

## Vineyard Gazette Online

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### **Suddenly Flush, Aquinnah Evades an Override Vote**

By MAX HART

Buoyed by an eleventh hour surprise of almost \$300,000 in free cash, Aquinnah voters wrapped up their annual meeting Tuesday night in an unfamiliar way: \$2.7 million in spending with no need for a Proposition 2 1/2 override.

And with a turbulent fiscal year now nearly a memory, the town heads into a new year on July 1 with its financial house in order.

In an evening that saw its share of twists and turns and featured discussion on everything from inn tariffs to the wisdom of electing versus appointing the town tax collector, voters approved an amended operating budget of \$2.4 million along with more than \$230,000 in warrant article requests.

Even with free cash at their disposal for the first time in years, voters carefully picked through the 22-article warrant, tabling two requests and engaging in frequent debate throughout the three-hour meeting.

Moderator Walter Delaney called the meeting to order a little after 7 p.m. Although an official count was mistakenly overlooked, town officials estimated a turnout of about 65 voters.

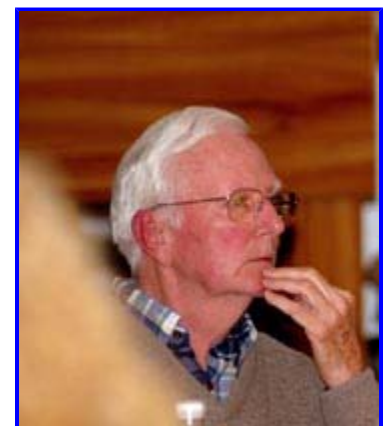
The atmosphere was congenial and upbeat, as a brilliant setting sun briefly flooded the old town hall through west-facing windows. Before getting down to business, Mr. Delaney thanked selectman Carl Widdiss for his nine years of service on the board, and voters responded with a rousing standing ovation. Mr. Widdiss did not run for a fourth term this year.

"It has been an experience," he said to scattered laughter, joking that he plans to take up golf with his newfound free time.

Town accountant Marjorie Spitz laid out the ground rules for the evening over the newly certified free cash. The warrant was originally written with two proposed overrides: a \$90,000 general override for the operating budget and \$76,000 to cover six spending articles. Ms. Spitz said the town had a choice: approve the overrides or amend the articles to use free cash.

Ms. Spitz reported that the town currently has \$197,000 in the stabilization fund and that the town intends to replenish the \$54,000 it withdrew to cover budget expenses for the current fiscal year.

"I think there have been many, many good decisions made this year," Ms. Spitz concluded, but she also cautioned: "What we do with the free cash may determine what



we do in the coming years."

On the budget there was some discussion over the selectmen's plan to hire an administrator at a cost of \$60,000.

"I would have liked to have seen the job description before we vote on it," said Berta Welch. "The finance committee is asking us to vote on something we haven't seen yet," she added.

"I object to getting into the details of this job description," Mr. Widdiss countered. "Several committees gave their inputs, and there are some good, thoughtful people in those groups. I really don't want to be here all night."



But the discussion continued. Finance committee member Joe Corbo explained the details of the job and said the town desperately needs an administrator.

"We are just trying to make business in town hall more efficient," said selectman Jim Newman.

One budget line item left voters smiling when they learned that the printed warrant for the town's elementary education assessment was \$20,000 higher than the actual assessment, thanks to a reduction that was approved earlier in the year by the Up-Island regional school committee. An amendment to reduce the line item passed unanimously.

Once the budget discussion ended, debate began over how to pay for it. Selectmen urged voters to approved the \$69,700 budget override option and leave free cash for the warrant articles. Mr. Newman called for honest debate.

"What's really important is for us to hear how you feel tonight, not at the polls," he said.

Finance committee chairman John Walsh opposed the selectmen.

"It's not unsound to vote for an override, but we feel if there is money in free cash, we should use it in this case," he said.

"An override would give us more stability and more cash should we need it next year," Mr. Newman countered. "I think it seems like a sound financial move going into the future."



Selectman Michael Hebert agreed. "If we continue to spend free cash on basic line item necessities, it will become a problem down the line," he said.

The debate went on. Finally, planning board member Peter Temple moved to adopt an amended budget and pay for it with free cash.

Voters agreed.

Six spending articles on the warrant also called for overrides to the state-mandated tax cap, and voters decided instead to pay for three with free cash, including \$32,000 for a new police cruiser, \$17,000 to train tri-town emergency medical technicians at the paramedic level and \$13,000 for the town audit.

A \$3,200 request to build a shed at the West Basin for the shellfish department was turned down.

A request to establish the tri-town ambulance service as an enterprise fund was tabled after voters expressed confusion over the details and the merits.

Voters agreed to borrow \$140,000 to buy a new tank truck for the fire department, which also brought a round of applause.

Nonspending items also drew lively discussion. In three consecutive articles, selectmen proposed changing both the treasurer and tax collector from elected to appointed positions, also asking for permission to combine the two jobs into one. Selectmen cited better accountability as the reason.

Town treasurer Beverly Widdiss resigned abruptly last fall. Audrey Jeffers-Mayhew, the current tax collector and interim treasurer, threw her support behind the plan, saying that the two jobs are combined in other small towns around the state. Being appointed rather than elected made no difference to her, Ms. Jeffers-Mayhew said. But Anne Vanderhoop said she felt like she was having a privilege taken away from her.



In the end voters approved all three changes. Consolidation of the two positions will not take effect until next year when terms expire for Ms. Jeffers-Mayhew.

A plan to impose a four per cent rooms tax on local inns and bed and breakfasts also sparked debate. Allowed under state law, the rooms tax has been adopted by other Vineyard towns. Aquinnah has only two inns, and some thought a rooms tax could hurt business.

In the end the article was approved 29-27.

Voters approved a nonbinding resolution calling for the creation of a Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank. Aquinnah is the sixth and final town to approve the measure on town meeting floor.

Voters also approved the dispersal of Community Preservation Act funds and adopted an Islandwide resolution supporting renewable energy.

Before the crowd dispersed, Mr. Widdiss thanked longtime town clerk Jeananne Jeffers for her service to the town.

"She worked many, many more hours than she was paid for," he said to one last ovation before voters filtered into the darkness.

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