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Aquinnah Tribe Hails Mashpee

Federal Recognition Announced for Wampanoags' Sister Tribe, Prompting Warm Expressions And Also Tales of Caution

By IAN FEIN

When the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe received a telephone call from U.S. Department of Interior last week, formally announcing their federal recognition as a sovereign Indian tribe, members of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) looked across to the Cape with a warm heart and a jaded eye.

They had lived through a similar moment almost 20 years ago to the day, when they celebrated their status as the first federally recognized tribe in the commonwealth.

Aquinnah Wampanoag members this week said they were happy for their counterparts in Mashpee and that the tribal status was long overdue. But with the perspective of two decades of experience, they also warned that federal recognition can be a mixed blessing.

"We'll see how much good it does them now, because like everybody else they can use the help," tribal elder Gladys Widdiss of Aquinnah said. "But it's not going to be an easy transition - that's the one thing I can tell them," she added.

"I'm very happy for them, and I wish them all the best," said June Manning, an Aquinnah Wampanoag historian. "But they still have a long road and a lot of work ahead of them. Here we are 20 years later, and sometimes it can all be very discouraging."

Federal recognition establishes a government-to-government relationship between the tribe and the United States, and makes the tribe eligible for millions of dollars in federal funding for housing, education, health care and other social services. But the new status also has the potential to pit tribal members against each other as they put programs into place, and to create conflict with the surrounding communities.

Some Aquinnah Wampanoag members this week said they were left disillusioned by the entire recognition system set up by the federal government.

"You're being recognized for something you've known all along, and in a lot of ways it kind of puts you in a box," said Aquinnah tribal planner and council member Durwood (Woody) Vanderhoop. "It's easy to get trapped up in what federal recognition offers, and there are some great resources if people take advantage and are judicious. But it's very much a struggle."

The addition of a second recognized tribe in the Massachusetts could also create a competition between the Aquinnah and Mashpee Wampanoags for diminishing grants and services. Funding for Indian programs throughout the country has decreased in recent years, and with more than 550 federally recognized tribes in the United States, any new recognition further divvies up the pot.

"It could be debated whether we should be looking at bigger things than this system, which gives you just enough resources to begin to make a difference but then often isn't followed up," Mr.

Vanderhoop said this week. "Some would say it just divides us further."

Though they share a language and culture, and were both part of a larger Wampanoag nation, the Aquinnah and Mashpee tribes have long been separate and distinct entities. No historical records document their differences prior to European contact, but by the time the pilgrims landed in Plymouth in 1620, the Mashpee Wampanoags were there to greet them, while the Aquinnah tribal members had settled at the western edge of the Vineyard - or Noepe, as they called the Island.

At that point, dozens of different Wampanoag tribes had formed villages from Boston down to the tip of the Cape and Islands. European settlers eventually took over most of the region, however, and though remnants of a few other tribes still exist today, Mashpee and Aquinnah emerged as the strongest remaining bands. The Massachusetts state legislature in 1870 incorporated the towns of Mashpee and Gay Head (later renamed Aquinnah) as areas inhabited almost entirely by Wampanoags.

The Mashpee tribe today is significantly larger than Aquinnah, with about 1,500 members compared to 1,000. The two groups visit each other for social gatherings periodically, and a tradition of intermarriage has developed. Aquinnah member Jason Baird lives on the Cape with his wife Jesse Little Doe, a Mashpee member, and commutes back to the Vineyard for work. The couple has a young daughter, Mae Alice, who will be eligible to enroll in either tribe.

Though representatives from the two tribes are working together on a language reclamation project, and have joined for other shared cultural preservation endeavors, formal cooperation between the tribes has been limited. Neither tribe mentions the other in the history section of its Web site, and the tribal councils have not met together in a number of years.

Some Aquinnah members expressed hope that the two recognized tribes could now work together to enhance each other's position.

"In recent years we've been doing our own things, as far as I can see, and I don't know why we haven't done more collaboration. We're dealing with all the same issues," Mr. Vanderhoop said. "In terms of the tribal councils getting together, I hope our leadership can work toward reaching out to each other. The more that we can work together on issues where we have similar hopes and shared interests, the more we might be able to support each other."

Mr. Vanderhoop identified housing as a primary challenge facing both tribes, and he said economic development is also a high priority.

Mashpee Wampanoag leaders have made clear their intention to build a resort casino in southeastern Massachusetts - something the Aquinnah Wampanoags have chased unsuccessfully for more than a decade.

According to the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, the tribes would only be allowed to build casinos if the Massachusetts state legislature first approves some sort of gaming. A bill to allow slot machines in the state's four race tracks passed in the state senate last year, but was killed decisively in the house, 100 to 55.

Any tribal casino would also require a compact with the state governor. Newly elected Gov. Deval Patrick has not yet taken a position on gaming, but he did appoint a task force to explore the issue - a marked change from former Gov. Mitt Romney, who was strongly opposed to the idea.

The Aquinnah tribe recently reformed a gaming corporation to negotiate with state lawmakers, and tribal council chairman Donald Widdiss this month sent a letter to Governor Patrick requesting a

meeting to discuss the possibility of expanding gaming in Massachusetts.

Though the Aquinnah Wampanoags have not completely dropped their pursuit of an off-Island casino, some tribal members this week seemed skeptical of the endeavor, and warned Mashpee leaders against relying too heavily on the outcome. It is understood that the Aquinnah tribe has spent more than \$25 million on its attempts to secure a casino. Some members said the tribe would have been better off investing in other economic development opportunities closer to home.

"The lesson we've learned is that if casinos are your only focus, you may fall behind in other areas," Mr. Vanderhoop said.

"It's a real gamble; it's fool's gold," Ms. Manning said. "There are certainly other forms of economic development that tribes can pursue. We live on the largest resort Island in New England, and have thousands of people coming into our community every summer day. How many thousands of people come through Mashpee? They have a lot of great ways to develop businesses over there," she added.

"I'm sorry, but I just don't see casino gambling as the wave of the future."

The Mashpee tribe first applied for federal recognition in 1975. Mrs. Widdiss said the tribe should not have had to wait so long to receive its status, no matter how she feels about the system.

"Deep down I feel that neither one of us need it, and neither of us should have had to go through that," she said. "Yes, federal recognition has advantages, but I think it has disadvantages too. We've had to accept things that we weren't particularly sure we needed or wanted."

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