concurred. "I think it's a good thing - any number of positive things can come out of this," he said.

The first meeting of the committee has been scheduled for Sept. 15 in the selectmen's room in the town hall.

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