



Responsible government
November 4, 2004

Aquinnah voters rejected all but one Proposition 2.5 override proposal on a special election ballot last week. They agreed to raise taxes for snowplowing, but that's all. This week, Beverly Widdiss, Aquinnah's elected town treasurer and the appointed town administrator, threw up her hands and quit both jobs. As Nelson Sigelman, The Times news editor, reports this morning, Ms. Widdiss, as she departed, criticized the selectmen who appointed her of failing to support town employees and not listening to voters. On the other hand, on Tuesday, the admirable efforts of the town hall building committee, the support of special town meeting voters, and the inescapable need for its renovation won the West Tisbury town hall a \$3.7 million revamping. It took hard work, out in plain sight, by the committee, and a reasonable willingness to be persuaded on the part of the voting residents in town. In the end, good sense, honest grappling with the problems — architectural, financial, historical, and political — and a persuasive case for needed capital spending carried the day.

What might town leaders and Island voters make of these different developments? Well, for one thing, rising real estate tax bills result from rising town budgets. The wonderful and dependable growth in real estate values over 30 years, even allowing for occasional national economic recessions, has restrained the growth of tax rates, but not the bills that taxpayers receive each year with a wince. And growing municipal real estate wealth has led to a willingness on the part of leaders and voters to spend more freely than they otherwise could. The spending is understandable to some degree because as much as 60 percent of the tax bill is paid by non-voting, non-resident, undemanding summer property owners. Still, no one will escape the bill when it comes due, and that worries taxpayers who are also voters. Budget requests must be persuasively justified.

There is an important difference between the debacle in Aquinnah and the constructive outcome in West Tisbury. In Aquinnah, leadership by the selectmen and the town finance committee is defective. The selectmen, in particular, are confused about where their responsibility lies. In addition, Aquinnah does not enjoy transparent, reliable, and timely accounting. Each town meeting cycle is a financial calamity. Consider, for example, that it is November, four months after the fiscal 2005 year began, and the Aquinnah selectmen are still trying to persuade taxpayers to fund the town budget.



In West Tisbury, the selectmen, the fincom members, and the building committee members know to whom they are responsible. They are serious about discharging that responsibility competently and wisely. Voters get good, reliable information about the town's financial position, and they trust the things they are told by leadership. Voters work with leaders to get things done.

It's a matter of responsible, trustworthy town government. One town makes the grade, the other does not.