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- ▶ [Calendar](#)
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- [Top Stories](#)
- [News Archive](#)
- [Photo Gallery](#)

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- [Feature Article](#)
- [Health and Fitness](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Nature](#)
- [Bird News](#)
- [Fishing](#)
- [Tides](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Wedding Planner](#)

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- [Current Conditions](#)
- [Five-Day Forecast](#)

Commentary

- [Editorials](#)
- [Gazette Chronicle](#)

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- [This Week](#)
- [This Month](#)
- [Music](#)
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NEWS**Aquinnah Town Treasurer Quits Abruptly Amid Tense Fallout From Failed Override**

By MAX HART

Declaring that her selectmen show no respect for town employees and have lost touch with the voters, Aquinnah treasurer and town administrator Beverly A. Widdiss abruptly resigned Monday night in the midst of a selectmen's meeting.

Her announcement was the first in a series of tense moments between selectmen and a handful of town residents who filled a small meeting room in the town hall.

Ms. Widdiss's resignation also comes just four days after the town rejected a third Proposition 2 1/2 override request to cover budget shortfalls.

Emotions ran high throughout the evening as selectmen began a new phase in the search for a solution to Aquinnah's continuing financial woes.

"I cannot continue to work in an office or for a board that I feel does not have any respect for or even seem to care about their employees or elected officials," Ms. Widdiss said, reading from a letter she submitted to the board. "Maybe things could run a lot better if you took the time and listened to what is going on around you. It seems apparent that the town voters see that something is wrong, and that may be the reason the last three overrides have failed," she continued.

Last week, voters rejected 11 of 12 articles on a third and final override request to secure more than \$100,000 for various town expenses. Funding for plowing snow from town roads totaling \$5,000 was the only proposal approved.

"I believe the voters are sending a message and I don't think it's just about money," Ms. Widdiss said, hammering at her point.

The selectmen appeared to be caught off guard by her resignation and sharp words.

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"I'm sorry it has come to this point," selectman Michael Hebert said.

Selectman Jim Newman offered his gratitude for her service, as did several members of the audience. Chairman Carl Widdiss, Ms. Widdiss's brother in law, said he was disappointed she had not brought her issues to the board earlier in a more formal manner.

Ms. Widdiss will finish up her duties as treasurer for the next two weeks before leaving the job.

After voting unanimously to accept the resignation, the board discussed the appointment of Audrey Jeffers-Mayhew, town tax collector, as treasurer for the rest of Ms. Widdiss's term.

The letter clearly set the tone for the rest of the meeting, which featured frank and sometimes heated discourse between selectmen and residents.

Frustrated with the town's fiscal predicament - simmering since June when voters rejected the first override request of \$260,000 - several townspeople raised pointed questions on everything from tax collection and the absence of free cash to the financial contribution from the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah (Gay Head).

"Some people are suggesting that the town had to go to an override because of an excess in spending or irresponsible spending, and that's just not true," Mr. Widdiss said.

In his view, the biggest problem lies in the tax collecting arena.

"It is no reflection on the tax collector," said Mr. Widdiss. "The only reflection is on, I am sorry to say, the taxpayer."

The town has approximately \$381,000 in outstanding property taxes, he said.

That would have contributed to the free cash reserves - unappropriated town money left over at the end of the fiscal year. Since those taxes were late, the state couldn't certify the free cash in time to put it toward this year's budget.

"We have money, it's just not available," Mr. Widdiss said.

Discussion then shifted to the thorny issue of paying for critical town expenses in the wake of the latest failed override.

"At this point, I think we should probably proceed with the money we have and shut down what we need to shut down when it comes time to shut it down," said Mr. Hebert.

Mr. Hebert focused his comment on the mood underlying voters' decision to shoot down another override request.

"I don't think it was the money," he said. "I think it was something else that is not being expressed at town meeting. And so people will express it at the ballot box, which is a shame."

Mr. Widdiss proposed going back to town meeting with a proposal to tap the town stabilization funds to cover critical services.

Planning board member Peter Temple, a vocal critic of the board's handling of town finances, suggested that if selectmen had approached the town with a new tack - one assuring voters that stabilization fund money would be restored next year - they might have reconsidered.

Flavia Stutz raised the issue of the Wampanoag tribe's financial impact on the town.

"Nobody talks about it," she said. "Nobody talks about the increase in tuition, what the tribe owes the town. We don't talk about that."

Mr. Newman quickly clarified the difference between educational costs and other services.

"The tribe only owes the town for police and emergency services," he said.

The Wampanoags are the only federally recognized tribe in the state.

A sticking point in town is whether the tribe should reimburse the town for some portion of the cost of educating children from the tribal housing project.

More than half of the schoolchildren from Aquinnah live in the tribal housing project.

"We see two selectmen closely associated with the tribe," Ms. Stutz continued. "I don't know if they are really representing the rest of the town or the tribe."

Mr. Widdiss is a tribal member as is Mr. Hebert's wife.

Responding to Ms. Stutz's comments, Mr. Widdiss argued that the town is working with the tribe to find new sources of revenue.

"If we can create a cooperative effort with the tribe, I see significant revenues coming in this town's direction from the tribe," he said.

Ms. Stutz's son, Michael, the town's elected land bank commissioner, reminded the selectmen of a memorandum of agreement signed in 1994 by the town and the tribe that placed some of the financial burden from the tribal housing complex on the tribe.

"The elephant in the room is the federal housing project that Michael and Carl helped realize without finding any funding to defray the financial

impact on this town," he said. "Perhaps you can begin to understand the frustration of us taxpayers."


Mr. Widdiss replied, "Your frustration is based on your distorted view of the situation. You're creating the big elephant with your own spin."


He also defended the tribe's delinquent payment of \$40,000 toward town emergency services, noting the tribe's contribution of an ambulance to the town eclipsed that debt.

"The tribe has made significant contributions to the town," he said. "They never said they weren't going to pay. They said they would make every effort available to identify the money to pay that."

"We are in good shape, if people just pay their taxes," Mr. Widdiss said.

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