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NEWS

Last Vineyard Town Meeting Convenes Tuesday in Aquinnah

By JAMES KINSELLA
Gazette Senior Writer

A slew of proposed Proposition 2 1/2 overrides and a couple of requests to partly restructure town government are among the decisions awaiting Aquinnah voters at their annual town meeting and town election next week.

The annual town meeting is slated to begin at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday at the Aquinnah old town hall. Voters will take action on a 30-article warrant. The meeting will be preceded by a special town meeting at 7 p.m., where voters will act on a six-article warrant.

The town election is Wednesday; polls will be open from noon to 7 p.m. in the town hall.

No elected positions are contested this year. Among the unopposed candidates are James Newman for selectman, Berta Welch for planning board, Jerry Wiener for board of health and Carlos Montoya for Martha's Vineyard Land Bank Commission.

The election, like the annual and special town meetings scheduled for Tuesday, is dominated by financial questions. Voters also will decide whether to give the town administrator more power and to have the selectmen act as the town assessors.

The selectmen this year have proposed a \$2.5 million operating budget for the fiscal year starting July 1, an increase of \$37,341, or 1.5 per cent, over the current budget. They also are giving the voters a laundry list of \$206,752 in proposed operating overrides that would push the budget to \$2.7 million, which represents a 10 per cent increase over the current budget.

Operating override proposals 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; the town's \$27,394 assessment for the

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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.

Operating overrides approved at Tuesday's town meeting then will go before the voters at the ballot box on Wednesday.

Voters on Tuesday also will consider whether to approve spending \$167,000 to build a public safety garage and appropriating \$4,500 for the first year of payment on a 10-year note to finance the garage. The garage and debt spending needs two-thirds approval at the town meeting and majority approval at the town election.

In addition, the selectmen have requested two capital overrides totaling \$8,511 to pay for a carbon monoxide warning system and a new siren and platform at the fire station. These proposals also are contingent on passage at Wednesday's election.

Voters also will consider whether to adopt two proposals that stem from a recent state Department of Revenue review of town finances and operations.

One would change the position of town administrator to town coordinator, and give the coordinator authority to oversee other departments and personnel.

The second proposal would adopt state law to codify the town's existing quarterly property tax payment system.

At Wednesday's election, voters will decide whether to have the Aquinnah selectmen act as assessors. This proposal also is derived from the Department of Revenue report. Among other things, the report questioned the accuracy of property records in Aquinnah, where assessors use outdated maps and have not performed a full review of town properties since the mid-1990s.

The state recommended that the town shift the assessors from elected to appointed positions, as the selectmen previously did with the position of treasurer.

Alluding to past problems in the treasurer's office, the report stated, "Aquinnah has recently discovered the financial maelstrom that can be caused by an elected officer's failure to demonstrate the professional skills necessary to do the job. We suggest that the town learn from the mistakes made in the treasurer's office before it becomes a problem in the assessors' office."



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Mr. Burgoyne said the selectmen have proposed taking over the assessors' duties as a possible first step toward making the office appointed rather than elected.

The selectmen have sought and received a legal opinion that their assumption of assessor duties would end the elected assessor positions in town, including the position that Hugh Taylor is seeking in Wednesday's election.

The state agency paired the criticism of the Aquinnah assessing operation with concern over the abatement process in the Chappaquiddick section of Edgartown and a lengthy tax assessment appeal in West Tisbury in calling for the creation of a regional assessing office for the Vineyard.

At Wednesday's election, voters also will be asked whether they support a nonbinding resolution pertaining to the protection of water quality in Aquinnah. The town is considering whether to contribute to the Massachusetts Estuaries Project for analysis of Squibnocket and Menemsha ponds. The resolution asks the town to carefully consider the results of the estuaries project work and to support "all credible recommendations" to protect ponds, embayments and drinking water.

A proposal that will come before the voters on Tuesday will ask whether to allow the tri-town ambulance committee to start charging for ambulance calls. Voters in Chilmark and West Tisbury, the other towns in the tri-town operation, approved the proposal at their respective town meetings last month. Aquinnah fire chief Walter Delaney said charges would be set by Medicare and would vary run by run, depending on factors such as the distance covered and the amount of medical care provided by the ambulance crew.


At 7 p.m. Tuesday, before the annual town meeting gets under way, a special town meeting will consider a series of money transfers. They include using \$44,000 in unexpended money in the current year's health and dental insurance line item for 10 other uses, including \$10,000 for town counsel and \$7,000 for the finance committee's reserve fund; transferring \$10,000 from the waterways improvement fund for repair and improvements at the West Basin ramp and dock; and \$6,400 for installation of a gas-fired boiler at police headquarters.


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