

Flush with cash, Aquinnah voters spend \$2.7 million

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By Nelson Sigelman

What a difference \$297,851 makes. Aquinnah voters, who only days before faced an annual town meeting laced with Proposition 2.5 overrides, found themselves flush with free cash at their annual town meeting Tuesday night.

Voters had no trouble spending the money, applying it to a fiscal year 2006 operating budget shortfall and several Proposition 2.5 warrant article spending requests.

Town officials were hopeful they would receive a certified free cash figure from the state in time for the meeting. The apparently conservative estimate was that there would be a minimum of \$166,000 available to spend. Instead the figure was \$297,851.

All that money did little to grease the wheels of political debate. Aquinnah voters made long work of a short warrant, discussing several proposals by town officials to reorganize town management and bolster financial and administrative controls.

The meeting began at 7 pm with an enthusiastic standing round of applause by voters for outgoing selectman Carl Widdiss, who decided not to seek reelection after three terms in office. By the time the meeting concluded a little after 10 pm voters had approved an operating budget of \$2,402,491 and all but one of the nine spending articles on the 22-article meeting warrant.

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

Carolyn Feltz is running for the position of town clerk as a write-in candidate, a spot left vacant when Jeananne Jeffers, Aquinnah's longtime clerk, announced she would not seek another term.

Election results are available at www.mvtimes.com

Roughly 65 voters gathered for the last of the Island's annual town meetings Tuesday, and the first order of business was a series of reports on town affairs. Marjorie Spitz, town accountant, said that while from the outside it may have appeared that town officials did not know where they were headed, a new degree of professionalism had been injected into town affairs.

In one recent change, the town hired Judy Jardin, former Chilmark town treasurer, as a consultant. Ms. Jardin, who has a reputation as a scrupulous financial manager, has been assisting in the Aquinnah town office since December.

John Walsh, finance committee chairman, reported that the town had requested that the state Division of Revenue services conduct a review of the town's policies and practices.

In the five other Island towns, annual town meetings are something of a semi-formal affair. Once they are recognized by the moderator, voters stand to speak, often at a designated microphone, and identify themselves.

But in a style unique to the Island's westernmost town, Aquinnah town meetings are more like a very large family dinner party presided over by an uncle who exerts authority but sometimes prefers to adopt the approach of a referee in the final minutes of a playoff game and lets the players play.

Moderator Walter Delaney had begun a line-by-line review of the operating budget when he was questioned about a new item, \$60,000 for an administrator. Joe Corbo, a member of the finance committee, explained that the town needed a strong administrator, someone who could keep things from falling through the cracks.

Selectman Jim Newman said it would provide accountability. But Russell Smith disagreed with the decision to

address the position within the budget rather than as a separate warrant article for consideration by voters.

Mr. Widdiss said it was not a new position but an upgrade of an existing position that must take place as soon as possible. Voters questioned the salary range and duties.

When it appeared the voters might next take up the specific job description, Mr. Widdiss called for a halt. "I can't see reading it aloud and nit picking the job description," he said.

The voters moved on to a \$90,000 Proposition 2.5 budget override request, which had been reduced to \$69,700 as a result of several line item reductions, including the elementary school assessment. Mr. Newman said funding the budget with an override rather than available free cash would provide more stability for the town next year. Selectman Mike Hebert agreed, telling the voters it was prudent to fund the operating budget from the tax base.

Mr. Newman said that what was really important was for voters to tell the selectmen "how they feel." The voters and the fin com did not feel like increasing their taxes and approved funding the budget from free cash.

Voters then moved on to the warrant articles totaling \$76,000, amending language subjecting each spending request to a proposition 2.5 override, to instead be paid for from free cash.

Three separate articles designed to combine the position of treasurer and tax collector into one appointed job generated more discussion relating to the conduct of town affairs in the past and what town officials wanted to see in the future. Selectmen and fin com members argued in favor of a change that would provide day-to-day accountability.

Some voters countered that the electoral process already provided accountability. Anne Vanderhoop said she did not wish to lose the power of her vote.

But Kristina Hook had another view. "Getting together in the room and moaning and groaning once a year is not oversight," she said.

The measures passed on a voice vote.

A request for \$3,200 for a shed for the shellfish department was tabled by a standing vote of 40 to 16 after Sarah Thulin, chairman of the conservation commission, said that the request had not been presented to the commission and should go through the town process.

A request to establish the Tri-town ambulance service as an enterprise fund, which would allow the towns to bill insurance companies for ambulance services, was the subject of considerable discussion and confusion. Voters were first told that individuals who did not have insurance would not be charged. That statement was then modified, and Mr. Delaney said it would depend on the circumstances and the details still had to be worked out. The article was tabled.

A proposal to institute a room occupancy tax also spurred debate from voters who thought it was unfair to pass a tax when there are only two inns in town. Speaking with some frustration in his voice Mr. Hebert said the voters had asked selectmen to pursue other sources of revenue and this was one such effort. The measure passed on a vote of 29 to 27.

By the time the voters reached article 22, a nonbinding resolution in favor of energy conservation, voters had no energy when Mr. Delaney asked voters if it was necessary for him to read the full text of the lengthy article. The measure passed without question or comment. **Send this page to a friend:**

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