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### **Aquinnah Town Leaders Scramble Anew for Fresh Revenues to Replace Shortfall**

By MAX HART

Aquinnah selectmen learned this week that the town now faces another financial dilemma: a \$25,000 budget shortfall for fiscal year 2005.

At a meeting on Tuesday originally intended to discuss finding new, long-term sources of revenue for the town, town accountant Marjorie Spitz said she discovered the budget discrepancy several weeks ago while preparing a report for the state Department of Revenue. She said the town has until June 30, the last day of the fiscal year, to obtain the funds.

Ms. Spitz listed two major culprits for the shortfall.

"We expected to have more in the way of parking lot revenues and public safety revenues, specifically the payments from the tribe [Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah)] for public safety," Ms. Spitz said on Wednesday. "Those are the two biggest holes."

The town has dealt with financial hardship all year, struggling to secure funding to pay for essential town services. Three failed attempts at a Proposition 2 1/2 override culminating with the use of transfers from the town emergency stabilization fund have until now produced just enough to cover a bare-bones budget. The new shortfall represents the fifth attempt this fiscal year by selectmen to cover town expenses.

Ms. Spitz told the board she has been bogged down compiling data from the last fiscal year, and that the shortfall was only discovered in the middle of January, just days before the blizzard. She said the matter is urgent, and the selectmen must identify sources for additional income in the coming weeks before the deadline for sending in the budget report.

"We need to commit to finding \$25,000 in local revenue now and fill that void," Ms. Spitz said. "But we have until June 30 to actually get the money."

The selectmen got right to the task, examining every current source of revenue.

They started with the beach parking lot fees and dates of operation, and discussed raising the cost of a full day's parking from \$15 to \$20. However, worried an increase in rates might be counterproductive and drive people away, selectmen agreed to begin charging for parking about one month earlier. The board estimated the extra month would generate about \$3,000.

The lot, which provides parking for the various town beaches, is a major source of income for the town. It was the also the major source of the shortfall this year. Actual revenue fell far short of projections, Ms. Spitz said.

Parking fees bring in between \$90,000 to \$110,000 a year, Ms. Spitz said.

Derrill Bazy, a member of the Aquinnah housing committee, offered some good news regarding the Vanderhoop homestead, a town-owned house available for event rentals. He estimated the historic building could bring in \$3,000 by the end of the fiscal from weddings and other events. He

also said rent from summer caretakers may help.

Selectmen also examined revenue generated by town moorings in Menemsha Pond. Board chairman Carl Widdiss said he thought town residents were getting a bargain and suggested tripling mooring fees in the head of pond, from \$50 to \$150. In the West Basin section of the pond, he suggested more than tripling the rates, from \$75 to \$300.

"I think you have to look at reality, at what's standard for the area, and you'll find that \$300 is a bargain," he said. The other two selectmen, Jim Newman and Michael Hebert, were hesitant.

"I'd be more comfortable with \$250," Mr. Newman said.

After some discussion, Mr. Newman and Mr. Widdiss agreed on \$300, with Mr. Hebert abstaining.

Selectmen also discussed raising the lease prices for the shops at the circle. The lease agreement currently allows the town to raise the rent four to eight per cent, and the selectmen agreed to an eight per cent increase. The jump in rent would amount to about \$3,000.

The board is also exploring a fifty cent per head surcharge for tour bus riders visiting the cliffs. The selectmen will meet with tour operators in the coming weeks to discuss the proposal.

As for the public safety revenues the tribe agreed to pay the town, Mr. Widdiss said he is comfortable that the agreement will be honored, and he said he is currently negotiating with the tribe to pay more than the \$8,000 promised. In the original agreement the tribe pledged to pay \$48,000 over six years. The town has received one payment of \$8,000.

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