

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Editorial

Missed opportunity

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Aquinnah voters Tuesday missed an opportunity to create a pathway for cooperative decision-making between the town and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). The town chose to continue the climate of suspicion, distrust, and stalemate that has prevailed for years. In fact, it was a sizable block of tribe members, who are also voters - joined by a small group of non-Indians who sympathize with the Wampanoags' unease at the proposed memorandum of understanding - who chose to delay a step toward good government.

There may be some reason to hope that determined efforts by town leaders to explain and support the proposed agreement to their constituents and by Indian leaders who must answer questions about the agreement from their tribe members will lead eventually to agreement. But that happy outcome is by no means foreseeable.

The memorandum of understanding, known as the "Intergovernmental agreement on cooperative land use and planning between the Wampanoag Indian tribe and the town of Aquinnah," which the voters tabled Tuesday, outlines a parallel permitting process overseen by a special-purpose Aquinnah planning advisory board, including tribe and town members. The memo addressed the question of how to conform to the requirement that the tribe adhere to state, regional, and local development rules with the award of sovereignty that came with federal recognition. Battling over the question in court has proven exhausting, frustrating, expensive, and time-consuming, and when the legal tussle was over, there remained the matter of working things out on a practical level.

To accomplish what the proposed memo attempted, there must be vigorous leadership by town officials and responsible citizenship by town voters, Indian and non-Indian alike. Tuesday was the moment for decision, not for dithering. Voters have the responsibility to prepare themselves for meetings at which important questions must be decided.

Questions about the agreement ought to have been addressed earlier. It may be that the selectmen, understandably, thought that because they and Indian negotiators had come to a mutual understanding, the Wampanoag rank and file must be onboard and that they had had time to air their worries about the memorandum before the special town meeting. The selectmen had every reason to be confident, and no reason to suspect that the hard work of several months would be derailed. The Indian leaders failed Tuesday to support the agreement they had joined in writing and, as the lopsided vote to table the proposal reveals, failed also to build adequate support in the tribe for the position the negotiators had taken on the tribe's behalf. Town negotiators have reason to think they have been let down by their Indian counterparts.

What happens next will depend upon the commitment of town and tribe leaders to the agreement they have forged. It will also depend upon their determination to explain to their constituents the value and fairness of the proposal.

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