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Aquinnah Tackles \$2.9 Million Budget

By IAN FEIN

Aquinnah voters will take up a \$2.9 million budget and a series of relatively small spending requests at their annual town meeting next week.

Town officials are hoping the evening will proceed more smoothly than last year's meeting, which was postponed for a month because voters were unhappy with the budget as presented.

"Town finances are in better shape than they've been for years, and there are no really contentious articles," said selectman James Newman, noting that the town meeting will also be the final send-off for board member Michael Hebert, who steps down the following day after nine years as a selectman. "We're looking forward to a calm departure for Michael."

Town moderator Walter Delaney will bang the gavel at 7 p.m. in the old town hall on Tuesday night, when voters will convene a nine-article special town meeting before moving on to the 16-article annual warrant.

The race to replace Mr. Hebert as selectman will headline the annual town election the following day, on a ballot that includes two Proposition 2 1/2 debt exclusions and a home rule petition that would allow the sale of beer and wine with meals in restaurants. The polls will be open from noon to 7 p.m. on Wednesday in the town hall.

The proposed fiscal year 2008 budget is up some \$250,000, or almost ten per cent, from the \$2.6 million approved by voters last year. A large bulk of the increase comes from the public safety section of the budget, which is up from roughly \$500,000 to almost \$650,000.

Driven by contractual salary hikes, the police department budget is up almost 25 per cent. Police chief Randhi Belain explained that the increase represents the third year of a three-year contract, which called for a seven per cent raise and four per cent cost of living adjustment.

"The purpose of it three years ago when we negotiated the contract was to try to bring us closer in line with the other up-Island departments," Chief Belain said this week. "After this year, we feel we'll be right where we need to be. And when we go to renegotiate our contracts next year, it probably won't be the percentage jump that it has been."

With a rise from \$20,000 to more than \$45,000, the assessing department budget is also up significantly this year. Town officials are trying to improve operations in the department, which came under fire from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue for some sloppy practices last year.

The overall \$2.9 million budget may actually be amended downward on town meeting floor. Because Oak Bluffs voters forced a switch in the way Vineyard towns share the costs of the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, Aquinnah taxpayers will see their contribution drop from the \$380,000 listed in the town budget to a smaller amount of \$320,000.

Aquinnah voters at their town meeting next week can also force a similar change to the Up-Island

Regional School District. Though no one has calculated the exact effect such a change would have to next year's budget, school officials estimated that the change this year would have saved Aquinnah more than \$90,000, with the difference to be made up by Chilmark and West Tisbury taxpayers.

Meanwhile, the up-Island school district is returning more than \$30,000 to Aquinnah for unexpended funds from the current year's budget, money which town officials are looking to divert to other town expenses.

One such request is \$10,000 to pay for final permitting of the capped town landfill, which town officials recently learned was never fully completed. The town in the late 1990s hired engineer James J. Decoulos to oversee the landfill capping. According to selectmen, there was a verbal agreement between the town and Mr. Decoulos to complete all the permitting for the project, but the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection recently informed the town that it did not have its final permit. In the decade following the landfill project, the town has been involved in multiple lawsuits with Mr. Decoulos over his attempts to gain access to and develop a number of vacant lots off Moshup Trail.

A new \$45,000 highway department dump truck and \$80,000 in old town hall repairs are the two Proposition 2 1/2 debt exclusion questions that voters will face at both the polls and on town meeting floor next week.

The old town hall roof has been leaking, resulting in the collapse of some ceiling plaster, and plans to renovate the kitchen area have stalled for years. On top of the \$80,000, town officials are seeking \$5,000 in a separate warrant article to cover roof and chimney repairs for the building, and another \$30,000 for structural repairs from Community Preservation Act funds.

In all, the town community preservation committee is looking to distribute more than \$90,000 to a variety of projects, including the restoration of the Edwin Vanderhoop Homestead, painting of the historic Aquinnah Library, creating a new town center playground, and preparation of some affordable housing sites. The finance committee is not recommending the community preservation article, because members do not agree with some of the spending requests.

"Most of it seemed fine, but there were a few items in it that we felt needed to be discussed," said finance committee member John Walsh. "Basically, we felt the voters and the political process needed to spend a little more time on some of these projects."

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