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Aquinnah Override Is Rejected for Third Time in Five Months

By MAX HART

A large turnout of Aquinnah voters said no to a Proposition 2 1/2 override yesterday for the third time in five months, dealing a final blow to the town selectmen on the subject of town spending - except when it comes to plowing snow.

Money to plow the town roads was approved by one vote in the override ballot, which presented voters with a supplemental budget for the current fiscal year. The budget, which included \$103,000 in spending requests beyond the state-mandated tax cap, was broken down into 12 separate line items.

Voters rejected a cost of living increase for town employees, salaries for the town selectmen, funding for the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group, expense money for the town harbor master and maintenance money for town buildings, among other things.

Expense money for the town library was rejected by the same margin that saved snow plowing - a single vote.

"This is a very, very clear message from the voters and I trust the selectmen will approach next year more carefully," said Peter Temple, a member of the Aquinnah planning board, after the votes were counted last night.

"People are annoyed that the selectmen have done nothing. I feel most sorry for the town employees - they are sacrificial lambs," said planning board chairman Camille Rose.

"I am very disappointed, but we'll deal with it. We'll have to get by with what they have given us," said selectman Michael Hebert.

Selectman and board chairman Carl Widdiss could not be reached for comment.

The election saw a huge turnout; 171 voters cast ballots. There are just under 400 registered voters in Aquinnah, which is the second smallest town in the commonwealth. The results went around the town like electricity a short time after the polls closed at eight o'clock last night.

The override odyssey in Aquinnah began in June when voters rejected a \$260,000 general

override to the annual town budget by just three votes in a special town election that followed the annual town meeting by a month. The selectmen then scrambled to find a way to cut 10 per cent of the town budget in time for the beginning of the fiscal year on July 1.

A level-funded budget was hammered into shape by slashing the police department budget, adjusting revenue projections and eliminating cost of living increases for town employees, along with funding for the shellfish group and salaries for the three town selectmen. A summer camp for town children narrowly escaped the budget ax.

The selectmen then tried again and called a special town election with an override request for half the original amount, \$130,000.

On July 22, Aquinnah voters rejected the second override request, this time by a substantial margin, 75-56.

The third override request followed a special town meeting in September, crafted this time as a supplemental budget and broken down into 12 separate questions. The questions amounted to a line-item budget for voters with 12 choices. Together the items added up to \$103,000 in override requests.

In the end the only request approved was \$5,000 for snow plowing.

Mr. Temple said last night that the line item decision was thoughtful on the part of the selectmen. The results, he said, were self-evident.

"This shows that voters were very sensitive to what was being voted on," Mr. Temple said. "They are prepared to go through the hardships in that we want the town run better," he added.

Mr. Hebert said the next step is still under discussion.

"We've got groups of people looking to the future," he said.

"The selectmen have to go back and implement ways to raise revenue and look at structural ways to cut costs," Mr. Temple concluded.

Final election results are as follows:

* \$36,967 in cost of living increases for town employees, rejected 86-83.

* \$2,000 for telephone expenses, rejected 100-67.

- * **\$2,000 for town accountant expenses, rejected 95-72.**
- * **\$10,000 for legal expenses, rejected 106-62.**
- * **\$5,000 for maintenance on town buildings, rejected 95-73.**
- * **\$4,000 for fire department expenses, rejected 101-68.**
- * **\$20,000 for the shellfish group, rejected 125-44.**
- * **\$5,000 for the town shellfish department and harbor master, rejected 111-50.**
- * **\$5,000 for snow and ice removal, approved 85-84.**
- * **\$5,000 for the resident homesite committee, rejected 108-61.**
- * **\$2,000 for town library expenses, rejected 85-84.**
- * **\$6,000 for community programs expenses, rejected 105-63.**

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