

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Annual Town Meeting Resumes in Aquinnah; Quorum Crucial

By JACK SHEA

Interrupted for lack of a quorum, the Aquinnah annual town meeting will continue on June 19 — and assuming enough voters turn out this time — the town will take up the first townwide bylaw on the Vineyard to regulate energy use.

Lengthy, detailed and focusing almost exclusively on wind turbines, the bylaw is the result of the town wide designation as an energy district of critical planning concern last December.

Because of a series of events that included the long postponement of the annual town meeting, a townwide complete building moratorium is now in effect, but the moratorium will end once the energy bylaw is voted on next week.

The annual town meeting is set to reconvene at 7 p.m. next Thursday in the town hall. Moderator Walter E. Delaney will preside over a complex three-part session that will include reconvening the annual town meeting, calling a special town meeting and then reconvening the annual town meeting again.

A quorum is critical for the town to complete its business for the year. Without it, the town may miss a June 30 deadline for a \$50,000 state grant to help pay for a \$100,000 library restoration project.

Selectmen have also added a new article on the special town meeting warrant to reduce the quorum requirement from 39 to 20 voters.

The special warrant includes six new articles plus nine from the original annual warrant. In new requests, voters will be asked to rescind their vote from the annual town meeting which requires the selectmen to return to the voters for final approval to sell 3.6 acres of town-owned land. Voters will now be asked to simply allow the selectmen to sell the property for a minimum price of \$600,000.

They also will be asked to spend \$15,000 on a part-time assistant to the town assessor and the tax collector.

Voters will be asked one more time to approve funding for a \$15,000 capital building and grounds stabilization fund. The fund was rejected on the town meeting floor in May, but passed by one vote in a companion Proposition 2 1/2 override question on the ballot.

Unfinished business from the annual meeting includes the lengthy town energy bylaw, which runs on for 14 pages in the printed warrant.

Technically an expansion of the townwide energy district of critical planning concern, the bylaw aims to regulate construction and use of wind turbines. It also would require energy saving practices such as home energy audits and would require solar or geothermal heating for new and remodeled swimming pools and hot tubs.

The chief architect of the bylaw is Aquinnah selectman Camille Rose, who is pushing to build a huge wind turbine that would supply power for the entire town and have enough left over to sell to other users.

In December 2007 the Martha's Vineyard Commission voted to designate a townwide energy district of critical planning concern (DCPC) for Aquinnah.

The designation triggered a limited moratorium and planning process to create regulations.

To date the bylaw focuses primarily on wind turbines, but Ms. Rose said it was a necessary beginning.

"Wind had to be the first part because we had inquiries from a lot of people, eight or 10 residents, who wanted to put turbines up and we have no way to regulate them now," she said.

The proposed bylaw would permit wind turbines for both individual homeowners and groups of abutting homeowners as well as municipal operators of large wind turbines.

The bylaw proposes dividing the town into two districts in which windmills may be built according to use.

Small wind districts would allow individuals and groups of homeowners to build windmills on their own land, with rules for setbacks from property lines and other restrictions, such as height for rooftop turbines.

Properties within 1,000 feet of the coastline would face stricter rules. Turbines would be prohibited in cranberry bogs, the Herring Creek, the Cliffs and on settlement lands.

A second area in the center of town, bounded roughly by State and Lobsterville Roads, is drawn for medium and large wind turbine use.

Large community and municipal wind turbine facilities would be located in this district — such as the town turbine that Ms. Rose wants to build.

“My goal in four years is to look out my window and see a wind turbine at work for Aquinnah. It’s like magic, this exciting idea of getting limitless energy from the air,” she said in a recent interview.

The town still faces a gauntlet of state regulatory work before the wind turbine project can become a reality.

Commission planner Jo-Ann Taylor called the energy bylaw a comprehensive job.

“The new district is intended to balance the protective nature of the Aquinnah town district [DCPC] and to promote use of alternative energy resources. Certainly they have the [wind] resource. The regulations serve the best interests of the town and the commission,” Ms. Taylor said, adding:

“I can tell you they did a comprehensive job of research and preparation.”

Ms. Rose said like so many things, the key is balance. “The trick is to balance preservation of our landscape with the benefits of this new technology. Look at the next 50 years. What will happen to our wetlands as a result of global warming? We have the technology now to preserve our land,

“We have this incredible resource, it’s shameful not to use it,” she said.