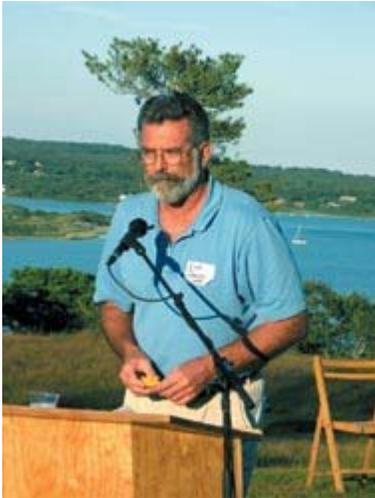


The Martha's Vineyard Times

Aquinnah taxpayers group looks to a future without lawsuits



With Menemsha Pond as a backdrop, Sheriff's Meadow Foundation executive director Richard Johnson described the work of his conservation organization at the summer meeting of the Aquinnah/Gay Head Community Association Monday evening. Photo by Nelson Sigelman

By Nelson Sigelman - August 24, 2006

On a hilltop offering one of the most magnificent views on Martha's Vineyard, members of the Aquinnah Gay Head Community Association (AGHCA) looked forward to devoting the group's energy and money into community endeavors and not lawsuits.

Larry Hohlt, AGHCA president, welcomed more than a 100 people to the lawn adjacent to the modest home (by current standards) of Yvette Eastman, a longtime seasonal resident. Standing at a microphone with views of Menemsha Pond, Quitsa, and the Atlantic Ocean beyond, Mr. Hohlt said that the recent legal battle with the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) had cost the group approximately \$280,000. Of that amount, the association has managed to raise enough money to pay off all but \$45,000 of the outstanding debt, he said.

In addition to being very expensive, said Mr. Hohlt, a retired lawyer, the lawsuit had consumed money and resources that should have been spent on other endeavors. Mr. Hohlt said he hoped that the group would never again be involved in litigation.

Unfortunately, because of the costs involved, he said the AGHCA had not been able to do many other things. Despite the financial drain the group had still managed to provide support for town and Island causes, including scholarships for high school seniors, contributions to the Vanderhoop Homestead and the activities of Island conservation groups.

"Until we are able to pay off the legal bills, we can't do much more than we are doing now," said Mr. Hohlt, "but that day will come."

Mr. Hohlt was referring to a three-year legal battle over the limits of Wampanoag tribal sovereignty that reached the state's highest court and ended this spring back where it started, in Dukes County

Superior Court. A lawyer representing the Wampanoag Tribe said the tribe would apply for town building permits for a small wooden shed and pier built without town permits in the winter of 2001 on tribal lands on the shore of Menemsha Pond.

The tribe's agreement to seek permits was in large measure due to the determination of the Aquinnah Gay Head Community Association, Inc., which continued to press ahead even when town selectmen faltered in the defense of the terms of the 1983 settlement agreement that led to federal recognition for the tribe.

It was left to the Association to carry the successful appeal to the State Supreme Judicial Court, an appeal later joined by the state Office of the Attorney General.

On Monday evening Mr. Hohlt spoke about the future work of the Association and his confidence that the "Intergovernmental agreement on cooperative land use and planning between the Wampanoag Indian tribe and the town of Aquinnah," would provide a framework for future cooperation.

Mr. Hohlt was anticipating that the agreement, which had the support of the tribal leadership, would be approved at a special town meeting the following evening. However, on Tuesday night the agreement was tabled after a block of tribal voters refused to support the document as currently written.

The guest speaker for the AGHCA meeting on Monday evening, Dick Johnson, executive director of the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, described the work of his organization, which has included preserving much of the Eastmans' acreage the guests overlooked that evening. Mr. Johnson described future plans to continue to preserve properties and scenic vistas along Moshup Trail and other areas of the Island.

For Mr. Hohlt and the members of the Association most involved with the lawsuit and the defense of an agreement signed in 1983, the view for the future, at least on Monday evening, was refreshing.

For more information on Aquinnah Gay Head Community Association go to www.aghca.org.

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