

On the Ropes

Town affairs in Aquinnah are in disarray and everyone knows it, with the possible exception of the town selectmen, whose collective voice has been barely a whisper over the last five months.

In this tiny town which is the second smallest in the commonwealth, it's been an avalanche of events:

Three failed Proposition 2 1/2 override requests in five months; a badly strapped town budget that includes no cost of living raise for town employees; the abrupt resignation of the town administrator and town treasurer.

"I believe the voters are sending a message and I don't think it's just about money," declared Beverly Widdiss as she handed in her resignation during the regular selectmen's meeting last week.

The frustration among townspeople in Aquinnah is both palpable and understandable, and it's time for the selectmen to show some leadership. There is a lot of talk about generating more revenues, but no one has developed a clear plan.

Uncollected taxes townwide represent a source of revenue, but no one knows how much. And discussion about revenues inevitably leads to a deeper discussion about the town's relationship with the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).

The tribe, which has its own government and a federally funded budget twice the size of the town budget, built a housing project in 1994 that has had an unmistakable impact on the town budget. More than half the children attending school from Aquinnah come from the housing project, which has also cost the town money for emergency services and snow removal. Two memorandums of agreement were signed between the town and the tribe in recent years that laid out a plan to defray the cost of the housing project, but one memorandum was simply forgotten and the other has not been rigorously enforced. Asked about these agreements, the selectmen have no answers.

No one can find a way out of the maze.

Help is available at the state level. The Massachusetts Department of Revenue provides a free service to cities and towns where it performs an audit of town finances and assists in developing a business plan.

The town of West Tisbury took advantage of this service two years ago and the result was a very useful report. Oak Bluffs also used the program three years ago. Aquinnah could be well-served at this juncture by the same service.

It's time for an open, honest dialogue in Aquinnah, time for real answers to real questions. The voters are onto something.