

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Aquinnah wrangles on

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\$2.8 M budget set, regional school formula prevails

See election results and final town meeting votes here.

Aquinnah voters were in good spirits as they trooped into the newly refurbished old town hall just before 7 pm Tuesday night to attend their annual town meeting. The mood was considerably more subdued by the time they left almost four hours later, having agreed to fund the up-Island school system using the formula agreed upon by the three member towns and having passed a \$2,863,315 fiscal year 2009 operating budget. There is more work to be done this evening.

For many, town meeting is a social event, an opportunity to catch up with friends and neighbors. The advertised start time of the special town meeting that preceded the annual was 7 pm.

But Aquinnah is not known for formality, and residents of the Island's smallest town gabbed happily, despite the efforts of moderator Walter Delaney to get their attention. The long-time moderator banged his gavel vigorously and repeatedly to quell the swell of voices.

"This could be a very long night," said Mr. Delaney, by way of explaining the need to get on with the town's business.

"Oh great," said one seated voter loud enough for all to hear.

A total of 69 voters, or 17 percent of the town's 396 registered voters attended town meeting. That number was considerably reduced when Mr. Delaney announced just after 10:30 pm that, with considerable work unfinished, the annual town meeting would adjourn and reconvene tonight at 7 pm, when the big question will be over the proposed Aquinnah energy district of critical planning concern.

Yesterday, voters went to the polls to decide a three-way race for a seat on the board of selectmen and to vote on seven ballot questions, including a measure that would allow the town to issue licenses for restaurants to serve beer and wine.

Voters moved slowly through the first eight articles on the nine-article special town meeting warrant. They approved the use of Community Preservation Act funds for affordable housing, the construction of a brick walkway up to the cliffs, and the burying of overhead wires at the Aquinnah circle.

The murmur that ran through the crowd when the moderator read article nine, a request that voters adopt a bylaw prohibiting the transport or consumption of an open container of alcohol on town roads or in public places suggested that the measure was in trouble from the start.

Finance committee member John Walsh kicked off the discussion. "Does that include old town hall?" he asked.

"Yes," said selectman Camille Rose. "It also includes beaches."

At that, Mr. Delaney had to unsheathe his gavel to quiet the room, all of whose occupants were trying to talk at the same time.

Aquinnah police chief Randhi Belain, unfazed by the reaction, explained the purpose of the bylaw request. He said it was prompted by the proposal to allow the sale of beer and wine. Known as a genial fellow, Chief Belain said the intent is not to arrest people. He said the bylaw would provide police with an additional enforcement tool, but as with all such laws it would be administered with discretion.

Barbara Bassett said she hardly drinks but recalled cracking a beer in the firehouse or up at the cliffs. She said the town is starting to lose a little bit of its flavor and independent spirit.

Sarah Thulin, chairman of the conservation commission, suggested voters wait to see if there is a problem that requires correcting. Adding a political twist, she said it seemed somewhat restrictive of people's rights, and based on what is going on now at the national level, she added, the town does not need more of that. There was a smattering of applause.

Mr. Delaney announced last call. "All in favor of article nine?" he asked. No one spoke.

The annual meeting began with a three-way wrangle between the finance committee (FinCom), the selectmen and voter Peter Temple, about the selectmen's budget strategy and a Proposition 2.5 override request to pay the \$20,000 debt on the Vanderhoop Homestead.

The FinCom wanted voters to have the opportunity to vote for a balanced budget, with no tax overrides. They pushed a plan to recover \$20,000 by delaying full salary increases for several town officials, as part of a town employee compensation plan approved at a special town meeting this winter, and by cutting the legal budget.

Peter Temple objected to the selectmen's reliance on the stabilization fund to fund several articles. In some cases, he said, money requests that rightly belonged as budget line items were presented as requests for money from the stabilization fund.

As the discussion unrolled, voters objected to the notion of cutting the salaries agreed upon in the compensation plan. Former selectman Jeffrey Madison pointed out that the argument was about a request for \$20,000 out of a budget of \$2.8 million. He could remember when the town budget was \$800,000. If selectmen have come within \$20,000 of presenting a balanced budget, he said, "That's pretty darn good."

The effect, Mr. Madison said, would be to add 2.5 cents to the tax rate. It was, "much ado about nothing."

But voters were not done.

The FY 09 budget presented to voters was based on the state's so-called statutory assessment method for apportioning costs in regional school districts. That calculation parted ways with the regional agreement upon which West Tisbury and Chilmark, members with Aquinnah of the Up-Island district, based their FY 09 assessments.

A phalanx of school officials sat patiently inside the town hall waiting to make an argument in favor of the regional formula. But, their contribution was not necessary.

Selectman Jim Newman proposed an amendment to adopt the regional agreement. Voters did, with little discussion.

They did again, but this time with discussion, when they came to article five on the warrant, a request for an additional \$27,228, the difference needed for the regional agreement.

Mike Hebert, a former selectman and school committee leader, said he had worked for a long time on the regional agreement and that it remained the fairest way to pay for the school system.

Mr. Madison said the town had made an agreement and needed to stick to it. The voters agreed, but there was one sticking point.

Town attorney Ron Rappaport pointed out that they had voted to fund the school assessment twice. The voters went back to the budget, to adjust the budget number downward, so the amount needed to meet the regional agreement's requirement would be correct.

The meeting ended with a long wrangle over the disposition of a valuable piece of landlocked, town-owned property envisioned as a site for affordable housing. After much discussion, voters agreed to authorize selectmen to sell the property, but only after seeking approval of the sales price at town meeting.

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