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## *Aquinnah annual ends in a muddle*

By Nelson Sigelman - May 11, 2006

The Aquinnah annual town meeting began shortly after 7 pm Tuesday, with 58 out of the town's 394 voters present. A little after 9 pm and with next year's operating budget as well as his nerves in tatters, moderator Walter Delaney declared the meeting would be adjourned until June 8.

That much was certain. Exactly all of what occurred during a meeting marked by confusion, contention, and humor was not.

Voters failed to get through the \$2,517,883 fiscal year (FY) 2007 operating budget and never made it to the warrant articles. Even judged by Aquinnah's generous standards, this one was a doozy.

Yesterday, Aquinnah voters went to the polls to elect town officers in a series of uncontested elections and vote on a slate of 15 Proposition 2.5 override requests totaling \$206,752. Town officials said the outcome of that vote would help shape their future budget strategy.

In preparing the budget for the 2007 fiscal year, which begins July 1, town officials faced a 21-percent increase in the town's school assessment, from \$839,808 to \$1,013,857, and had only \$35,000 available in free cash.

Their original plan was to use the annual town meeting to pass an operating budget balanced by stripping it of regional assessments and various town costs, including the harbor master/shellfish department. Then the override process would be used to fund those items not included in the operating budget and increase the tax levy, something voters had not been willing to do in the past.

That plan did not take long to unravel, leaving the selectmen and members of the finance committee who had worked long and hard on it greatly frustrated.

### **Budget discord**

The first major snag in the line item review of the operating budget came when Walter Delaney arrived at the assessors department budget, which no longer included money for the three assessors' salaries or health insurance costs. The budget referred to a warrant article that would have the selectmen act as assessors.

Roxanne "Johnny" Ackerman told Mr. Delaney she wanted to talk about the lack of salary funding. Mr. Delaney said it would be discussed when the warrant article came up for discussion. Ms. Ackerman would not be put off.

"No, no," said Ms. Ackerman. "This is the budget, and I want to talk about the assessors salary in the budget."

"Even though it is a warrant article?" asked Mr. Delaney.

"Yes," said Ms. Ackerman.

Mr. Delaney sought parliamentary refuge with Ron Rappaport, town counsel, who advised him that Ms. Ackerman had every right to talk about it then and there.

Jim Newman, chairman of the selectmen, explained that selectmen were following the recommendation contained in a financial management review of the town by the Department of Revenue (DOR), which found numerous deficiencies in the assessing department.

The DOR report said the office does not maintain accurate up-to-date records, and the assessors, two of whom are often absent from town in the off-season, "continue to do the absolute minimum in order to generate a tax commitment year after year."

Ms. Ackermann said she was outraged that the DOR would recommend that voters eliminate "all elected positions in Gay Head (the previous name of the town, still preferred by many long-time residents)."

Camille Rose, a selectman, corrected Ms. Ackerman. DOR had not recommended eliminating all elected positions. Unquenched by the facts as presented, Ms. Ackerman's outrage continued to burn bright.

Adriana Ignacio said that if the assessors were not doing their job, then they needed to be made aware of that and be given an opportunity to step up and fulfill their responsibilities.

One issue was that the town now pays 50 percent of the cost of health insurance for assessors Hugh Taylor, Carl Widdiss, and Michael Stutz. In separate statements Mr. Widdiss and Mr. Taylor defended their records.

Mr. Widdiss said they did the job, as they had understood it, for years. To suggest the assessors are not doing their job is erroneous, he said.

Mr. Taylor said there was nothing in the DOR report's conclusions that spoke to efficiencies in the office. He added that the assessors acted appropriately, having in mind the job and size of the community.

Ms. Ackerman made a motion to restore the money removed from the budget. Hearing the voice vote, Mr. Delaney said it failed. Ms. Ackerman asked for a standing count. The motion failed, 27-30.

Mr. Delaney made it as far as the newly funded salary position of tax collector/treasurer. Ms. Ackerman said the salary of \$63,426 was too high. She offered a motion amending it to \$45,000. John Walsh, finance committee (fincom) member, said voters had not traditionally negotiated salaries on town hall floor.

Mr. Rappaport told him that, notwithstanding tradition, voters could do that. Ms. Rose said Audrey Jeffers-Mayhew had been doing a great job as treasurer and tax collector, and deserves it.

Rick Lee said he was offended by the discussion and the second-guessing of the finance committee. "We are not financial wizards," he said. "We don't sit and discuss these things. This is what the finance committee does. This is why we have a finance committee."

Barbara Bassett demanded to know why the town was not also willing to pay an equal salary to her sister, town accountant Marjorie Spitz. Ms. Ackerman's motion was defeated.

The next disruption in the reading of the budget came when a large hornet flew through the meeting room. In the firmest use of his gavel that night, Mr. Delaney clobbered the insect, and Mr. Walsh administered the coup de grace with his foot.

Each of the Island's town moderators has a distinctive style. Mr. Delaney's appears to be that of a troubled uncle attempting to control a fractious family. Every now and then, he just throws up his hands in futility.

As a result, at an Aquinnah town meeting, a speaker is as likely to outlast the competitors for the floor as he is to be recognized. And voters, when they do wait to be recognized before speaking, are identified by first names or nicknames.

The budget free-fall began in earnest when voters took up the budget for the shellfish/harbormaster, zeroed out in anticipation of a successful Prop. 2.5 override yesterday. Barbara Bassett asked that the \$26,125 salary for Brian "Chip" Vanderhoop, the town's popular harbormaster/shellfish warden, be replaced in the budget.

Mike Hebert, selectman, said that if voters did that it would put the budget over the levy limit and require an override vote. He said that the town was not eliminating the harbormaster's department but had decided to place it on the ballot as an override.

Ms. Bassett said it was "manipulative." Mr. Hebert said it was decided that was the best way to handle it. Mr. Walsh said replacing the money would not help solve the issue the town was trying to solve.

More discussion ensued. Town finances combined with personal loyalties into a volatile mix. Mr. Delaney let on to the voters that he intended to adjourn the annual town meeting to June 8 because town officials did not know what would happen the next day when voters decided on the overrides.

Stephanie Hecht, fincom chairman, explained that the town did not have free cash to fall back and the budget was prepared in the hope that voters would approve the overrides so next year they could avoid a repeat of the town's budget crunch.

A motion was made to replace Mr. Vanderhoop's salary. Mr. Delaney said the no's had it. Ms. Bassett disagreed with his hearing and called for a vote count. The motion passed 33 to 30.

Exasperated by the vote, Kristina Hook declared the meeting "an exercise in futility" and questioned the need to go on any further. The room broke into open discussion. With no explanation from Mr. Delaney, the selectmen, fincom members and Mr. Delaney rose to confer at the front of the room in a sidebar of sorts.

When they returned, Mr. Delaney declared the meeting adjourned until June 8 and said that when the voters reconvened they could discuss the items that did not pass on the override.

A last-ditch effort to reverse the vote mounted by Jay Theise, a voter who identified himself as a new arrival and spoke in the manner of a lawyer, which he is, addressing a jury, failed to attract any support. The discussion continued until one by one the voters filed out, including school officials who were never presented with an opportunity to make their case for an override.



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