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Aquinnah Voters Back Spending at Town Meeting

By MAX HART

Tapping the town's stabilization fund, Aquinnah voters approved eight of nine funding measures presented by selectmen at a special town meeting last night, effectively ending over six months of fiscal turmoil.

"I think this chapter is finally closed," selectmen chairman Carl Widdiss said after the voting. "I think the townspeople wanted to resolve this, and for the most part they did tonight."

The meeting was punctuated by strong words and pointed dialogue that illuminated some of the rifts between the town and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). But in the end, voters had agreed to transfer \$54,800 from the stabilization fund to pay library costs, telephone bills and fire department expenses.

Other approved articles included:

- * \$25,800 to fund a cost of living wage increase for town employees and officials retroactive to Oct. 1.
- * \$10,000 to pay legal expenses.
- * \$6,000 for the community programs committee.
- * \$5,000 for maintenance to town buildings and grounds.

Voters also agreed to transfer \$13,034 from unexpended balances from last fiscal year to the town's general account. Of the \$70,334.53 total requested by selectmen, only \$2,500 for shellfish and harbor master expenses was rejected.

"I'm encouraged that the voters are starting to be more reasonable with regards to town finances," Mr. Widdiss said.

Five months into the fiscal year, last night's vote marked the fourth attempt by selectmen to secure money to fund various town expenses. Voters have shot down three previous Proposition 2 1/2 override requests since May, and this latest proposal was a shadow of the original \$260,000 asked for by selectmen.

A quorum of 38 was easily reached as 47 voters filled the town hall at the start of the town meeting. Town moderator Walter Delaney presided over the two-hour meeting that got off to a rocky start even before it officially began.

Prior to Mr. Delaney opening the meeting, Mr. Widdiss issued committee reports regarding the town's pursuit of additional funding. One of the reports, presented by Mr. Widdiss on behalf of

the Aquinnah Community Task Force, said the town has applied for \$9,000 in federal impact aid in an effort to offset the cost of sending children from tribal housing to Island schools.

The announcement triggered a brief but intense debate over the amount of aid available to the town and the financial contributions made by the tribe. Selectman Jim Newman sparred with town resident Michael Stutz, who referred to the town's 1994 memorandum of understanding with the tribe and challenged the selectmen to estimate the costs associated with tribal housing.

"Have the selectmen estimated what those costs are?" he asked. "Are we talking about \$600,000 to \$800,000?"

"I don't know what those costs are, and frankly, I don't care," Mr. Newman shot back. "It's the responsibility of the town to provide the town's children with an education. We are looking for outside funding, but right now we can't do more than that."

Almost immediately after the meeting was called to order, there was a motion for an Australian ballot, which voters approved. The first eight articles required a two-thirds vote.

All but one of the spending proposals passed with the required margin, with voters overwhelmingly deciding to back the request for \$10,000 to cover legal expenses.

Voters rejected the \$2,500 article for the shellfish and harbor expenses, failing by one vote, 27-15, to get the two-thirds majority.

The ninth warrant article - the transfer of funds to the town's general account - required only a simple majority and passed unanimously.

Mr. Widdiss and the other two selectmen, Mr. Newman and Michael Hebert, were visibly pleased as the gavel came down at the conclusion of the meeting. The board let out a collective sigh of relief, offering smiles and handshakes.

"As the finance committee pointed out, we already know we are going to have another override situation in the spring concerning next year's budget, so we have to start planning now. We'll start formulating budgets and working with the finance committee," said Mr. Widdiss.

He said the board's top priority in the coming weeks is getting the treasurer's office up to speed, which was left a mess following the departure of former treasurer Beverly Widdiss, Mr. Widdiss' sister in law.

"I am interested in making sure we are in a different place this spring than last spring," Mr. Widdiss said.

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