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## NEWS

### Aquinnah Voters Adopt Balanced Budget

By IAN FEIN

It took a month and a good dose of grief, but Aquinnah voters last week completed their annual town meeting and adopted a balanced \$2.6 million town budget.

The approval did not come a moment too soon for town officials, who needed to have a budget in place for the start of the 2007 fiscal year only three weeks away.

Discussion on Thursday was relatively mild compared with the first town meeting installment, which ended early last month after budgetary discord erupted in chaos. Though voters last week approved all but one of the spending requests, and passed many of them unanimously, a number of the budgetary line items were scrutinized by town residents.

Selectman and board chairman Michael Hebert at the outset on Thursday pleaded with the 40-odd voters present to maintain civility and order.

"I would appreciate if the proper respect and decorum could take place," Mr. Hebert said. "Please wait to be recognized by the moderator before making statements."

Skye Lane resident Barbara Bassett, who nearly toppled an incumbent selectman in a last-minute write-in campaign during the annual town election last month, continued her criticism of town budgetary practices on Thursday. She again called the selectmen's budget strategy manipulative, and berated them for separating out some popular and statutory line items as Proposition 2 1/2 overrides.

"If the Martha's Vineyard Commission payment was mandatory, then why was it put on as an override?" Ms. Bassett asked last week, after the commission assessment, which failed as an override at the polls, was placed back in the overall town budget. "Why would something that we were legally required to pay be put up for a vote?"

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Despite weathering some criticism, selectmen in the end actually succeeded in their tactics. Aquinnah voters, who were traditionally weary of overriding Proposition 2 1/2, the state law that restricts annual increases in the town property tax levy limit, last month gave town officials some budgetary breathing room by approving more than \$120,000 in overrides.

Selectmen then slipped back into the budget some of the important overrides that failed - including the \$27,000 statutory assessment to the Martha's Vineyard Commission - and made a few cuts to balance out the bottom line. The town housing committee offered to lower its own expense line by \$6,000 to fund the town's share of the Dukes County Regional Housing Authority, which also failed an override request at the polls.

Lighthouse Road resident Deborah Webb, the lone person to vote against the budget last week, told selectmen that their override strategy may have caused unintended cuts for certain programs and departments.

"When people went and voted on the overrides, they may have had many different reasons for voting whatever way," Ms. Webb said. "I think the regional housing authority and the town committee both need to be funded. But I voted no on everything [at the polls] because I was hoping you would go back and work on the budget."

Voters eventually approved the budget without any amendments from the floor, but Ms. Bassett and Russell Smith both questioned salary line items for the tax collector/treasurer, fire department and police department.

Finance committee members also expressed some concern about the police department wages, which went up more than 10 per cent this year to reflect previously negotiated increases. Unbeknownst to the finance committee, the latest police department contract signed by selectmen called for a seven per cent annual wage increase, on top of a cost of living adjustment of roughly four per cent.

"When this contract is up, it is quite unlikely we would support a seven per cent increase," said finance committee member John Walsh, who added that he only learned about the significant increase at last month's town meeting. "This [discussion] is essentially a message from voters, and I think it's been heard."

Aquinnah police chief Randhi Belain explained that the increases were negotiated to bring the town's wages in line with police officer salaries elsewhere on Island. But Mr. Smith told town officials that - Aquinnah being the smallest town on the Vineyard - they should not rely on comparing themselves to other towns.



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"It's a lot harder to patrol Circuit avenue [in Oak Bluffs] at 12 o'clock at night rather than the beach here [in Aquinnah]," Mr. Smith said.

The only spending request voters rejected last week was \$25,000 for a new police cruiser sedan. Residents questioned why the police department put so many miles on its current fleet of cars, and the finance committee, which earlier asked Chief Belain to pursue a hybrid sedan, did not recommend the request.

A simple majority of voters (21-15) supported the purchase, but it did not receive the two-thirds approval required for stabilization fund transfers.

Voters did approve \$5,000 stabilization fund transfers for assessors' expenses and a carbon monoxide detector in the fire station, even though both requests failed at the polls as override questions last month.

At one point on Thursday Ms. Bassett criticized the line item budget presented at town meeting, and said she was disappointed that voters do not see a more thorough breakdown of individual expenses. Her sister, town accountant Marjorie Spitz, replied that those numbers are now kept out of the budget to promote clarity, and that many of the expense breakdowns are available in her office in town hall.


Conservation commission chairman Sarah Thulin said it was incumbent upon voters to educate themselves about the budget prior to town meeting.


"I've been in town hall enough to know that there are endless finance committee meetings and budget preparatory meetings where they go over everything with a fine tooth comb," Ms. Thulin said. "As things get more sophisticated with town government, it is up to us to participate in those meetings and ask questions before we get here. It is our responsibility to do that."

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