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EDITORIALS

Blueprint for Change

The state Department of Revenue has given political leaders in Aquinnah a clear blueprint for improving financial management in the town and also reinforced the value of cooperative planning and open discussion, as seen lately between the town and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).

It is important to recall the state review was solicited by the selectmen last spring after a period of financial disarray that included three failed Proposition 2 1/2 override requests and four budget revisions, leaving Aquinnah with barely enough money to cover basic services. Since that straitened time, town leaders have taken significant steps to bring order and professionalism to financial management in Aquinnah, as noted in the state report last week. But there is still work to be done.

The state's practical recommendations reach into many town hall offices, including the administrator, accountant, assessors, and treasurer and tax collector. The underlying message is clear: The effort to improve Aquinnah town affairs must cover all departments and include every municipal employee.

Responsibility now falls to the selectmen to bring everyone on board and set a schedule for effecting the changes.

The state also brings needed perspective to the town's murky financial relationship with the Wampanoag tribe.

Of particular importance, the report points directly to the housing development built in 1994 on tribal land, and to the costs of educating the children who live there in the Vineyard school system. Aquinnah taxpayers are spending more than one-fifth of their \$2.5 million budget for fiscal year 2006 on the education of children who live on tax-exempt land. And there is no set formula for calculating payments to the town in lieu of taxes.

The circumstances clearly demand a broader dialogue between town officials and the governing tribal council. And such discussions must include the fair allocation of payment by tribal members for services provided by the town. The inconsistent and uncodified payment practices cannot continue if Aquinnah is to

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secure a stable financial footing in the future - a goal that is of benefit to every citizen in town.

Admittedly, the subject is sensitive and politically charged. But the positive and respectful tone of the present land use talks between the town and tribe sets the stage for such a discussion to take place.

It is time now for town government officials and tribal representatives to put these critical issues on the agenda and proceed to meaningful talks that offer at least the prospect for compromise and solution.

In Praise of Herring

As much a sign of spring on the Vineyard as the first peeping of pinkletinks is the return of herring to Island waters. A century ago, the silvery schools of alewives ran so thick at Mattakessett in Edgartown a person could catch them with a dip net alone; it was the largest commercial herring fishery in Massachusetts.

Today such abundance is but a distant memory. For several years Island shellfish and environmental managers have reported sharp declines in herring stocks - and statewide the news is even more dire. The Division of Marine Fisheries reports the volume in Massachusetts herring runs dropped by roughly one-half to three-quarters from 2004 to 2005, following several consecutive years of slower but steady decreases.

To halt the decline, the state Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission has imposed an unprecedented ban on the harvest, possession and sale of herring through 2008. Though enacted in November, the moratorium in effect begins now, when the fish return from the ocean to spawn in the freshwater ponds where they were born.

The protection of herring is of course about more than protecting a cultural legacy. They are an essential part of a healthy coastal ecosystem, feeding on plankton and phytoplankton and serving as food for bluefish, striped bass and osprey. Within the fishing industry, herring roe are sold as a delicacy; more often the herring themselves are used by recreational and commercial fishermen as bait.

Vineyard environmental managers in fact already have taken a number of steps - in particular over the past five years - to counter the herring's disappearance. Protective measures have included reduced bag limits and restricted harvest times. Restoration efforts are under way as well, including a program to revitalize the old herring run at Mattakessett and the



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construction of a new herring ladder at the head of Lake Tashmoo in 2002.

These conservation and restoration measures deserve the broadest possible public support - and the state decision to enact a three-year ban on the harvest of herring also is worthy of commendation. Fisheries managers have acted decisively and with urgent foresight to address the precipitous population decline.

It undoubtedly will take fishermen time to adjust to these new conservation strictures; they cannot catch alewives this spring. But as strange as it seems now to face the present season without a commercial herring fishery, it is far more troubling to contemplate the disappearance of this vital resource from Island waters altogether.

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