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Aquinnah chooses neighborliness

Sticks with traditional school funding formula

By Nelson Sigelman - May 10, 2007

In the last of the Island's annual round of town meetings, on Tuesday night Aquinnah voters agreed with speakers who said that it was more important to be good neighbors and honor past agreements than reduce the town's annual up-Island Regional School District assessment.

Aquinnah voters decided to stick with the regional agreement that apportions costs on a per pupil basis rather than the state's so-called statutory formula that would shift \$73,699 in fiscal year 2008 school costs to Chilmark taxpayers. The vote was 41 to 20.

A total of 64 voters, or 16 percent of the total electorate, attended the combination special and annual town meeting that began at 7 pm and ended at 9:37 pm. In that time voters approved every article presented, most unanimously, and a FY 2008 operating budget of \$2,810,495.

Despite the general agreement, voters found plenty to discuss, and ground through a lengthy series of spending requests for community preservation projects.

Yesterday, Aquinnah voters went to the polls to decide a race between landscaper Carlos Montoya and Wampanoag tribal natural resources ranger Spencer Booker for the seat on the three-member board of selectmen held for the past 12 years by Michael Hebert, who decided not to seek reelection.

Voters also decided two Proposition 2.5 questions and one ballot question. Voters were asked to approve spending \$80,000 to pay for the preservation and repair of the historic old town hall and \$45,000 to purchase a new highway department dump truck.

One ballot question asked if the selectmen should seek legislative approval to allow the town to issue licenses for the sale of beer and wine to be consumed with meals by patrons of restaurants with a seating capacity of not less than 15 people

Long-time town moderator and fire chief Walter Delaney gavelled the special town meeting to order at 7 pm. Voters made quick work of the nine-article special town meeting warrant.

Mr. Delaney announced there would be a brief recess before he convened the annual meeting at the scheduled 7:30 pm start time. That left more time for the spring socializing that is one of the principle attractions of annual town meetings in the Island's smallest town.

The annual meeting began with words of appreciation for selectman Michael Hebert, who helped to guide the town during nine often tumultuous years. Selectman Camille Rose praised Mr. Hebert's demeanor and leadership and said that in his "gentle, dignified way" Mr. Hebert led the town through many complex issues.

Town officials noted recent changes in town hall operations and personnel they said had helped to put Aquinnah's financial affairs in order and provide more professionalism in the conduct of town business.

For the first time in many years, town leaders knew well before the annual town meeting that there was approximately \$215,000 available in so-called free cash, money certified by the state in excess of expenses in the prior fiscal year.

Board of assessors chairman Hugh Taylor introduced the town's new assessor, Angela Cywinski, who explained that she would be inspecting property as part of a scheduled 2008 revaluation.

Following some initial confusion between the budget that appeared in the town report and a copy of the budget handed out separately, voters moved through the operating budget line items. The only extended discussion concerned school assessments.

Good neighbors

Aquinnah was the last town to grapple with the change in regional school funding formulas that allowed Island towns to opt for the so-called statutory formula that apportions school cost based on property values and income. Because the state formula benefits some towns at the expense of others, Island leaders have generally argued for keeping the current agreements in place while they work on finding a way to soften the blow.

The budget presented to Aquinnah voters Tuesday night showed an elementary school assessment of \$659,730 and a high school assessment of \$380,729. Both numbers reflected the school agreements that had governed costs for more than a decade.

Under the statutory formula it takes only one town in a region to make a change. Since both West Tisbury and Chilmark had already agreed to stick with the current formula, it was left to Aquinnah to make any change.

Mr. Hebert, one of the architects of the up-Island regional agreement used to fund the West Tisbury and Chilmark schools, said he did not think it was fair to base school costs on the value of a house and urged voters to stick with the agreement and not adopt the state formula. He agreed that the town had the opportunity to save some money but pointed out that it was money that would have to come from somewhere and asked voters "to think about how this will affect your neighbors."

John Walsh, a member of the town finance committee, said that Oak Bluffs voters had adopted the state formula for the high school assessment because it benefited them and he urged Aquinnah voters to do the

same with regard to the elementary school assessment. He said basing taxes on wealth was not unique.

Asked to speak to the issue, Superintendent of Schools James Weiss said that if the town decided to change, the entire burden would shift to Chilmark.

Joe Corbo offered a similar view as that expressed by Mr. Walsh. He said the tax code was based on wealth. "It happens every day," he said, "some people pay more taxes than other people."

"Will you make a motion?" asked Mr. Delaney.

"Sure, I'll make a motion," said Mr. Corbo.

"I'll second the motion," said Megan Sargent from the back.

"What is the motion?" someone asked.

Mr. Delaney read the figure needed to amend the budget from \$659,730 to \$586,031 to reflect the state formula.

The high school assessment required no decisions since Oak Bluffs voters had already decided to go with the state formula. On a voice vote, voters amended the high school assessment downward from \$380,729 to \$319,791.

Happy baby

With the budget out of the way it initially appeared that voters were getting ready to glide through the remaining warrant articles. They quickly dispatched five articles but ground to a halt when it came time to approve requests to spend community preservation funds.

A request for \$10,000 for predevelopment expenses associated with the creation of affordable rental housing on town land provoked extended discussion related to costs, decision making and priorities assigned to the use of preservation funds.

Derrill Bazy, community preservation committee chairman, assured the voters that rental housing was only meant to supplement other efforts. He said the request was only the beginning of a very extended process that would provide ample opportunities for public comment.

When Ms. Sargent asked if it was too early to ask about who would administer the housing there was an audible groan from the crowd.

Voters moved on to a request for \$10,000 for a new town playground that provoked an equally lengthy discussion. Noting earlier requests for money for playground equipment, Barbara Bassett questioned the details of the request. As a back-and-forth volley of questions and answers continued, the voters, with imploring glances to moderator Walter Delaney, grew increasingly restless.

The murmur of call the question rippled through the room. Mr. Delaney asked for a vote. With only a few nays the article passed.

As visibly weary and restless voters quickly took up the five remaining articles one resident continued to smile and chortle. Waylon Sauer, six months old, who watched the whole affair from his mom's lap, with

extended cuddles from nearby voters, remained unperturbed as Mr. Delaney gaveled the meeting to a close.

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