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September 23 - 29, 2004 Edition
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Aquinnah special includes override request - or not *September 23, 2004*

By Nelson Sigelman

Despite two earlier losses at the ballot box, Aquinnah leaders planned to return to voters for a third time with a Proposition 2.5 override request at a special town meeting set to convene at 7 pm Tuesday. But less than one week before the meeting it now appears likely Aquinnah officials will punt.

Although selectmen had planned to go before voters with the Prop 2.5 override Tuesday night on town meeting floor, they had not set a date for voters to go to the polls and vote on the \$113,731 override.

At a selectmen's meeting Tuesday night, town officials discussed the advantages of scheduling a Prop 2.5 vote immediately following a town meeting. There is now discussion about delaying Tuesday's town meeting so that an election can immediately follow. (No decision will be made until Monday night when the selectmen meet with the town finance committee.)

That is common practice for deciding on ballot questions in most towns but has not been the case in Aquinnah for several years, due to the inability of the town to have its finances in order prior to the annual town meeting.

This year, 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 rejected a request to close a \$260,000 gap in the town's 2005 fiscal year operating budget of \$2,459,335. That vote was 40-37.

Town officials took their paring knives to the budget, eliminating cost of living adjustments for town employees, the town's contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Regional Shellfish Group, a police position, and other town expenses, including selectmen salaries. By cutting approximately \$180,000 from the budget and revising revenue projections, selectmen managed to begin the fiscal year on July 1 with a balanced budget and avoid a shutdown of town government.

Selectmen also promised to find ways to raise additional revenue. All to no avail as far as voters were concerned.

In a special town election on July 22, Aquinnah voters rejected a whittled down Prop 2.5 request of \$130,313. The final vote tally was 75-56 against the override.

The supplemental budget article that might be put before voters Tuesday includes money to provide cost of living increases for town officials, \$10,000 in selectmen's salaries, \$2,000 for general town expenses, and \$10,000 for legal counsel.

In a telephone conversation prior to the Tuesday night selectmen's meeting, Carl Widdiss, chairman of the Aquinnah board of selectmen, said selectmen had no choice but to go back to the voters.

"I think it is important for the town to have the financial resources to run at a



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reasonable level," said Mr. Widdiss.

He said that earlier budget cuts were made in order to keep the town running on July 1, the start of the 2005 fiscal year.

Mr. Widdiss said there is absolutely nothing frivolous or extravagant in the town's operating budget or the Prop 2.5 request.

He said the Aquinnah tax rate is very reasonable and the amount of revenue generated by the town is in line with other communities across the state. He said towns across the Island and the state have all voted for significant Prop 2.5 overrides in the recent past.

"This town hasn't," said Mr. Widdiss. "There has to be an adjustment at some point."

Mr. Widdiss said the town is making "significant progress" seeking outside sources of revenue. The town is talking with the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) and has formed several special committees to pursue ways to increase revenue, he said.

After years during which selectmen made little effort to pursue the terms of a public safety agreement with the tribe, which called for payments to the town for public safety services, the budget crisis focused attention on overdue payments totaling \$48,000.

Mr. Widdiss said the tribe has paid a portion of the \$48,000 it owed but he could not provide a figure. According to Beverly Widdiss, town treasurer, the tribe has made a payment of \$8,000.

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