

## The Martha's Vineyard Times

# Aquinnah weighs pay scales, county costs

By Nelson Sigelman - February 7, 2008

Aquinnah voters gather Tuesday for a special town meeting. In addition to the usual financial housekeeping, voters will be asked to take action on a new compensation and classification plan for town employees.

If approved, the classification and compensation plan would create nine grades of hourly pay and seven salary steps. Town employee pay scales would range between a low of \$13.55 per hour to a high of \$40.02 in the current fiscal year.

Voters will also be asked to subsidize the costs of several county services previously included in the county budget. Any town contribution of tax dollars would be in addition to the annual county assessment the town now pays.

There are 13 warrant articles on the special town meeting warrant. The meeting begins at 7 pm in the old town hall located on State Road.

Several years ago town officials began a reorganization of town administrative practices. That effort underpins two warrant articles.

At a special town meeting in August 2006 voters approved new personnel bylaws for town employees. Article seven on the special town meeting warrant provides a follow-up to that vote.

Voters will be asked to approve a measure that would create a personnel board with three members to be appointed by the selectmen to three-year terms. The board's responsibilities would include monitoring and employing the town's personnel bylaws and practices, and supervising and maintaining a centralized personnel record-keeping system.

In a telephone conversation, Camille Rose, chairman of the Aquinnah board of selectmen, told The Times that the article is a companion piece to the personnel bylaws approved in 2006. She said an outside board would provide a fair means of addressing personnel issues.

Selectmen will also ask voters to address the issue of employee pay. Currently the town does not have a formal classification plan. Article eight asks voters to adopt a new classification and compensation plan prepared for the town by MMA Consulting Group of Boston.

MMA conducted a study ([available here](#)) in which it compared current Aquinnah jobs and wages with those in the towns of Brewster, Chatham, Chilmark, Edgartown, Orleans and Tisbury. After evaluating the responsibilities of town employees the consultants arrived at comparable wage scales.

Voters will be asked to approve a salary plan for fiscal year 08, that began on July 1, 2007 and a plan for fiscal year 09 that reflects a 2-percent cost of living increase.

The new plan provides nine grades of employees. For example, the library technical assistant and the landfill attendant would fall into the grade three position.

The police chief and the town coordinator would occupy grade 9.

Within the plan are seven steps under which an employee's pay would increase by 2.5-percent increments, irrespective of any annual cost of living increases. For example, a grade three employee at the step 1 level in FY 08 would earn \$16.40 an hour and \$19.01 per hour at step 7. A grade nine employee would earn \$34.51 per hour at step 1 and \$40.02 at step 7.

Selectmen said the plan would bring some order to the current system and not be a dramatic change. For example, the landfill attendant now earns \$18.98 per hour and the library technical assistant \$14.13. The police chief currently makes \$38.42 per hour and the town coordinator earns \$31.32.

Town voters will also be asked to dig a little deeper to help pay for three county departments. Article nine asks voters to pay a share of the county engineering, health and rodent control departments.

In December the Dukes County commissioners decided to erase a looming fiscal year 09 budget deficit by cutting the rodent control and health care departments by 50 percent and eliminating the county engineer. The cuts were made with the intention of asking taxpayers in Island towns to make up the difference in the first two departments and fully fund the county engineer. Ultimately, the commissioners intend to ask the towns to fully fund all the programs.

At the same time the commissioners cut the departments, they added \$15,000 to the county commissioners' department, raising the line item to \$190,389, in order to boost the salary for the currently vacant position of county manager.

According to the article language, the health access program and rodent control department, if they were fully funded, would account for \$90,000 and \$50,000 respectively, and the engineering department \$65,000.

Any town payment would be in addition to the town assessment. The seven towns of Dukes County, which includes Gosnold, pay 16.5 percent of the county's operating budget through annual assessments that are not subject to annual town meeting review or approval. In FY 08 the Aquinnah assessment was \$26,046.

Aquinnah voters would be the first Island town to take up the county request at a special or annual town meeting.

The inclusion of several articles proposing significant changes in town policy and spending in a February special town meeting warrant has raised some concerns. Long-time town moderator Walter Delaney said voter participation can be expected to be light and there may even be difficulty reaching a quorum.

Mr. Delaney said he strongly supports a new employee wage classification system. "We tried to do it years ago," said the former selectman, "but I think that type of business, in fairness to all the voters, should be on the annual town meeting."

Ms. Rose said that in general she would agree that important issues should not be taken up at special town meetings. By way of explanation she said the plan is long overdue and she does not expect it to generate any controversy. She also said that approving a new classification plan would greatly help town officials in preparing the FY 09 budget that will be presented to voters at the annual town meeting. "It just seemed to make sense," said Ms. Rose.

As for the county article, Ms. Rose said the selectmen placed the request on the warrant because county officials asked. She said that does not guarantee any action. "We are very good at tabling things," she said, describing the habits of town voters.

Selectman Jim Newman agreed with Ms. Rose that action on the compensation plan would help the budget

process and go along with the effort to overhaul town government. He said the guidelines are not set in stone and can be changed. "We have been talking about this for a long time and I think we need to get everything organized," he said, "not just talk about it as we have done."

Mr. Newman said he would push to have the county article split among the three programs. He said he supports the county's health care access program and wants to support it.

Money matters including outstanding bills and an oversight dating back to the 2007 annual town meeting take up the majority of the town meeting warrant.

Additional money articles include a request that the town take \$47,480 from free cash to fund the fiscal year 2008 operating budget; a request to use \$12,000 in Community Preservation Housing Reserve funds for predevelopment expenses at the Church Street number two resident homesite; and a request to allocate \$20,300 from community preservation funds for expenses associated with a town center affordable housing proposal.

The town housing committee will ask voters to approve the use of a portion of the town center parcel for the development of up to four units of rental housing.

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