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Sports
Nature & Conservation
Bird News
Fishing
Tides
Obituaries
Wedding Planner
Travel Guide

Weather

Current Conditions
Five-Day Forecast

Commentary

Editorials
Gazette Chronicle

Calendar

This Week
This Month
Music
Theatre
Movies
Submit an Event

Classifieds

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Help Wanted
Place an Ad

Travel Guide

Getting Here
Maps and More

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NEWS

Aquinnah Voters Tangle Over Budget; Town Meeting Adjourned Until June

By IAN FEIN

Aquinnah town finances were left in tatters after a tumultuous town meeting on Tuesday. But at the polls on Wednesday voters approved more than \$120,000 in Proposition 2 1/2 overrides, giving the town some breathing room to balance its budget.

Six of the 12 operating override requests approved on Wednesday came as a pleasant surprise to some town officials in Aquinnah, where voters have traditionally been wary of overriding Proposition 2 1/2, the state law that restricts annual increases in the town property tax levy limit. And the boost to the town's levy limit might help restore some semblance of order in Aquinnah after an annual town meeting that was far more chaotic than most.

Town moderator Walter Delaney on Tuesday night called for a vote to adjourn the meeting when it became clear that a large contingent of town voters were unhappy with the budget as presented. After more than an hour and half of discussion, marked by frequent disruptions and debate, voters were only halfway through the town budget - the third article on a 30-article warrant.

Mr. Delaney, selectmen, and finance committee will now meet with town counsel Ronald H. Rappaport on Monday at 5 p.m. in an attempt to reorganize the budget and untangle their financial mess. When they reconvene the annual town meeting on June 8, selectmen will have to ask voters to either cut costs or tap the stabilization fund to balance the budget.

If the voters do not approve a budget by June 30, the Aquinnah town hall will have to shut its doors.

Selectman and board chairman James Newman said yesterday that it was too early to tell what the board will try to do, but he acknowledged that he had been humbled by the week's events.

In the annual town election on Wednesday, Mr. Newman nearly

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 Island Info
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lost his seat to a last-minute write-in-campaign by Skye Lane resident Barbara Bassett, one of the selectmen's loudest critics at the town meeting on Tuesday. Mr. Newman narrowly edged Ms. Bassett, 72-59, while all of the other candidates on the ballot were easily elected to their positions without contest.

Some 157 residents, or 40 per cent of registered voters, cast ballots in the town election. Ms. Bassett yesterday could not be reached for comment.

"I felt the result of the election was a vote of no confidence in me as a selectman," Mr. Newman said. "And so I will need to work hard to regain the voters' support."

Mr. Newman also apologized yesterday for a personal comment he made about an elected assessor on the town meeting floor. He said his comment, about the assessor's time spent in the Bahamas during the winter, was out of place.

The remark came during a larger discussion about the future of the town board of assessors. Acting on the recommendation of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, which has expressed multiple areas of concern in the Aquinnah assessing department, the selectmen are seeking to switch the board from elected to appointed positions.

Voters at the polls on Wednesday voted 89-63 against having the selectmen act as assessors, but they also rejected override requests to pay for the assessors' salaries, health insurance and expenses. The assessors retained their positions, but, as of now, will not be compensated in the coming fiscal year. The ramifications of the votes, as well as the assessors' budget, will likely be discussed again at the June town meeting.

Mr. Newman yesterday also said that the selectmen made a strategic error by separating out certain budgetary line items for override votes. Specifically, he said it was a mistake to put the \$40,000 harbor master budget at risk.

The selectmen took a good deal of heat about the harbor master override at town meeting, which was adjourned after voters decided 33-30 to put the harbor master budget back in the operating budget. Ms. Bassett at town meeting called the override maneuver manipulative, and said it was unfair to the town harbor master and shellfish constable Brian (Chip) Vanderhoop.

The selectmen and finance committee members tried to explain to voters on Tuesday that they were forced to seek overrides because they faced an operating budget shortfall of more than \$200,000. And when deciding how to present the override request to voters, they decided to put on the chopping block some operating budgets - from key town programs such as the



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town harbor master, Up-Island Council on Aging, town community programs committee, and the Martha's Vineyard Refuse and Resource Recovery District - that they believed voters would support.

Voters on Wednesday approved those override requests, as well as library wages, for a total of roughly \$120,000. But they rejected six other operating override requests that totalled \$85,000.

Aside from the assessors' funds, voters also turned down the town's contributions to regional organization such as the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group, Dukes County Regional Housing Authority and the Martha's Vineyard Commission. The \$27,0000 commission assessment is mandatory, so the selectmen must still find a source of money to pay it.

Voters at the polls also rejected a \$167,000 debt exemption request to fund the construction of a new public safety garage, as well as two other override requests totalling \$8,500 to install a carbon monoxide detection system and warning siren in the fire station.

In the special town meeting that preceded the annual town meeting on Tuesday, the night actually began somewhat smoothly, with voters approving the first five articles before turning down a \$1,900 request for a water heater in the police station.

But the annual town meeting quickly turned divisive when Mr. Delaney reached the line items for the assessors' office in the budget.

Debate about the assessors' positions showed stark divisions among town residents. Roxanne Ackerman said she was outraged that the Department of Revenue asked town voters to eliminate their elected officials, and two of the three elected assessors defended their records on town meeting floor.

"We the assessors have done our job as we have known it to be over the years," said assessor Carl Widdiss. "Sure we do function in albeit an unconventional manner. But the assessors' office does function in service of our town," he added.

"We feel very confident that our job is done appropriately to the size of the community," said assessor Hugh Taylor. "There are lots of details that the Department of Revenue pointed out we are not complying with. But none of them I think are illegal."

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