

Aquinnah finances in chaos as treasurer quits

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By Nelson Sigelman

Rejecting all but one question in a repackaged third attempt to pass a Proposition 2.5 override, Aquinnah voters agreed to an increase in spending for snow and ice removal, 85-84, but nothing else. In a special election Thursday, Oct. 28, Aquinnah voters rejected 11 of 12 override questions totaling \$102,967.

On the heels of last week's special election defeat, Beverly Widdiss, Aquinnah's elected town treasurer and appointed board of selectmen administrator, resigned from both jobs.

In a letter of resignation read aloud at a special Monday night selectmen's meeting, Ms. Widdiss delivered a stinging blast at the three-member board of selectmen, accusing them of having no respect for town employees and failing to listen to the voters.

In a meeting interspersed with sharp comments regarding the impact of Wampanoag Tribal housing on town finances and characterized by the lack of financial information and accountability that has clouded town affairs for years, on Monday night selectmen discussed how to move forward despite the budget constraints imposed by town voters.

Rebuffed once again at the voting booth, selectmen now plan to call a special town meeting and ask voters to approve using money from the town stabilization fund to pay for some of the more pressing money requests, notably cost of living hikes for town employees.

The town's financial situation may result in improving the quality of notoriously unreliable up-Island cellular telephone service. Selectmen also heard a brief report from Peter Temple, a member of a committee looking at ways to boost town revenues, about efforts to explore leasing town property for a cellular tower, or even erecting a tower the town would rent for antennae space.

Even as selectmen look ahead to future revenue sources, one source of revenue inserted by them into the 2005 operating budget — in order to avoid a shutdown of town government on July 1, 2004, the start of the fiscal year — may not be reliable.

The budget assembled by the selectmen is based in part on the expectation that the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) will pay the town \$48,000 for public safety services provided by the town under the terms of an agreement signed in 1995. To date the tribe has paid \$8,000.

On Monday night, Carl Widdiss, chairman of the board of selectmen and a tribal member, said that it is his view that the Wampanoag Tribe has already met its financial obligation, given the fact that it contributed and equipped a new ambulance for the town at a cost exceeding \$40,000.

Spare attention

Despite last week's vote and the continued uncertainty surrounding the town's operating budget, no more than a dozen residents including selectmen attended the Monday night meeting. No tribal officials or members of the town's finance committee were present.

The meeting began with Ms. Widdiss. "At this time I feel both positions (one more than the other) are thankless and the environment surrounding both is not a nice one," said Ms. Widdiss, reading her letter of resignation. "I cannot continue to work in an office for a board that I feel does not have any respect or even seem to care about their employees or elected officials."

Ms. Widdiss, the sister-in-law of Mr. Widdiss, accused the selectmen of not listening to those around them. "It seems to be apparent that the town voters see that something is wrong," she wrote, "and that may be the reason the last three overrides have failed. I believe the voters are sending a message and I don't think it is about money."

Ms. Widdiss said she would bring her office up to date before she left and recommended that selectmen appoint Audrey Jeffers-Mayhew, town tax collector, to fill the remainder of her term, which expires in 2006.

Selectmen, who had sat stone-faced throughout, had few comments. "I am sorry it has come to this," said selectman Mike Hebert. The selectmen voted unanimously to accept the resignation and to speak with Ms. Jeffers-Mayhew about taking on an expanded role and compensation.

A discussion of who might step in on an interim basis as board administrator brought a suggestion that before finding a permanent replacement the selectmen consider expanding the role to that of a town manager or executive secretary. Camille Rose, chairman of the town planning board, said the town was a \$3.5-million business in need of professional management.

Blame it on the taxpayer

Turning to the town's current financial situation, Mr. Widdiss said it was a lack of so-called free cash, undesignated money remaining in a town's account at the end of the fiscal year and certified from the state department of revenue services, that had put the town in the position of seeking an override. For several years in a row, town officials have not known how much free cash would be available for town expenses in time for the annual town meeting. This spring was no exception.

Mr. Widdiss said that after looking into the matter he discovered that the town should have had approximately \$225,000 in free cash certified by the state but because approximately \$381,000 in late property and personal property tax payments were outstanding, the state deducted that amount against the free cash amount that would have been available for use at the beginning of this fiscal year.

Mr. Widdiss said the notion that the town had to seek an override because of irresponsible or excessive spending was not true. "The biggest problem in this town with regards to our financial situation right here is the tax collection," said Mr. Widdiss. "And it is no reflection on the tax collector. The only reflection is on, I am sorry to say, the taxpayer."

Town officials said the problem of late tax payments was compounded by a "computer crash," but the problems had since been rectified and the outstanding figure reduced to \$11,000. Mr. Widdiss said he anticipated free cash should become available before the next fiscal year.

Explaining the free cash process, Marjorie Spitz, town accountant, said free cash is not available until the state certifies it. "It is supposed to be done in September when the balance sheet is presented to the state, however the balance sheet is late every year and will be again this year," she said, deferring

a more detailed explanation why that is so for a later date.

Back to the voters

Taking a different tack after two earlier defeats at the polls, selectmen had presented last week's Prop. 2.5 request in the form of 12 separate ballot questions, giving voters a sort of line item veto in deciding which town expenses to fund.

Among the proposed expenditures that were rejected:

The largest request was for \$36,967 to restore cuts in the wages and salaries of town employees, rejected 83-86; \$2,000 for telephone expenses, 67-100; \$2,000 for the town accountant, 72-95; \$10,000 for legal expenses, 62-106; \$5,000 for town building and grounds maintenance, 73-95; \$4,000 for the fire department, 68-101; \$20,000 for the shellfish group, 44-125; \$5,000 for the shellfish/harbor master, 58-111; \$5,000 for the resident homesite committee, 61-108; \$2,000 for the library, 84-85; and \$6,000 for community programs, including a summer camp, 63-105.

The special election was only the latest act in a 2005 operating budget drama that began with the annual town meeting in May that did not conclude until late June

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

On Monday, Mr. Widdiss suggested that the selectmen go back to the voters with a request to take money from the stabilization fund to fund those questions which came close to passing, based on a commitment to replenish the stabilization fund once the expected free cash becomes available.

Mr. Hebert said he did not want to put the public through another budget request or attempt to do something that could be seen as an end run around the election. Mr. Widdiss said the selectmen owed it to the town employees.

Selectmen agreed to set a date for a special town meeting after conferring with the members of the finance committee and deciding what measures to fund.

Elephant in the room

The intimate nature of personnel connections in Aquinnah, particularly those arising from the status of the Wampanoag Tribe as a federally recognized tribe, generate undercurrents in any discussion of town issues. At one point in Monday night's discussion, Flavia Stutz raised the issue of the "elephant in the room," the subject of the costs associated with the tribe's housing complex.

Mr. Widdiss defended the tribe's many financial contributions to the town and the promise of significantly greater contributions and cooperative efforts. "In the long run, looking at the big picture, if we can create a cooperative effort with the tribe I see significant revenues coming in this town's directions from the tribe," said Mr. Widdiss.

Michael Stutz, Mrs. Stutz's son and the town's elected land bank commissioner, reminded Mr. Widdiss of earlier commitments not kept to find money to defray the costs of educating children from tribal

housing, now borne entirely by town taxpayers. The tribe, which is tax exempt, has not contributed to the town's education costs, which have risen to \$916,114.

Mr. Widdiss challenged Mr. Stutz to detail the burden placed on the town by the 34-unit housing complex.

On the subject of the outstanding payments due for the public safety agreement, Mr. Widdiss said in his conversations with tribal officials, "They never said they weren't going to pay, they said they would make every effort available to identify the money to pay that."

Mrs. Stutz said it was her understanding that tribal officials had said they were not obliged to pay the balance. Mr. Widdiss said he had not heard that and added, "By law, they are not obliged to pay it. The agreement says that the tribe will make a contribution to the town. It does not say that the tribe will pay the town."

Defining a contribution as opposed to a payment, Mr. Widdiss said the ambulance and its outfitting far exceeded \$40,000 and was entirely paid by the tribe. "Then why are we billing them?" asked Mrs. Stutz.

Mr. Widdiss said that was because the tribe said it had stopped making payments because it had not received bills in the past. "As far as I am concerned they have met the obligation and it is not because I am a tribal member. I recognize their significant contribution to this town," he said.

When asked by a Times reporter, who was allowed to ask questions after those present were polled, why he had allowed that \$48,000 to be included on the revenue side of the budget, Mr. Widdiss said the tribe had not said it would not pay the money and besides it was a small part of the budget.

"If we have to rely on a \$40,000 contribution to balance our budget we are in trouble," he said.

Reminded that the selectmen had used those enhanced revenue projections to do just that, Mr. Widdiss said, "Those are projections."

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