

Aquinnah, tribe reach deal on public safety dollar figure

July 21, 2005

By Nelson Sigelman

A representative of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) described the outlines of an agreement reached between tribal representatives and Aquinnah officials, under which the tribe will compensate the town for public safety services supplied to tribal lands, at a meeting of the town selectmen Tuesday night.

Brett Stearns, tribal natural resource director and a member of the joint tribal-town public safety committee, said that the tribe had agreed to pay the town \$11,000 for services received in fiscal year 2005, which ended on June 30.

Mr. Stearns, who had expected to be joined at the meeting by Donald Widdiss, tribe chairman, said the agreement is only a draft document, and the tribal council has yet to approve it.

Mr. Stearns also outlined several of the tribe's contributions to the community, including road work to reduce road runoff at the intersection of South Road and Church Street that will be funded by an Environmental Protection Agency grant; the use of a Coast Guard boat acquired through a federal surplus program; and funding for various community summer programs.

The town and tribe will meet this fall to agree on an amount for the current 2006 fiscal year. Mr. Stearns said the committee had worked well together, and all agreed it was best to start the process early.

The public safety agreement was signed on June 5, 1995, between town and tribe officials with much fanfare as the first government-to-government agreement between the tribe and town. The agreement provided that the town would deliver police, fire, and medical services on tribe property in return for an annual payment, to be set by a committee each year.

For the first several years, the tribe made payments of \$8,000 annually. But later, tribe and town leaders largely ignored certain terms of the agreement, including meeting annually.

As a result, no payments were received for five years. The tribe said it had not received a bill. Former town treasurer Beverly Widdiss said she sent bills annually, but received no payment.

Asked by The Times about the current status of the outstanding payments, Jim Newman, chairman of the selectmen, said he did not know and would have to check with the town accountant.

Camille Rose, selectman, said that while she appreciated various tribe contributions and gifts, she said in some cases they might be things the town would not normally want, such as a used Coast Guard patrol boat, and could not be considered payments without first seeking town meeting approval.

Mr. Newman said the agreement that was reached envisions a cash payment.

In other business, selectmen, residents, and members of the town cemetery committee engaged in a sometimes philosophical discussion regarding policies governing the town's burial place, which includes a field long used by members of the Wampanoag tribe.

The selectmen approved a schedule of charges for plots, an application form, and burial residency requirements, but they balked when it came to imposing rules on what graveside visitors could leave on grave sites.

Karl Burgess, a former selectman and member of the cemetery committee, said that the cemetery, particularly its older tribal portion, is badly in need of a cleanup. He said some grave markers are completely overgrown and more maintenance is needed.

But Ms. Rose said she preferred the natural look of the town cemetery rather than the more manicured look of those in the down-Island towns. She objected to any policy that did not allow people to leave whatever objects they might wish in honor of the dead. "This is a community of unique individuals, and they express themselves in different ways," she said.

Mr. Burgess said some of those chosen methods made it very difficult to mow gravesites. "I don't want to be a czar of the dead," said Mr. Burgess, making his political intentions clear, "but I want it to look nice."

The selectmen agreed to take no action on that portion of the regulations and to visit the cemetery prior to their next scheduled meeting in August. **Send this page to a friend:**

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