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## Split Aquinnah assessors reappoint assistant

By Nelson Sigelman  
Published: June 19, 2008

By most measurements, Angela Cywinski, Aquinnah's new assistant assessor, has done a very good job. But that has not earned her the unanimous support of the three elected assessors who are her bosses.

Nearing the June 30 end of the 2008 fiscal year, the assessors voted 2-1 to reappoint Ms. Cywinski. The vote was a formality. Last month, one month before her term expired at the end of the fiscal year, the assessors did not reappoint Ms. Cywinski or hire a new assistant assessor. As a result, by state statute Ms. Cywinski was automatically continued in her job for one year.

Assessors Michael Stutz and Hugh Taylor voted to reappoint Ms. Cywinski. Carl Widdiss, who wanted to readvertise the position, did not.

In a telephone call yesterday, Mr. Stutz, chairman of the assessors, said Ms. Cywinski has done "yeoman's labor." "She's done an excellent job," Mr. Stutz said. "I am happy with her, and I know Hugh's happy with her."

Mr. Widdiss did not return telephone messages left on his business phone or cell phone.

Change does not always come easy in the Island's smallest town. One of the town selectmen told The Times this week that Ms. Cywinski's by-the-book approach was a big change and likely ruffled some feathers.

Yesterday, Ms. Cywinski said she preferred not to comment on the split board vote.

Hired in March 2007, in her first year on the job, Ms. Cywinski, the town's first state certified, full-time assessor, oversaw the town's most complete revaluation in more than a decade. In the process, she corrected scores of inaccurate property records, eliminated elderly exemptions granted incorrectly, and updated and corrected faulty town records.

In January 2008, the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) approved Aquinnah's revaluation. Propelled by recent sale prices, values increased dramatically for houses with shore property or water views.

As a result, the town's total valuation - including residential, commercial and personal property - increased from \$565,687,496 to \$732,608,899, a 28-percent jump for fiscal 2008, which began on July 1, 2007.

### Vote of support

Ms. Cywinski has the unqualified support of the three town selectmen. Prior to yesterday's vote, Jim Newman, chairman of the selectmen, said he was disappointed that no action had yet been taken to reappoint Ms. Cywinski. He said she has done a great deal to straighten out the assessor's office and in the process increased town revenues.

"We have worked hard to bring order to the town and the way it functions," said Mr. Newman. "And this woman has come in and straightened out a situation that was in dire need, and they are not giving her the vote of confidence that I think she deserves."

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Mr. Newman said some people were upset when their property increased in value. That is a function of rising Aquinnah property values, he said. "You can't shoot the messenger," Mr. Newman said. "She has been taken to task because she is absolutely following the letter of the law and deadlines, and that is quite a change for a town not used to doing that."

Camille Rose, selectman and chairman of the planning board, agreed with her fellow selectman.

"She really has done what the DOR said needed to be done in that office," said Ms. Rose. "And I think it may have ruffled some feathers, because things aren't being done in the old way."

Ms. Rose said she and other town officials have received calls from taxpayers who have seen their assessments jump but have no complaints because they think the process is now fair. "I hear that regularly, and Jim [Newman] does too, and it is really pleasant to hear that," said Ms. Rose.

History of poor

performance

For years Aquinnah, once called Gay Head, earned a reputation for informality that carried over into the conduct of town business. The result was sloppiness that often benefited a small group of year-round property owners familiar with town affairs but resulted in lost revenue to the town and meant that other taxpayers shouldered a larger share of the burden.

At times taxes went uncollected, checks were not deposited in a timely manner, bills were unsent, town offices and employees were unsupervised.

In 2006, selectmen, bent on changing such municipal habits, asked the Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services to conduct an unconstrained review of the town's structure, management, personnel, and general financial practices.

The [DOR report released in March 2006](#) was especially critical of the board of assessors, which has remained relatively unchanged for more than 23 years.

Mr. Widdiss, 1984, and Mr. Taylor, 1985, are the two longest serving members. Mr. Stutz, re-elected in May unopposed to another three-year term, joined the board in 1999 after he defeated long-time assessor and former selectman Jeffrey Madison.

For much of that time the office had no staff. In 1994, the board hired Jeananne Jeffers, a respected town resident and longtime elected town clerk, as an assistant assessor to administer the office on a part-time basis. Ms. Jeffers retired in February 2007.

The DOR review said that the office of the Aquinnah assessors did not maintain accurate, up-to-date records, and the assessors, two of whom are often absent from town in the off-season, did the absolute minimum in order to generate a tax commitment year after year.

DOR recommended the town convert the board of assessors to an appointed board responsible to the board of selectmen.

One of the flash points during the 2006 annual town meeting occurred over the selectmen's plans to zero out salaries and health benefit payments for the town's three elected assessors and appoint themselves to the job as a preliminary step to a reorganization of the office.

That May voters responded with a mixed message at the polls. They said no to a request to have the selectmen act as assessors. But they also said no to a request for \$6,000 to pay the elected assessors' expenses, no to a request for \$15,552 for their health insurance costs, and no to \$2,400 for their salaries.

At the annual town meeting in May 2007 Mr. Taylor introduced the town's new assessor. Meeting voters for the first time, Ms. Cywinski said that she would be inspecting property as part of a scheduled 2008 revaluation.

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