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Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Marks Recognition Anniversary

By IAN FEIN

When the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) broke ground on a community center building in the spring of 2004, tribal leaders envisioned it as an important gathering place, and said young members would be shooting hoops inside the new gymnasium by the end of the summer.

Three years later, the building is still unoccupied, sitting half-finished on tribal lands.

The project serves as a symbol for the ongoing frustrations the Aquinnah Wampanoags have experienced in their 20 years as a federally recognized tribe. Originally funded by a federal grant, the community center project still needs another \$300,000 to carry it to completion. Meanwhile, town officials in Aquinnah have pressured the tribe into applying for town permits for the structure by the end of the month.

Like the community center so far, federal recognition has fallen well short of original expectations. Funding is in decline, often coming with strings attached, and sovereignty is so limited that it is nearly nonexistent. Tribal members this week said that recognition has not resulted in a stronger native community.

"In some ways, I think we had more autonomy before we ever had federal recognition," tribal council chairman Donald Widdiss said last week. "And our programs are never funded like they were supposed to be, so we're always at a loss in terms of unmet needs," he added.

"What was promised in federal recognition has just not come true," said tribal member Berta Welch. "Frankly, it seems like people cared more for the native cause before we ever had recognition."

This week marked the 20th anniversary of federal recognition for the Aquinnah Wampanoags. Noticeably, the milestone passed without any fanfare.

The tribe may host an event to honor the anniversary later in the year, but the tenor will be surely be different than the original celebration some two decades ago, when tribal members toasted their recognition with champagne, chocolate cake and words of unlimited potential for the future.

Tribal member Jeffrey Madison, who served as chairman of the town board of selectmen at the time, acknowledged this week that some of the original sentiments may have been overinflated.

"Twenty years ago there weren't many of us who understood what tribal recognition was. And I don't know that we totally understand what it is today," he said this week. "It's something that evolves as national Indian policy evolves. It's always a constant battle to get out of federal recognition what you had hoped."

Federal recognition establishes a government-to-government relationship between a tribe and the United States, and makes a tribe eligible for millions of dollars each year in federal funding for housing, education, health care and other social services.

Members of the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe in the last 20 years have benefited from college scholarships and programs for elders and families. The tribe now has its own health clinic, with a full-time nurse and an in-house doctor twice a month. Environmental grants have allowed the natural resources department of the tribe to help run a shellfish hatchery and water quality testing facility.

Though tribal members acknowledge that such programs are not to be discounted, they also note that the financial benefits are not as grand as they are perceived to be. The funding also comes with stipulations on how it must be spent, resulting in a growing bureaucracy to manage all of the necessary paperwork.

"A lot of times it's more strings and confusion than actual programs," Mr. Madison said this week. "A significant amount of money which could be better used providing services gets eaten up accounting for those services that are received."

Funding for Native American tribes and programs is drying up across the country.

With federal assistance, the Aquinnah Wampanoags in the mid 1990s started a 30-unit housing complex on their tribal lands with the intention of adding more units later. In the last decade, however, funding has only allowed for a few more homes.

"Whenever the federal government promises you anything, it always includes 'subject to appropriation,'" said tribal member Beverly Wright, who served as council chairman for 15 years. "And that's where they get you."

U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy, who assisted the Aquinnah tribe during its long struggle for recognition, acknowledged in a statement this week that the federal government has not lived up to all of its promises.

"We have both a legal and a moral commitment to Native Americans - our nation's first Americans - to provide the necessary funds to meet the housing, health care and education challenges in their communities," Senator Kennedy said. "Congress has a responsibility to address the problems that have been so long ignored, and to stop short-changing federal funds for needed tribal programs."

The Aquinnah Wampanoags' battle for federal recognition began unofficially in 1974, with the filing of a federal lawsuit alleging that tribal lands were wrongfully taken from them in the 19th century. Tribal members in the ensuing decade made frequent trips to Washington, D.C., for Congressional hearings. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs initially turned down their request for federal recognition, but later reversed itself for the first time in history.

After recognition was established in 1987, some 450 acres were transferred back to the tribe - land that includes cranberry bogs, Lobsterville dunes and the Gay Head Cliffs.

The 13 years between the initiation of the lawsuit and the final recognition were marked by bitter disputes and litigation among tribal members and townspeople, and tension and bitterness from that era still lingers in town to this day. The town and the tribe in the last decade have faced off over the housing complex, the rights of tribal rangers to carry guns, and a shed and pier the tribe built on Menemsha Pond.

"It's been one headache after another, and who knows the troubles we'll be facing in the future," Mrs. Welch said this week. "Every time we take a step - whether it's land issues, fishing, hunting or sovereignty - it has been problematic," she continued.

"But in the end, those that have been against the tribe are in for the long haul. Because of federal

recognition, we are protected to some extent, and our future generations are protected," Mrs. Welch said. "So as long as we're federally protected, we'll be here."

In the coming years, Mr. Madison said he hopes to see more cooperation between the town and tribe, pointing to the restoration of the Edwin Vanderhoop Homestead as a positive example. Ms. Wright said the key to the tribe's success lies in becoming more economically self-sufficient, so that it can rely less on federal funding.

Mr. Widdiss agreed with his fellow tribal leaders, but held back in expressing outright optimism for the next 20 years.

"Optimism is based on having a degree of satisfaction," the tribal council chairman said last week. "And we can't be satisfied with the way things are now."

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