

# VINEYARD GAZETTE

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## **Aquinnah Scrambles for a Plowman**

By SAM BUNGEY

As meteorologists yesterday charted a storm creeping inexorably toward the East Coast, in Aquinnah a race was on to get someone behind the wheel of the town snow plow.

Though the retirement of highway surveyor Forest Alley is apparently imminent, town coordinator Jeff Burgoyne said yesterday Mr. Forest will be manning the plow this weekend.

“He is ready, willing and able,” he said.

Yet selectman Jim Newman said that a new hire is waiting in the wings.

“Jay Smalley is ready to plow this weekend; we hired him yesterday,” he said.

Judging by a good-natured but somewhat ranging Tuesday night meeting of the selectmen, this is just the type of confusion that some are hoping to clear up in the steering of Aquinnah town government.

A stricter policy on decision-making, better recording of meetings for the record, and improvements in inter-department communication were among the issues discussed at the meeting, attended by several town employees as well as Mr. Burgoyne and selectmen.

There have been several recent, minor scuffles over selectmen’s decision-making. In one such instance, an annual youth powwow was canceled by selectman Camille Rose in the face of safety concerns posed by a power line burial operation at the Aquinnah Circle. When Mr. Newman, who was off-Island at the time, was informed of the cancellation, he called Mr. Burgoyne to reverse the decision.

“We need to operate by consensus, and coordinate what we do with one another,” said Mr. Newman.

A member of the Chilmark board of assessors, Michael Stutz, who was in the

audience, said the policy may involve more meetings, since as a matter of law, selectmen cannot discuss town business outside of public meeting.

“You can’t just go out and say Jeff do this, hire this person,” he said.

Selectman Spencer Booker said the ruling would help clarify things for Mr. Burgoyne.

“The catalyst for this is that the town administrator has three bosses and often has three different marching orders,” he said. The new ruling will eliminate confusion, he said.

“This enables him to say, let me make a phone call.”

Ms. Rose said she felt the word decision was vague.

“I’d like a little more definition,” she said, adding she would be happier if the wording was altered to include only public policy decisions. “Rather than [decisions like] ‘Gee, can you get the snow plow out?’ ” she said.

But Mr. Newman insisted the ruling should be broader.

“I’m talking about, say, canceling a public event,” he said.

“It’s a good policy,” concluded Ms. Rose. The board voted unanimously to adopt the policy as written.

Reading from a statement, Mr. Newman referred to perceived bad mouthing by some town employees of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), in a recent article in the Martha’s Vineyard Times.

“I would request that any discussion of the wind initiative not include criticism of the tribe,” he said. The board moved on without comment.

In other business Ms. Rose was appointed by the board to be member at large for Aquinnah of the Martha’s Vineyard Commission.

“I think you’ll be a great asset to the town on the board,” said Mr. Newman, “you bring a tremendous amount of experience.”

A request came from planning board member Carlos Montoya, who was in the audience, to acquire DVD copies of selectmen’s meetings. The agenda item said that the move would solve an existing minutes problem.

Currently the minutes are taken by Mr. Burgoyne who also records the meeting on a tape recorder.

Mr. Montoya said he has found it difficult to review past meetings. The board agreed that the purchase was a good idea, and that they were willing to make any necessary cuts to the discretionary budget to bankroll it.

“Maybe we’ll have to go without these bottles of water,” said Ms. Rose, pointing to unopened spring water in front of her on the desk.

“Yes, I don’t know where they come from,” said Mr. Newman.

Mr. Newman also chided Mr. Burgoyne who mentioned that he had bought a DVD burner earlier that day.

“How much did that cost?” he asked.

“The bill will come,” said Mr. Burgoyne.

“This is what I’m talking about,” said Mr. Newman.

In other news, due to delays caused by training and staff absences, the annual property tax bills will not go out by the Dec. 31 deadline for the second year, said assistant assessor Angela Cywinski, in a report to the board.

Though no estimate is currently available for the tax rate, selectmen were able to vote to accept a single classification. Mr. Burgoyne said that even if no tax returns come before May 31, an unlikely outcome, he added, the town is able to borrow from Community Preservation Act funds to remain solvent.

The meeting then turned to the question of snow plowing.

Ms. Rose said Mr. Alley, 75, verbally announced his intention to resign from snow plowing duties. “He doesn’t feel he is able to continue,” she said.

The town received two responses to separate advertisements for a snow plow operator and a sanding truck operator.

Mr. Booker said he knew several people who are interested in the larger job of highway superintendent; he said dividing the job is complicated and possibly not cost effective.

“It’s way too convoluted,” he said

“It’s what we’ve always done,” said Ms. Rose.

Mr. Newman proposed that the board accept Mr. Smalley for the position of snow plow operator, but again Mr. Booker objected. “It may not be cost effective,” he said.

“Why haven’t we done it before then?” asked Ms. Rose

“I don’t know. Maybe because we haven’t thought ahead,” he replied.

The board eventually voted to move forward with all possible haste on the matter and hire Mr. Smalley if an alternative could not be found in the short term.

Speaking yesterday, Mr. Newman said that while he conceded there may be some continuing confusion over who is officially hired for the snow plow position, in the case of emergency, there is no cause for concern.

“A lot of thing get done ass-backwards in this towns, but with important stuff we get it done,” he said.

He added that a West Tisbury sanding contractor was also hired yesterday and the town is considering the future purchase of a sanding attachment for the plow.

“If there’s an emergency we’ll be there, I can tell you that. We’ll do what we need to do. One thing I’ll say about it, everyone cooperates here when comes to it,” said. Mr. Newman. “This town is good at that.”

Shortly after the two-hour meeting broke up Tuesday, it began to snow.