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NEWS

Donald Widdiss Returns as Chairman; Sketches Hopeful Wampanoag Outlook

By MAX HART

For the first time in 13 years, there will be a new chairman of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). Donald Widdiss, the first chairman to lead the tribe after it gained federal recognition in 1987, returns to the top post after ousting incumbent Beverly Wright, 132-105, in the tribe's annual election on Sunday.

Eleanor Hebert was reelected tribal council secretary and Naomi Carney and William (Woody) Vanderhoop were elected to the council. Ms. Carney was reelected while Mr. Vanderhoop filled a vacancy left by Jason Baird, who did not seek reelection.

The shift in leadership at the top ends a long and sometimes controversial run by Ms. Wright. In an interview with the Gazette this week, Mr. Widdiss spelled out his goals for mending strained town-tribe relations, uniting his own constituency and developing a solid economic base for the tribe's future. He also spoke candidly about sovereignty, gaming and the tribe's financial responsibility to the town of Aquinnah.

"The tribe needed to establish a new direction, and I represent that new vision," he said. "There is an apparent lack of interest and participation of tribal members that has caused other breakdowns in the ability to create a consensus, and that was a direct result of poor leadership and lack of political influence. I have the contacts and people skills needed to successfully lead the tribe."

Mr. Widdiss acknowledged that his biggest challenge lies in repairing the tribe's relationship with the town, where there is now a tense and bitter rift. Core issues center on the tribe's impact on town finances and how the tribe views its share of financial responsibility.

"It may seem that we're being glib when we talk about our financial contributions, but that's not how I work," he said. "The bottom line is that the tribe makes contributions that no other organization makes."

He ticked off examples: the town ambulance, which was donated to the town by the tribe, the shellfish hatchery and water testing facility.

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"We employ up to 25 people at the hatchery in the summer, provide EMT training and work with schools and youth services," he added. "Those types of contributions may not count directly to the town's bottom line, but are they not important contributions to the community?"

Mr. Widdiss also said one priority is opening a day care facility at the tribe's new community building, currently under construction. He said he wants the facility to be open to both tribal and nontribal families.

"We view our contributions not as an obligation, but as a responsibility," he continued. "We are not going to say we owe anything to the town because we don't."

But many in Aquinnah disagree. Hefty educational costs associated with sending children from the tribal housing project to Vineyard schools is at the heart of a war of words as the town struggles to pay for expenses.

"The problem is that there is not much of a tax base from businesses in Aquinnah, so almost all of it comes from taxpayers. And when some taxpayers don't pay their taxes, like they didn't last year, that's not the tribe's fault. People see the large educational costs coming from tribal housing, and try to blow it up as a source of tribe-town problems. Unpaid taxes are the real problem," Mr. Widdiss said.

Tribal members do not pay taxes. Critics point to a 1994 memorandum of understanding between the town and the tribe that is aimed at finding a way to defray the costs of education and municipal services.

The memorandum had gone dormant but was recently revived.

Mr. Widdiss said the burden should not fall on the tribe. "We do take responsibility but we feel we are not obligated to pay for our children's education. We feel that is the responsibility of the state or the federal government. I believe our role is to cooperate with the town to find state and federal money to offset those costs, which I plan to work aggressively to do," he said, adding with a smile:

"I have a good relationship with the selectmen and they are more than comfortable working with me." His brother Carl is chairman of the town board of selectmen.

Sovereignty is another simmering topic, as all wait for a decision from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) on an appeal of the landmark sovereignty case.

A superior court judge ruled last year that sovereign immunity trumps the historic 1986 Indian land claims settlement agreement between the town and the tribe - because the tribe cannot be sued.

Mr. Widdiss said the real issue isn't the tribe's sovereignty, but the culture of distrust throughout the town and Island community.



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"The problem isn't related to our actions, the problem is other people's fear, and we can't control that," he said. "The lower court already said we are sovereign, and we're governing our actions just fine. I think we've proved to be good stewards of the land. The people that say we might throw a Hyatt hotel on tribal land, they are just trying to create political issues. Those claims are absurd."

Mr. Widdiss said if the SJC upholds the lower court decision, the tribe plans to honor the settlement agreement.

"We looked at the 1986 contract that we agreed to and have said the conditions won't change. We're not in the business of overstepping the authority of the town, the community or the state. We're not trying to screw up the Vineyard," he said.

Mr. Widdiss said the tribe is hurting economically, and he plans to right the ship. He cited poor investment choices and lack of planning as critical missteps, and said the tribe will take a new look at gaming if the climate changes.

"We're in a quiet period now, and it is up to the state legislature to make any kind of move. But we've made the commitment, so if it came up, we'd aggressively pursue it," he said.


Increasing profits from the shellfish hatchery and annual fundraisers are included in the plan to generate more revenue. Mr. Widdiss also said he will begin negotiations with the town to purchase the lease lots and circle at the cliffs.

Mr. Widdiss said his election got a boost from an emerging younger generation of tribal voters. His message, he said, resonated with a group anxious for change.

"They were my strength. They have gone from something that was fractured, something that fostered hopelessness to feeling empowered. People said we need change, and that's what I intend to do."

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