

The Martha's Vineyard Times

New leaders, new course for tribe

By Steve Myrick

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In thousands of years of history on Martha's Vineyard, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) has undergone many changes. In the last 400 or so years of that history, those changes were centered on the tribe's interaction with European settlers, and many of those changes were not beneficial to the Wampanoag.

In the last year of history, the change has been at the top, with the election of a new tribal chairwoman, Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, and the hiring of a new tribal administrator, Tobias Vanderhoop. Though neither was born and raised on the Island, both have deep roots in the Wampanoag ancestral lands, community, and culture.

In a wide-ranging interview with the Times, Ms. Andrews-Maltais and Mr. Vanderhoop outlined their vision for the future of the Wampanoag Tribe, and the way they seek change in tribal government, business ventures, and relations with Island towns.

Over and over, they emphasized a desire to open communication, create partnerships, and repair relations strained over the years by disagreements with other Island governments, and by a society sometimes perceived as secretive and separate.

"We want to be as open as we can be," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais. "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."

"I will do," added Mr. Vanderhoop, "whatever I can do to make sure the tribal administration reaches out to the rest of the Island, to be good partners. We want to be good partners. We want to be good neighbors."

Different path, same destination

Ms. Andrews-Maltais was educated at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and worked for much of her professional life at a logistics company in New Bedford. In 1998 she moved to the Island to become the manager of a Sears store, a business venture that never got off the ground. She applied her skills as the tribe's personnel manager, and then as the historic preservation officer, before winning the job of tribal chairwoman in an election last fall. She took office in January. She lives in Edgartown with her husband and daughter.



Tribal administrator Tobias Vanderhoop and tribal chairwoman Cheryl Andrews-Maltais promise a more open, responsive government for the Wampanoag Tribe.

Photo by Steve Myrick

Mr. Vanderhoop, who already held a bachelors degree from the University of Massachusetts-Boston, recently completed a masters degree in public administration at the Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School. He is a member of a large and extended Wampanoag family. While growing up in Everett, Mr. Vanderhoop spent summers in Aquinnah, always reluctant to make the end-of-season trip back to the city. He made the Island his home in 1992.

"With ten years of administrative experience," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais, "he brings to this position a set of skills that are unparalleled, through his experience and his education. I know there is somebody in this office that understands our community first, understands how our government and administrative offices function, and can apply different skills and principles."

"No pressure at all," responds Mr. Vanderhoop with a hearty laugh.

Open doors

Inside the tribal administration building in Aquinnah, the doors of the tribal leadership are open, literally. Ms. Andrews-Maltais ran on a campaign of openness, promising more communication with the 1,100 (approximately) members of the Wampanoag Tribe on and off the Island.

"It makes a longer day for you, you have to stop what your doing and be responsive," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais. "I'm trying to make sure my communication with the tribal council and the tribal membership is open. I understand I can't do it all, and I shouldn't be doing it all. I empower people to do their jobs. I also hold them accountable for their jobs because accountability is needed to show we are maximizing our investment in our staff, and our people.

As the tribal administrator, Mr. Vanderhoop says his goal is to implement the goals set by the tribal leadership. "When decisions are made, all of the necessary steps are taken, that is how you create an effective government," he said. "Make sure the tribal government is responsive as it needs to be, help the administration become more active partners."

Casino plans

Under the administration of Donald Widdiss, Ms. Andrews-Maltais's predecessor, the Wampanoag Tribe signed a development agreement with the Seneca Nation, a tribe in New York that has developed two very successful casinos. During her campaign Ms. Andrews-Maltais criticized the way that agreement was negotiated and announced. She said the "hard funding" part of the Seneca agreement has been suspended, but the corporation is still working closely with the Seneca.

The tribe's interest in casinos is in the hands of a corporation separate from the tribal government.

"While it's part of the government focus, it's left in the capable hands of the corporation," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais.

Earlier this year, governor Deval Patrick proposed establishing three casinos in Massachusetts, with an additional site to be awarded to an Indian tribe. That plan was defeated by the Massachusetts house of representatives, but may be revived during next year's legislative session. The Patrick administration estimates that the casino licenses, which would be sold at public auction, could sell for \$300 million.

"A \$300 million license and a billion-dollar commitment for a casino resort is really not feasible," Ms. Andrews-Maltais said. "We're waiting to see where the window is at, whether the window is open, closed, or ajar."

Ms. Andrews-Maltais described the tribe's efforts like a swimming duck - that is, it may look like nothing is happening above the water, but below the water, the duck is paddling furiously.

Federal funding

Like every other government on the Island, the Wampanoag tribe faces budget challenges, and the times are getting more challenging, though for different reasons.

"Municipalities have the ability to raise taxes; we don't," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais. "We're working on a shoestring. Our healthcare dollars are not going up, they're staying the same, but our population is growing. Our service population for education and human services is going up, but those dollars are staying the same or being reduced."

Last year, according to Ms. Andrews-Maltais, the tribe received approximately \$3 million in direct appropriations and grants from the federal government. It comes in various forms, and goes to various tribal entities.

About \$860,000 is allotted for basic programs and services. About \$480,000 goes to operate the town's infrastructure. About \$920,000 is allotted for healthcare for tribal

members, and about \$700,000 comes to the tribe's natural resources department.

"The trust relationship between the federal government and the tribes begins with the constitution," said Mr. Vanderhoop.

In article 1, section 8, the part of the document commonly known as the commerce clause, the constitution declares that Congress has the authority to "regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes."

"It's really making good on the promises of 200 years ago, when they said if you give us your lands," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais, "we will make sure your people are taken care of. They didn't do that."

Ms. Andrews-Maltais declined to release the tribe's operating budget for publication, but noted that information is available to any member of the tribe.

Town governments are required to release budget information, so that taxpayers can scrutinize how their elected officials are spending tax dollars. The tribe, as a sovereign nation, is not required to release that information.

"We are extremely scrutinized by the federal government," said Mr. Vanderhoop. "We have reporting requirements that are far more strict than state governments or local governments. We are always held accountable by our tribal members. They are why we're here as a government, and we answer to them."

Business ventures

The Wampanoag tribe has embarked on a number of business ventures since establishing federal recognition as a tribe in 1987. Some have resulted in high-profile failures.

Ms. Andrews-Maltais said her administration has been working over the past eight months on a corporate charter, intended to provide a better foundation for Wampanoag business ventures. "In the past we've relied on internal staff," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais. "The numbers projected weren't accurate. (The new corporate charter) allows for separation between the elected officials and the government. It really allows the business expertise within our community and outside our community to be in charge of those businesses. We're not totally reliant on people we've hired."

Most recently, the tribe faced criticism when an oyster aquaculture operation went awry in Menemsha Pond. The business was a for-profit venture, under the control of the Wampanoag Aquinnah Shellfish Hatchery, a separate corporation. Over the winter, clips which anchor dark plastic bags of maturing oysters failed, and the bags drifted loose on the tide. Hundreds washed up on the shoreline, some drifted as far as the Elizabeth Islands.

"Unfortunately the type of clip used at one point wasn't the best choice of clips to use, but it was less expensive at the time," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais.

Mr. Vanderhoop said a work crew recently completed an extensive clean-up operation. In the first phase of a plan to clean up and evaluate the business, 260 bags were recovered.

"Those have been returned to our aquaculture site," said Mr. Vanderhoop. "We've entered into phase two this week. We are (taking) inventory of our product, and the bags are being put back out onto the lines."

In the third phase of the plan, the hatchery will present the tribal council with a plan for the future of the oyster growing operation.

"We've suspended for-profit operations," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais. "We are still, and will always be custodians of the pond. What we're unable to do is continue to put financial resources into it as a for-profit business." She said the aquaculture project would now seek government grants open only to not-for-profit businesses. Ms. Andrews-Maltais was eager to point out that the project has had success in other areas. "Our scallop program (has grown) from a few hundred bushels to 2,800 bushels this year, providing livelihood for tribal members and non-tribal members alike."

Another project that has drawn scrutiny is the tribe's community center. The structure, a model of environmentally sensitive construction, was erected in 2004, by an Air Force Reserve construction battalion, as part of a training program. The 6,176-square-foot building, considered about 80 percent complete, was designed to include a gym, stage, locker rooms, and kitchen. Since the original construction, little or no work has been done. The community center sits in a clearing near the tribal administration building, partly open to the weather, with waterproof exterior wrapping flapping in the breeze.

"We're waiting on permitting issues, internal issues and working with the town to get all that together," said Ms. Andrews-Maltais. "What we started with a few years ago with a projected budget, with the time that has elapsed, that budget is no longer being able to satisfy that, so now we have to seek alternatives."

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