

As usual, Aquinnah budget awaits free cash calculation

May 5, 2005

By Nelson Sigelman

Although Aquinnah town officials head into the annual town meeting Tuesday evening with the expectation that there will be enough free cash to fund their annual meeting warrant, the selectmen are prepared with a \$170,025 fall-back position.

If needed, a series of Proposition 2.5 override articles requesting that sum may be put to voters at a special town election on an unannounced date that the selectmen hope will not come.

Up until April 29, selectmen were still tinkering with the operating budget and annual warrant. With the town report and warrant sitting at the printer's, selectmen increased a \$57,500 Proposition 2.5 override needed to fund the general operating budget to \$90,000 and eliminated a request for a new boat motor.

Budgetary brinksmanship in the weeks before the annual town meeting is a familiar state of affairs for voters in the small up-Island town. Every spring for each of the past five years, the unknown, or known and uncertified, amount of free cash available to the town has shaped the conduct of annual town meetings.

Free cash represents the difference, often a positive balance, between a town's budget and the amount of tax revenue raised, certified by the state Department of Revenue. Town officials said they are only waiting for the department of revenue to certify a free cash amount projected to be a minimum of \$166,000.

At 7 pm Tuesday evening in Aquinnah town hall, voters will take up a spare 22-article annual town meeting warrant that includes a \$2,487,521 operating budget for fiscal year 2006, up six percent over the previous year.

Proposition 2.5 override requests on the warrant include: \$90,000 needed to fund the general operating budget; \$13,000 for audit and accounting services; \$4,600 for a new copy machine; \$32,000 for a new police vehicle; \$3,200 for a shed for the shellfish department; and \$6,200 for a new mower for the highway department.

The Prop 2.5 requests include a combination of debt and capital exclusions. If all of the overrides pass, the tax rate would increase by 42-cents per thousand, or \$210 for a house valued at \$500,000, according to the town accountant.

On Wednesday, voters will go to the polls to elect town officers. Camille Rose, the only candidate whose name appears on the ballot for selectman faces a write-in challenge from Faith Vanderhoop in a race for the seat formerly filled by Carl Widdiss, who decided not to seek re-election.

In the only other contest, incumbent Michael Stutz faces a challenge from Richard Lee for a three-year term on the board of assessors.

For the first time in years, a familiar name will not appear on the ballot. Jeananne Jeffers, Aquinnah's longtime clerk will not seek another term, leaving the position to be filled by a write-in candidate.

Carolyn Feltz, wife of town building inspector Jerry Wiener, said she would seek the job as a write-in candidate. Ms. Feltz, who has served as the town's temporary executive secretary for the past several months, said her positive experience in town government prompted her to run for the clerk's spot.

There are three ballot questions, all of which must first be presented for a vote Tuesday night. Question one is a nonbinding resolution that asks if voters favor the creation of a housing bank to be funded by a one percent fee on the sale of any property over \$750,000. Voters in Edgartown, West Tisbury, Chilmark, Oak Bluffs, and Tisbury have already approved a similar resolution.

The remaining questions ask voters if the town should appoint rather than elect the town tax collector and town treasurer.

Bare budget

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... of the most part, the largest increases in the general operating budget can be found in the costs of the selectmen's office, police department, ambulance service, shellfish/harbormaster, and employee benefits.

Spending in the selectmen's office jumps from \$45,115 to \$76,151, a 69 percent raise based on an increase in the wages of a new town administrator from \$29,443 up to a maximum of \$60,000, in keeping with the job's expanded responsibilities

The police department budget rises from \$269,529 to \$307,000, a 14 percent increase based on a hike in department wages.

The cost of ambulance service increases from \$65,973 to \$94,199 as part of enhanced coverage approved last year.

As a percentage, the shellfish/harbormaster department takes the biggest jump, 84 percent, based primarily on the willingness of the town to pay the full Martha's Vineyard Shellfish group assessment of \$25,000, which it decided not to do this year in order to save money.

Total debt payments will drop by nearly half, from \$95,000 to \$54,000, saving the town some money. But the cost of employee benefits, including insurance, will rise from \$259,696 to \$285,098.

Although the overall school cost will drop from \$909,451 to \$860,108 based on a reduction in the Up-Island Regional School District assessment, Aquinnah taxpayers will still devote more than a third of the town's operating budget to education.

Warrant changes

In addition to the budget, voters will be asked to take up several warrant articles designed to change the way Aquinnah conducts business. Articles five and six, which must also be approved on the ballot, would change the offices of treasurer and tax collector from elected to appointed positions.

Article seven asks the town to give the board of selectmen the option to combine the two positions into one. Jim Newman, Aquinnah selectman, said the restructuring is an effort to provide more oversight and control.

Article 18 asks voters to impose a four percent local room occupancy excise tax. The town estimates the new tax would generate \$4,000 in revenue.

The largest spending article is a \$160,000 request to fund the purchase of a new tank truck for the fire department.

Several articles mirror those already approved by voters in the other Island towns, including a request to fund a pilot year-round transit program for seniors, a nonbinding resolution in favor of a housing bank, and a resolution supporting the goal of a renewable energy Island.

Lingering questions

In the days leading up to the start of the last fiscal year on July 1, 2004, Aquinnah selectmen created the appearance of a balanced budget through a combination of cuts and revised revenue projections that included a payment from the Wampanoag tribe of \$48,000 to the town for providing past and present public safety services.

The agreement signed on June 5, 1995 between town and tribe officials stipulated that the town was to provide police, fire, and medical services on tribe property in return for an annual payment. But in the years following the signing ceremony, tribe and town leaders largely ignored certain terms of the agreement. As a result, no payments were received for five separate years.

To date, the tribe has paid \$8,000. According to town accountant Marjorie Spitz, revenue projections were revised in February for the current fiscal year to show a payment of \$8,000 in 2005 and an estimated payment of \$8,000 in FY 2006.

Mr. Newman said the outstanding \$32,000 is the subject of ongoing negotiations between representatives of the tribe and town. The discussions do not include Mr. Newman.

Last December, six months into the fiscal year and following three failed Proposition 2.5 override attempts, selectmen asked the voters at a special town meeting for the money they said was needed to keep the town functioning. The voters agreed to dip into the town's stabilization fund to the tune of \$54,800 after Carl Widdiss, chairman of the board of selectmen, assured voters that the stabilization fund would be replenished later, once free cash became available.

Although the warrant includes no provision for replacing the money taken from the stabilization fund, which is now less than \$200,000, Mr. Newman said that when the town is able it will put the money back. For now, he said, the town needs to see what will be available for free cash. "I am all for putting it back," he said, "it is healthier."

