

I Vote no on Aquinnah's override

To the Editor:

Aquinnah returns to the polls on Oct. 28, 2004, as the selectmen try for the third time since May to solve our financial problems with an override. The ballot has 12 items totaling \$103,000 and some seem to provide essential services. All 12, however, were itemized in the \$130,000 "contingency budget" the voters rejected by a significant margin in July. What's changed? Having rejected an override twice, why should we approve these same items now? We shouldn't, and I urge Aquinnah to vote against all of them!

The selectmen still aren't getting the voter's resounding message. When the town rejected the \$260,000 override in May, the selectmen thought the message was, "Cut costs, we don't like big overrides." So they cut the override down to \$130,000 and presented us with a bare-bones budget. They said if we didn't approve this override (called the "contingency budget") they would have to cut summer camp, the shellfish group contribution, cost of living increases for all employees, and selectmen's salaries and reduce legal expenses and other operating costs for various departments. The voters listened, but again turned down the override, clearly stating their willingness to live with those cuts for the rest of the year. There were real hardships involved, but when a company hits a financial crisis, layoffs, salary freezes and cutbacks are expected. Why should our town be any different?

This time the selectmen think the message is "Cut costs more, the override's still too big, and find new sources of revenue." To their credit, the selectmen have finally started to look for new revenue sources. In August they reconstituted a committee pursuant to the January 1994 Memorandum Of Understanding between the town and the tribe to search for funds to defray expenses attributable to tribal housing. They also had a "revenue meeting" in August and set up a separate committee to pursue some of the most promising ideas. Nevertheless, August is a late start and they forecast no increase in revenues for the balance of 2005 and there's no promise of any additional revenues in 2006. As for costs, they "cut" another \$27,000 and are now asking for a \$103,000 override. Actually, \$10,300 of that reduction wasn't a "cut" at all; it's due to the fact that summer camp is over and funds are no longer needed.

The selectmen feel \$103,000 is a "reasonable" amount for an override and emphasized at town meeting it would be a "small" increase in our taxes; just \$.28 per \$100,000 of valuation. That's misleading. \$.28 is a six percent increase over the \$4.63 tax rate for 2004 and \$103,000 represents a permanent tax increase of 6 percent over the 2004 levy limit. If we approve this override, our 2005 taxes will be up 10 percent over 2004: six percent from this override, plus the allowable Prop. 2.5 increase, and the balance from ambulance/EMT service overrides we did approve at town meeting. I don't find an additional six percent increase reasonable.

The selectmen have lost fiscal credibility with the voters. Our budget has doubled over the last 10 years, increasing 7.5 percent per year, and they haven't offset the impact of tribal housing. I believe the message the voters have been sending is threefold:

1. We don't want any overrides (permanent increase in our taxes) just to cover normal town operating expenses. As we demonstrated in May, we will approve overrides for increases in services or new budget items but only if they're absolutely necessary and if other funding sources aren't available.
2. Find some significant new sources of revenue. New revenue, not additional taxes, should have been used to fund much of our recent cost growth and should

be used to fund future cost growth. You should maximize income from existing revenue sources/leases and you need to find enough new revenue that sometime soon you can ask us to vote for an under-ride; reducing taxes to offset the extra costs we've had to cover. And finally,

3. We want better fiscal management of the town. We've known for 10 years that our costs would increase dramatically. We've known the free cash that's been funding our cost growth the last few years would run out, creating the financial crisis we face today. Despite this, you waited until two overrides failed this year before starting to look for new revenues. We want to know at annual town meeting how much free cash we have each year, just like every other town. We want our financial affairs handled responsibly; failure to bill the tribe for public safety costs for five years is inexcusable. We don't want to lose money operating the cliffs. We want a stronger/pro-active finance committee that will do the long-term forecasting and financial planning we need to identify problems early and solve them before they become crises. The finance committee is supposed to be the taxpayers' watchdog, but they aren't getting the message either; they fully support the override.

Now, we know our selectmen and committee members are basically volunteers, not professional managers, and we appreciate the extensive time and effort they put in. It's not easy and not a lot of people in town could or would do it. Plus, they have to put up with potshots from people like me. Nevertheless, we need to raise the financial bar. Overrides aren't the only solution.

Here's an example. The selectmen have revealed there are several hundred thousand dollars of uncollected taxes and potential land sales from tax takings that could be available as soon as we can get them. These are one-time-only sources of funds, but would help us through a tough period until new ongoing revenue sources are available. Two questions: Why are we looking at an override if these sources will be available soon? Are we doing everything we can to collect these funds? Tax takings require time and money for legal expenses of land court filings, but this is money worth spending since it brings in revenue. Yet the selectmen cut \$10,000 from legal expenses, and this has delayed some of the filings. These legal expenses should be a priority. They could have transferred money from a less important line item months ago.

Back at the cost-cutting meetings in June, there were several things identified that the selectmen haven't taken advantage of. For 2002, we approved \$17,640 for police academy training that was never used and isn't needed. Instead of asking for a \$103,000 override, they should have asked to transfer these funds to cover the legal expenses and other needy areas so we can file these land court items quickly.

The selectmen still have a lot to do to solve our underlying problems and restore their fiscal credibility. When they do, they may find the voters have a different attitude towards overrides.

That's how I feel. If that's how you feel, please vote against all 12 override items on Oct. 28.

Peter Temple
Aquinnah