

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Current Edition: Friday, May 16, 2008

Aquinnah Agrees to Keep Peace on Regional School

By JACK SHEA



photo by Mark Alan Lovewell
Librarian Jennifer Christy needs money for books.

Opting to be good neighbors, Aquinnah voters agreed to go along with the traditional regional assessment formula for the up-Island regional school district at their annual town meeting this week.

Voters also approved wine and beer licensing for two Aquinnah restaurants, authorized selectmen to trade or sell a 3.6-acre parcel of town-owned land worth more than \$600,000 and accepted a new pay structure for town employees.

And at a special town meeting just before the annual meeting Tuesday night, they soundly rejected a bylaw that would ban open alcohol containers on town roads and beaches.

So voters were in a debating mood as town moderator Walter Delaney gavelled annual town meeting and about 70 voters to order more than an hour later than the scheduled start time of 7 p.m.

The meeting reconvened last night and failed to achieve a quorum. It has been rescheduled for Tuesday at 7 p.m.

But on Tuesday evening the school assessment issue was a topic for passionate debate.

“If we violate this agreement today, how will our neighbors react in the future when we need their help?” said former Aquinnah selectman Jeffrey Madison, adding: “We don’t have a school in town and we need to participate as partners.”

Michael Hebert, also a former selectman, agreed.

“The value of a person’s home should not be the yardstick for measuring the value of education that we provide. We get a good product and we need to continue to support it in the manner we have been,” he said.



photo by Mark Alan Lovewell
Selectmen lead the way from left: Camille Rose, Spencer Booker, Jim Newman.



Former selectman, now statesman Jeffrey Madison.

Voters had the choice of sticking with the regional agreement method for dividing school assessments, or switching to the state statutory formula.

The regional method divides assessments based on enrollment; the state method is a complicated formula based partly on property values.

West Tisbury and Chilmark — the other two towns in the three-town school district — had already voted budgets based on the regional agreement.

Switching to the state formula would have saved Aquinnah \$27,000 and Chilmark \$101,000 while costing West Tisbury \$128,000, and would have sent the school budget for the coming year back to the drawing board.

Hugh Taylor had a dissenting opinion.

“We’re being very generous here. I’m not sure if our positions were reversed that the other towns would do the same for us. Do what you want, but just know that we’re being very generous,” he said.

The manner in which the education budget was presented led to voters funding it twice. Early in the evening selectman Jim Newman moved to amend the \$2.8 million town budget to include an additional \$27,000 for the school budget. The motion was approved.

But the \$27,000 assessment was also the subject of a warrant article. And when that came up later and was also approved — town counsel Ronald H. Rappaport took note of the situation.

Voters returned to the budget and removed the extra money from the line item — but only after receiving assurance from Vineyard schools superintendent James H. Weiss that the school budget would remain whole.

“We have a budget,” Mr. Weiss said.

Voters spent a long time debating a complicated land swap article that involves a landlocked 3.6-acre town owned plot near Sand Castle Lane.

The town may either negotiate a sale to abutters or trade the lot for another piece of land suitable for affordable housing.

But voters were not in a spending mood on all accounts. A \$50,000 request to build an addition to the firehouse was defeated, as were three articles calling for the creation of stabilization funds totaling \$35,000 to be excluded from Proposition 2 1/2. The three articles were withdrawn by selectmen on the town meeting floor.

A new wage scale plan designed to put Aquinnah town employees in line with Island and regional pay standards was approved, but not before debate.

Mr. Madison offered some perspective. “I remember when the town budget was \$800,000 and people said it was all screwed up . . . and probably it was. I think [the selectmen] have done a great job. We have a \$2.8 million budget and we’re arguing about \$20,000. Pretty good job,” he said.



Isaac Taylor speaks about pay for town employees.

During a brief special town meeting before the annual meeting opened Tuesday night, voters swiftly axed a proposed town bylaw that would ban open containers of alcohol in public places.

Open containers are not allowed in vehicle under state law; the town bylaw would have banned them from being carried about in public places.

From the outset it was apparent that this did not square with the casual way of life in this remote town.



John Walsh is point man on finances.

John Walsh questioned whether the bylaw would extend to functions in the town hall, which was recently refurbished and is planned as a community gathering place.

Police chief Randhi Belain said the bylaw would be an enforcement tool for his officers and is related to the licensing of beer and wine sales at restaurants for the first time.

But selectman Camille Rose said the ban would also extend to town beaches, and that was the end of it.

“Look, I barely even drink or crack a beer so this isn’t a big deal to me but you’re telling people they can’t have a cocktail at West Basin while watching the sunset?” asked Barbara Bassett. “Wait for evidence that there is a problem before we act,” she added.

“We don’t need any more of these restrictive laws. There is already too much of that at the national level,” said Wendy Swolinzky.

“We will be losing the flavor of this town and a piece of our independence. I am completely against this and I hope it fails,” she said.

When the question was called, voters spoke by saying nothing.

T.J. Hegarty, the county rodent control officer who attended the meeting, said: “You know, I’ve never seen that at town meeting, voting by being completely silent.”

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