

Editorial
Sunshine
July 7, 2005

Communication between the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah and the town of Aquinnah has not worked well for a long time. Troubled communication has led to resentment, suspicion, and to failure. The most difficult problems ought to be confronted and resolved, but in Aquinnah the preferred route has been to let matters slide. It's been wasteful and irresponsible on the part of the town and the town selectmen in particular.



Pressed by voters and taxpayers, and by financial good sense, the selectmen have expressed new determination to address the matter of the financial obligation incurred by the town for public safety services provided to it by Aquinnah fire and police. A meeting to negotiate the matter was set for Tuesday this week.

Town and tribe officials signed the public safety agreement on June 5, 1995. Both sides celebrated it as the first government-to-government agreement between the tribe and the town. There would be others, folks thought, for instance a contribution from the tribe to help with soaring education costs associated with the creation of the tribe's housing development. At the time the housing was under consideration, tribe leaders suggested that there were funding sources that would be available to help out. No such funding assistance has ever materialized. But leave that aside for the moment.

The safety agreement required the town to provide police, fire, and medical services on tribe property. In return, the tribe obligated itself to make an annual payment to the town for the services.

The first several years the tribe made payments of \$8,000 annually. Later, tribe and town leaders abandoned some terms of the agreement, including one that called for the two sides to meet annually. So the tribe made no payments for five years while the town continued to provide the services. The Times has reported that tribe leaders said they had not received bills. Former Aquinnah town treasurer Beverly Widdiss said she sent bills each year.

Just before the start of the 2005 fiscal year, just ended, when Aquinnah selectmen were scrambling to balance the town budget through a combination of cuts and revised revenue projections, it became clear that one revenue source — the expectation that the Wampanoag tribe would pay \$48,000 for current and past due safety services — was doubtful. Indeed, in early fiscal 2005, the tribe did pay \$8,000 of what it owed. The outstanding balance and the future relationship of town and tribe were on the agenda Tuesday.

What was not on the agenda was openness. Carl Widdiss, the Wampanoag chairman, told a Times reporter to leave and — something more dismaying — Jim Newman, the Aquinnah selectman designated to represent the town in the talks, agreed to the expulsion. Mr. Newman's interest ought to have been in conducting these discussions in the bright sunshine, not in the darkness that has led to so much distrust, resentment, and failure over the years. He ought to have insisted on open discussions. Mr. Newman ought to have had his constituents and their interests at heart, knowing that whatever the outcome, discussions conducted in the open will inspire trust, even if they prove difficult and disappointing.

Whatever the goals of the tribe may be, the goal of the town leadership must be to resolve this matter in a way that settles not only the financial questions but improves the wounded relationship between Aquinnah voters and their town government. In this case, as in so many others, the answer is sunshine.

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