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### **Voters in Aquinnah Face Budget Deficit**

*Shortfall of Over \$200,000 Expected; Town Meeting Warrant to Include 12 Separate Override Questions*

By JAMES KINSELLA  
*Gazette Senior Writer*

Aquinnah voters will confront a series of choices at their May 9 annual town meeting - some may consider them Hobson's choices - including whether to fund the town shellfish and harbor master operation and community programs for children and senior citizens.

The reason is an operating budget shortfall of more than \$200,000 and at the town meeting voters will consider 12 operating Proposition 2 1/2 override proposals totaling almost \$207,000. Voters also will decide whether to approve a \$167,000 debt exemption to fund the construction of a new public safety garage, and two capital overrides totaling \$8,511 to fund a carbon monoxide warning system and a new siren and platform at the fire station.

The finance committee will vote its recommendation for the budget and the proposed overrides and exemption at a meeting set for 5 p.m. Wednesday at town hall.

The override and exemption votes are required under Proposition 2 1/2, a state law that restricts annual increases in the town's property tax levy limit.

The proposed operating overrides reflect a renewed financial squeeze in Aquinnah. In 2004, voters rejected three Proposition 2 1/2 override attempts before approving \$54,800 in borrowing from the stabilization fund at a special town meeting in December.

Last spring, voters were slated to face a \$69,700 budget override request at the annual town meeting. But voters tapped an eleventh-hour infusion of \$300,000 in free cash to obviate the override and fund other warrant articles.

This year, the board of selectmen has proposed a \$2.5 million operating budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. The budget is an increase of \$37,341, or 1.5 per cent, over the budget for the current fiscal year. The budget includes a 4 per cent cost of living increase for town employees.

The selectmen also have added 12 spending proposals totaling \$206,752 covering items that normally would be part of the town's operating budget. They include funds for the shellfish and harbor master budget, the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group, the Up-Island Council on Aging, the community programs budget and the Martha's Vineyard Refuse and Resource Recovery District.

If voters approve all 12 spending proposals, three additional items with no tax impact totaling \$20,990, and the rest of the operating budget, the overall operating budget would total \$2.7 million, an increase of \$265,083, or 10 per cent over the current year.

Unlike last year, free cash will not ride to the rescue. Town administrator Jeffrey Burgoyne said the state certified about \$35,000 in free cash in the town earlier this year, not enough to wipe out this year's proposed override.

Mr. Burgoyne said Wednesday that Aquinnah is facing a surge in assessments for elementary and high school students. The assessments are increasing by \$174,049, or 20 per cent, to a little over \$1 million.

Mr. Burgoyne said town officials decided to give the education costs priority in the budget; therefore, to come in with a balanced budget, the selectman have isolated other operating costs and listed them as proposed expenses. The town will fund them only if voters approve them as operating overrides at the May 9 town meeting and in corresponding ballot questions in the town election the following day.

Stefanie Hecht, chairman of the finance committee, said the committee learned at the start of the budget process in late February about the potential size of the deficit, following meetings with department heads and school officials.

Town officials calculate the average tax bill would total \$2,910 from the \$2.52 million operating budget. The higher proposed budget, including the operating overrides, would result in an average tax bill of \$3,190. The operating overrides would account for an average increase of \$280.

The debt exclusion for the garage would raise the average tax bill another \$6 in the coming year. The carbon monoxide detection system would add \$6.75 to the average bill and the new siren and platform would add \$4.50.

Operating override proposals waiting for the voters at the May 9 meeting and May 10 election include \$40,625 for the shellfish and harbor master budget; a \$27,400 contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group; \$27,550 for the Up-Island Council on Aging; \$27,394 as the town's assessment to the Martha's Vineyard Commission; \$23,850 for community programs; and \$23,102 for the town's assessment to the regional refuse district.

The proposals also include \$15,552 for assessors' health insurance; \$6,000 for assessors' salaries and \$2,400 toward assessors' expenses; \$6,005 for the Dukes County Housing Authority; \$4,000 for library wages; and \$3,224 for the Island Council on Aging.

Aquinnah shellfish constable and harbor master Brian Vanderhoop said he knew this year's contribution to the shellfish group could be in jeopardy because of the town's budget problem. But when he returned from a vacation, Mr. Vanderhoop was surprised to learn that the entire town shellfish and harbor master program had been listed as an override.

"I was shocked, to say the least," Mr. Vanderhoop said. "For the 12 years I've been working for the town, I would never foresee anything happening like this."

Mr. Burgoyne said the existence of the shellfish program operated by the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) operated on Menemsha Pond would lessen the possible impact of cutting the town program.

But Mr. Vanderhoop said the tribal program focuses on aquaculture, while the town program is involved with the seeding, harvesting and management of wild shellfish. He also said the harbor master program helps provide safety for boaters.

"You think they would find other ways to get the money," Mr. Vanderhoop said.

Mr. Burgoyne acknowledged that the town faces contractual obligations to fund some of the expenses listed as overrides, including the assessment for the Martha's Vineyard Commission and the regional refuse district.

If voters reject the overrides, Mr. Burgoyne said a special town meeting likely will be scheduled. Then Aquinnah voters would decide whether to tap the stabilization fund, which now totals \$244,000, to help balance the budget.

Despite the potential spike of 10 per cent in the operating budget, a number of budget items show modest increases or even declines.

The selectmen's budget would rise from \$81,151 to \$85,651; the legal budget is level-funded at \$40,000; and data processing would rise from \$18,420 to \$20,000. General town expenses would fall from \$23,000 to \$21,250; the town accountant budget would decline from \$47,504 to \$44,450; and general insurance would fall from \$36,700 to \$35,100.

After education, the largest chunks of the town budget include \$470,061 for public safety and \$380,271 for general government.

At the annual town meeting last spring, the selectmen asked Aquinnah residents to vote an operating override rather than fund the deficit with free cash.

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

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

The voters, however, opted to tap free cash - avoiding an override last year, but deepening the potential bite this year.

In March, the state Department of Revenue issued a report recommending, among other things, that the town avoid using free cash to pay for recurring expenses. The agency also recommended that the town create a master financial calendar to better plan its finances.

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