

Aquinnah Opens Annual Town Meeting with Free Cash Unsettled Once Again

By MAX HART

After a tumultuous fiscal year that saw three failed attempts at a Proposition 2 1/2 override, an operating budget pared to the bone and the use of reserve funds to pay for basic town services, Aquinnah voters will look for a new start at their annual town meeting on Tuesday night.

They will be greeted by a 22-article warrant that includes a \$2,487,521 operating budget, almost a dozen separate spending requests and several nonspending resolutions with Islandwide implications.

The meeting begins at 7 p.m. in the old town hall building with moderator Walter Delaney presiding.

The following day, voters will head to the polls to choose a new selectman for the next three years. Carl Widdiss, who after nine years on the board decided not to run for reelection, will not be on the ballot. Running in her second straight campaign and hoping to take Mr. Widdiss' seat is Camille Rose, a longtime member of the planning board. She will be challenged by write-in candidate Faith Vanderhoop, who is running for office for the first time. In the only other contest on the ballot, Richard Lee will challenge Michael Stutz for a spot on the board of assessors. Mr. Stutz is the incumbent.

Polls open are from noon until 8 p.m. at the town hall.

But on Tuesday evening, all eyes will be on the town's spending proposals for the next fiscal year, and a big question mark looms: will there be a free cash figure?

Free cash, money unspent from the previous year's budget, can be applied to the following year's expenses pending certification by the state Department of Revenue. Last year, Aquinnah had no free cash and was forced to turn overrides to cover town operating expenses and other expenditures. But three override attempts failed, and the town was forced to run for a year on a skeleton budget.

This year, the town meeting will again begin with no guarantees about free cash.

By law, a town can only publish its warrant based on known revenues, so override requests were built into this year's warrant with the hope that the free cash figure arrives before the meeting. Over \$170,000 in overrides, including a \$90,000 general override for the town operating budget, will be needed if the town again ends up with no free cash.

At press time, Aquinnah town accountant Marjorie Spitz was still

awaiting word from the state on that figure, which she estimated at over \$150,000.

With or without free cash, voters will take up the 22-article warrant, starting with the town's operating budget. This year's budget reflects a six per cent increase from last year's requested amount of \$2.3 million. Most of the increase can be tracked to a sharp rise in public safety costs, which jumped 23 per cent. The cost of ambulance service is up 40 per cent and expenses for the shellfish and harbor master's department are up 84 per cent. During last year's budget crunch, voters declined to pay the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group assessment; this year the assessment comes in at \$25,000.

General government rose from \$335,020 to \$385,896, but most of the increase stems from \$30,000 in additional funding for a new town manager position.

Education spending is down six per cent from \$909,451 to \$860,108.

Almost half of the 22 articles on the warrant are spending requests. The largest request is a \$160,000 capital expenditure for a new tanker truck for the fire department. Other spending requests include \$32,000 for a new police cruiser, \$4,600 for a new copy machine and \$3,200 for a new shed the shellfish department wants to build at the West Basin landing.

Voters will also be asked to spend \$17,000 for the town's share in paramedic training for Tri-Town emergency medical technicians and up to \$17,630 for a two-year pilot program sponsored by the Vineyard Transit Authority to fund year-round service for the Senior Day program.

There are several nonspending articles. In an effort to increase accountability and efficiency in the town hall, selectmen will ask voters to decide whether two positions - tax collector and treasurer - should be changed from elected to appointed positions. Voters will also be asked if the two positions should be consolidated into one job, a common practice in towns around the state. Currently, Audrey Jeffers-Mayhew performs both duties.

In an effort to generate more revenue for the town, voters will also be asked to adopt a rooms tax for inns and bed and breakfasts allowed under state law. The four per cent levy would take effect July 1 of this year, and according to Ms. Spitz, would generate approximately \$4,000 to \$6,000 a year.

Over \$100,000 generated from the Community Preservation Act awaits dispersal to various community preservation funds, pending approval by voters.

Aquinnah is also the last town to vote on the creation of the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank. The resolution has passed in

...and the Vineyard Housing Bank. The resolution has passed in each town and will move into the legislative phase if Aquinnah voters say yes.

In the town election on Wednesday, voters will choose between a veteran of town affairs and a political newcomer for their next selectman. Camille Rose is a longtime member of the town planning board who ran against Mr. Widdiss last year and lost by four votes. Ms. Vanderhoop, who has never held town office, has publicly pledged an aggressive write-in campaign.

Both candidates have stated a desire to improve the relationship between the town and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), foster greater trust and involvement among town residents, and find solutions to the fiscal problems that have hamstrung the community in recent years.

"Being involved in town affairs for over 30 years I think says something about my commitment to Aquinnah, but it also gives me a certain perspective on how to make it better," Ms. Rose said. "I think I can bring a new way to look at financial affairs. I really believe there are many things we can do to make this town stronger if we only work more closely together. There is a tremendous amount of talent in this town, and I want to tap into it."

Ms. Vanderhoop could not be reached for comment.

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