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October 21 - 27, 2004 Edition

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Aquinnah dissects Prop. 2.5 decisions

October 21, 2004

By Nelson Sigelman

In what has become a familiar ritual, Aquinnah selectmen will again ask town voters to approve a Proposition 2.5 override at a special election next Thursday. Stung by two earlier defeats at the polls, selectmen will take a new tack.

Rather than stake the total override amount of \$102,967 on one question, selectmen will present the Prop. 2.5 request in the form of 12 separate ballot questions, leaving to the voters the question of which town expenses to fund.

But as town officials seek to shore up with tax dollars a fiscal year 2005 operating budget they say is inadequate, comments by a Wampanoag tribal leader created some uncertainty regarding earlier revenue projections.

This week, Beverly Wright, chairman of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), said she could not say whether the tribe will pay the town \$40,000, the balance due on a bill for \$48,000 for public safety services provided by the town under the terms of an agreement signed in 1995.

Next week's special election is only the latest act in a 2005 operating budget drama that began with the annual town meeting in May. With a looming budget deadline of July 1, the start of the fiscal year, voters rejected on June 16 a request to close a \$260,000 gap in the town's 2005 budget of \$2,459,335.

As a result, town officials cut approximately \$180,000 from the budget and revised revenue projections in order to begin the fiscal year with a balanced budget they did not think was adequate but was the only way to avoid a shutdown of town government.

Selectmen went back to voters with a whittled down Prop. 2.5 request of \$130,313. That override was also rejected.

In comments at last month's special town meeting, prior to presenting the latest money request to voters, Carl Widdiss, chairman of the Aquinnah selectmen, said selectmen had no choice but to go back to the voters. Mr. Widdiss said the town must have the financial resources to run at a reasonable level.

12 questions add up

Polls will be open in the Aquinnah town hall between noon and 8 pm on Oct. 28 to vote on 12 separate questions totaling \$102,967.

The largest request is for \$37,967 to restore cuts in the wages and salaries of town employees, including cost of living adjustments and selectmen's salaries.

The Prop 2.5 request is also aimed at restoring cuts across the board made in the expense accounts of individual town departments. The requests include \$2,000 for telephone expenses; \$2,000 for the town accountant; \$10,000 for legal expenses;

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\$5,000 for town building and grounds maintenance; \$4,000 for the fire department; \$5,000 for the homesite committee; \$2,000 for the library; and \$6,000 for community programs, including a summer camp.

Voters will also be asked to restore \$20,000 that was lopped off the town's contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Regional Shellfish Group.

Tribe is noncommittal

In the days leading up to the start of the 2005 fiscal year, Aquinnah selectmen managed to create a balanced budget through a combination of cuts and revised revenue projections. A cornerstone of the revised budget was the expectation that the Wampanoag tribe would pay a total of \$48,000 to the town for providing past and present public safety services.

The agreement signed on June 5, 1995, between town and tribe officials stipulated that the town was to provide police, fire, and medical services on tribe property in return for an annual payment. But in the years following the signing ceremony, tribe and town leaders largely ignored certain terms of the agreement. As a result no payments were received for five separate years.

The tribe said it has not received a bill. Town treasurer Beverly Widdiss said she sent bills annually, but received no payment.

As selectmen scrambled to assemble a budget in June, Ms. Wright said the tribe would pay once it received a bill.

According to Ms. Widdiss, the tribe has made a payment of \$8,000.

Commenting on the status of the outstanding balance in a telephone conversation Monday, Ms. Wright said, "The council has not made a decision on that, but in a good faith effort we did pay \$8,000, and the town already has that check."

Ms. Wright said a committee made up of town and tribal members, including Mr. Widdiss and Walter Delaney, town fire chief, has been meeting to discuss and review the public safety agreement. "We know there is an issue out there," said Ms. Wright.

Ms. Wright said the \$8,000 payment stands on its own. "We paid that in a good faith effort," she said. "We did not say we owe it or we didn't owe it."

Asked if the tribe still owes the town \$40,000, Ms. Wright said, "I can't answer that because we are still working on the agreement." Ms. Wright said tribe and town officials, including Mr. Widdiss, police Chief Rhandi Belain, the town's new law enforcement leader, and Walter Delaney, the fire chief, continue to meet on the agreement.

Pressed to comment on the tribe's intentions with respect to the past due account as opposed to the current discussions, Ms. Wright said the tribe has not said it would or would not pay the money. "We are working on the agreement," said Ms. Wright. "Some things need to be upgraded."

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