

Wampanoag Tribe elects new tribe leader

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By Nelson Sigelman

By a narrow margin, members of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) on Sunday elected Donald Widdiss as chairman. Mr. Widdiss defeated long-time leader Beverly Wright, 132-105.

Roughly a quarter of the tribe's approximately 800 eligible voters traveled to the tribe administration building in the Island's westernmost town to vote, according to Ms. Wright, who was seeking a sixth three-year term as the head of the state's only federally recognized tribe.

The election further solidifies the personal connections that often characterize tribe-town affairs. Mr. Widdiss, vice chairman of the tribal council, is the brother of Carl Widdiss, chairman of the three-member Aquinnah board of selectmen.

Eleanor Hebert, tribe secretary, won re-election. Ms. Hebert is the wife of Mike Hebert, also an Aquinnah selectman.

Incumbent Naomi Carney and Woody Vanderhoop also won election to the tribal council.

The election is one element in a sometimes delicate town-tribe political equation. Recently, some tribe members and town taxpayers have found themselves at odds over the limits of tribe sovereignty, as described in the 1983 settlement agreement, now the subject of a pending decision by the state Supreme Judicial Court, and the willingness of the tribe to contribute to the increasing costs of educating children who live in tribal housing.

Ms. Wright ran a campaign based on her experience, knowledge, and steady leadership. In a telephone conversation Monday, she said that while she was disappointed in the outcome of the election, Mr. Widdiss's call for a change obviously struck a chord with voters.

Ms. Wright said the new chairman must focus on healing the splits that exist in the tribe's membership. Finding ways to get more members involved in tribe affairs is another challenge, she said.

Ms. Wright said she is proud of all that the tribe's staff has accomplished during her tenure, including the construction of a shellfish hatchery, tribe housing, and the multi-purpose building, as well as the positive image the tribe has in Indian country. She said her five terms have been personally rewarding, and she wished the tribe well under new leadership.

Ms. Wright said her future plans remain uncertain, but for now she will concentrate on working for the tribe until her term of office ends in December.

"There are options out there for me," she said.

In a telephone conversation following his election, Mr. Widdiss, a Native American artist and graphic designer, said his platform included improving relationships both within the tribe and between the tribe and the Island community at large.

He said one of his goals is to complete work on a memorandum of understanding between the tribe and the town designed to govern future relationships. The selectmen decided to pursue the memorandum after voting not to pursue a defense of the settlement agreement in court.

Mr. Widdiss said he thinks he will be able to use his personal relationships with townspeople to help ease some of the tensions and mistrust that has developed over the years and work towards developing more cooperation.

“The moment that I get sworn in, the tribe’s relationship with the town will improve,” he said.

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