

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Editorial : Common ground among nations

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The report this morning about the determination of the new leaders at the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) to remake the way they conduct tribal government is heartening. The new chairwoman, Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, and the new tribal administrator, Tobias Vanderhoop, appear determined to change the way the tribe governs itself, the way it does business, and the way it relates to the town of Aquinnah and the other Island towns.

To non-Wampanoags and non-Aquinnahans, the promise of such change is welcome, bringing with it as it does the promise of more cooperation and openness, less hostility, and fewer legal and regulatory disputes. Perhaps the fact that neither Ms. Andrews-Maltais nor Mr. Vanderhoop was born and raised here will help their agenda along, and their roots in Wampanoag culture will comfort and guide their constituents.

Ms. Andrews-Maltais and Mr. Vanderhoop described to Times writer Steve Myrick their plans to communicate more openly, to search for useful partnerships, and to heal strained relationships with Island governments.

"We want to be as open as we can be," Ms. Andrews-Maltais told Mr. Myrick. "We do understand that we're part of this Island community. We want the Islanders to understand what we're doing up here, because there are benefits that are not just going to our tribal members, they're going to the entire Island."

Just as one cannot be too hopeful, one cannot underestimate the challenges facing the two new Wampanoag leaders. The modern history of discomfort between Indian and non-Indian year-round and summer residents of Aquinnah is a long, turbulent story, described in court papers and the Congressional Record for 40 years. In Aquinnah alone, the multi-part division of residents - year-round voting residents, summer property owning residents, and Wampanoag people, some of whom fall into each of the other two categories even as they are members of the tribal nation - means that the currents of interests and ambitions run strongly in several directions over every issue, never cleanly predictable and without benefit of a handy tidal current table to serve as a guide. It's a

maelstrom. And, one must add to the mix crosscurrents within the tribe itself, which has hardly been immune from paralyzing political division.

But, given these extraordinary circumstances, it is clear, and history underscores this conclusion, that the efforts Ms. Andrews-Maltais and Mr. Vanderhoop promised this week offer the only real opportunity to organize these contentious subsets into a progressive force for change.

Of course, this promised initiative on the Wampanoags' part must be matched by a similar willingness on the part of town and Island leaders to look at many of the old, divisive issues anew. We hope and expect similar forward-looking determination from the non-Indian leadership across the Vineyard community. The fruits of such cooperation may improve the lives of Aquinnahans and Islanders all.

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