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Post vote, Aquinnah picks up the pieces

By Nelson Sigelman - May 18, 2006

At a meeting Monday evening, selectmen and members of the finance committee, with assistance from town counsel Ron Rappaport, began picking up the pieces of Aquinnah's budgetary process.

The town officials were left with the job of finding sources of funds for various departments and costs in the aftermath of last week's annual town meeting, adjourned until June 8, and town election. Much of Monday evening's discussion was based on the outcome of 15 Proposition 2.5 override requests.

Voters who went to the polls last Wednesday said yes to only six of the Proposition 2.5 override questions on the ballot and turned down several regional assessments including \$27,394 for the Martha's Vineyard Commission (MVC), an assessment it is still legally bound to pay.

They also narrowly rejected an override request for \$6,055 to pay the Dukes County Regional Housing Authority assessment and also said no to \$27,000 for the Martha's Vineyard Regional Shellfish Group.

In total, voters approved \$122,351 in override spending, leaving more decisions ahead when voters reconvene on June 8 to finish up work on the budget and warrant.

Monday evening, town officials went through the list of budget line items that must be funded, including the MVC assessment and the assessor's department expenses, and items they would like to fund, such as the Regional Housing Authority and a warning siren for the fire station.

Next week, selectmen and members of the finance committee will meet with department heads to see where they can make additional cuts in the operating budget. Selectmen will be looking for approximately \$35,000.

During Monday's discussion, selectmen decided that a new garage was not necessary and put that project aside until next year. They said that the town could always rejoin the shellfish group next year. However, the selectmen said they wanted to try to find a way to pay the housing authority because the town had made a commitment to do so.

Selectman Jim Newman said there are no plans to seek another override at this time.

The strategy failed

In preparing the \$2,517,883 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.

Their two-part plan was to use the annual town meeting on Tuesday 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 at the polls on the following Wednesday.

That strategy failed when the annual town meeting ended in disarray after voters failed to

approve a \$2,517,883 fiscal year 2007 operating budget or take action on any warrant articles. It did not fare very well at the ballot box either when voters rejected nine Proposition 2.5 override questions on the ballot, in some cases by a wide margin.

Voter turnout was strong at the polls. A total of 157 voters out of 394, or 40 percent of the electorate, cast votes.

The only contested election was provided when Barbara Bassett mounted a last-minute write-in campaign against incumbent Jim Newman for a seat on the board of selectman. Mr. Newman won the election by a vote of 72 to 59.

Carlos Montoya replaced Michael Stutz on the Land Bank commission after the long-time land bank commissioner decided not to seek another term.

Mixed messages, close calls

That fact that voters rejected the MVC assessment by a vote of 92 to 61 took some town officials by surprise. On Monday, those who spoke said it was unclear whether the vote represented an anti-commission sentiment.

One of the flash points during the annual town meeting occurred over the selectmen's plans to zero out salaries and health benefit payments for the town's three elected assessors and appoint themselves to the job as a preliminary step to a reorganization of the office.

Those actions were based on the recommendations contained in a financial management review of the town by the Mass. Department of Revenue (DOR), which found numerous deficiencies in the assessing department.

Voters responded with a mixed message at the polls. They said no to a request to have the selectmen act as assessors by a vote of 89 to 63.

But they also said no to a request for \$6,000 to pay the elected assessors expenses (77 to 74), no (113 to 39) to a request for \$15,552 for their health insurance costs and no (88 to 66) to \$2,400 for their salaries.

Hugh Taylor, an assessor, said that at this point he had no plans to leave his position over the salary issue. Carl Widdiss said he is still considering the results. Michael Stutz said he would remain on the board and plans to seek state certification.

Much of the anger directed at town officials at the annual town meeting arose over their decision to make the Shellfish/Harbormaster operating budget a Prop. 2.5 override question. Voters restored that money on the town meeting floor and again at the polls by a vote of 89 to 65.

Voters also said no (103 to 48) to borrowing for the construction of a new garage; yes (87 to 67) to \$23,850 for the Community Programs operating budget; yes (105 to 53) for \$4,000 for library wages; no (104 to 50) to \$5,051 to install a carbon monoxide detection system in the fire station; no (114 to 40) to \$3,500 for a new warning siren and platform for the fire station; yes to \$23,102.00 for the Martha's Vineyard Refuse District assessment (101 to 52); yes to \$3,224 for the Island Council on Aging Services assessment (104 to 52); and yes to \$27,550 for the Up-Island Council on Aging Services assessment (96 to 59).



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