

## Vineyard Gazette Online

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### **Voter Conduct Is Neighborly**

#### *Aquinnah Annual Town Meeting Rejects Notion of Shifting Regional School Costs Over to Chilmark*

By IAN FEIN

In a unanimous sign of regional good will, Aquinnah voters at their annual town meeting this week turned down an opportunity to pass on some \$74,000 in Up-Island Regional School District costs to their neighbors in Chilmark.

The decision came after heartfelt discussion among voters about whether it seemed fair to lower their own share of the school district budget at the expense of the original agreement that formed the district.

By state law, Aquinnah voters could have forced a switch from the regional agreement, where school costs are divided among towns by per-pupil enrollment, to a statutory formula, which is meant to divide the costs based on wealth and a town's ability to pay. Voters in Aquinnah, the town with lowest per-capita income on the Vineyard, could have handed off some of their financial burden to neighbors in Chilmark, the town with the highest average home value in the commonwealth.

Selectman Michael Hebert, a former school committee member and one of the original framers of the Up-Island district, led the discussion, urging voters to resist the temptation to change the rules at this stage in the game.

"It doesn't seem fair to me, and if you think hard about it, it probably won't seem fair to you either," said Mr. Hebert, who stepped down the following day after nine years as a selectmen. "If you choose to go that way, I want you to think about how that will affect your neighbors - the people we work with in West Tisbury and Chilmark to educate our children."

More than 70 voters attended the town meeting on Tuesday evening, which proved to be one of the most congenial annual Aquinnah gatherings in recent memory.

Ongoing efforts by town leaders to improve financial practices led to a smooth budget discussion and a limited number of spending requests. Voters sailed through a nine-article special town meeting in a matter of minutes, before moving on to the 16-article annual warrant. After friendly amendments to lower a couple of line items, voters unanimously approved a \$2.8 million fiscal year 2008 budget.

The town meeting proceeded rapidly until it tripped up over a community preservation committee article, when some residents questioned the initial funding for proposed affordable housing rental units and a new playground on vacant land in the town center. But voters eventually approved every article presented to them, most by unanimous votes, and finished the annual meeting in just over two hours.

The night offered a fitting send off for Mr. Hebert, who was widely praised for his calm leadership during some financially and politically trying times for the town. Mr. Hebert received a standing ovation in appreciation for his years of service, and he in turn asked voters to support town officials

as they forge ahead with a number of ongoing efforts, including an initiative to adopt progressive energy conservation regulations.

"I would like see Aquinnah be a leader in this effort," Mr. Hebert said. "Let the other towns on the Vineyard see how well it works up here."

Voters on Tuesday also honored Jeananne Jeffers, who retired this year after serving the town for more than three and a half decades, most recently as assistant assessor. Town assessor Hugh Taylor, who is elected, also introduced the new assistant assessor, Angela Cywinski, and told voters to expect some improvements in the department, which came under fire from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue for its practices last year.

"I think you'll find there are going to be some changes in the office," Mr. Taylor said.

The regional school formula issue proved to be the central debate of the evening. And though Aquinnah voters declined lowering their Up-Island school assessment, they did benefit from a similar move made by Oak Bluffs voters last month. Because Oak Bluffs forced a switch in the way Island towns share the costs of the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, Aquinnah taxpayers saw their contribution drop on Tuesday by some \$60,000.

Town finance committee member John Walsh told voters that they should not feel guilty about taking advantage of an opportunity afforded them by the state legislature.

"It doesn't seem to me to be dishonorable to ask the district to adopt a statutory formula," Mr. Walsh said, "because really it's the state saying they should adopt this."

Joseph Corbo agreed and rebutted Mr. Hebert's contention that the value of a person's home should not determine how much that person pays to educate a child. "Our whole tax code is derived on that same basis, so I don't think philosophically we should have trouble sleeping with it," Mr. Corbo said. "What the long-term implications are [in forcing a switch to the statutory formula], I don't know. But short term, it happens every day."

Mr. Corbo offered an amendment to lower the up-Island contribution by \$74,000, and a voice vote was too close to call. Town moderator Walter Delaney then asked for a standing count, and the amendment failed 20 to 41.

Good will regarding Up-Island school costs went both ways on Tuesday. The money for some \$30,000 in spending requests approved by voters came from Up-Island district funds returned to Aquinnah from the regional school committee.

School committee member Roxanne Ackerman also noted that all three Up-Island towns recently approved an amendment to the regional agreement that will require Chilmark taxpayers to take over more of the capital costs of their school building.

"We've agonized over this, met with the all-Island selectmen, the all-Island finance committee," Ms. Ackerman said on Tuesday. "We're committed to making this regional district work."

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