

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Aquinnah votes concert venue plan

By Nelson Sigelman

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Whether it was the interest a proposal for an outdoor music stage generated or the knowledge that on a cold winter night it was the best show in town, a significant number of voters appeared Tuesday night for an Aquinnah special town meeting.

Over the course of the approximately two-hour meeting, voters authorized selectmen to solicit proposals to lease a portion of the Aquinnah Circle for the purpose of a performing arts stage and took action on 13 additional warrant articles, most of which involved some degree of financial housekeeping.

Having failed to attract a quorum of 39 voters in three tries since October, the first question of the night was answered when voters continued to fill the rows of folding seats in the old town hall past the scheduled 7 pm start of the meeting. The ultimate and official total attendance was 55.



Jim Glavin, a partner in a proposal for a performing arts center at the Aquinnah circle, described the project and answered questions from voters at the Aquinnah special town meeting Tuesday. Selectmen Camille Rose (right), Spencer Booker, and James Newman are seated in the foreground.

Photo by Nelson Sigelman

Aquinnah in early March is very quiet. That may have accounted for the distinct conviviality that permeated much of the night's discussion and smoothed the edges off debates among year-round residents who found themselves suddenly gathered in one room with folks they had mostly seen in passing on up-Island roads.

The first extended discussion of the night came when voters were asked to approve a policy that would allow selectmen to sell a town-owned, landlocked parcel to abutters, in exchange for an

agreement that the property would not be subdivided.

Selectman Jim Newman explained the financial benefits of a sale, expected to generate approximately \$600,000. He said the immediate benefit would be that the town would be able to place \$238,000, the maximum allowed, into the stabilization fund. Over the long term, the sale would place a piece of property back on the tax rolls. "This is really important to us," he told voters.

But voters were not convinced it was a good deal for the town and defeated the measure on a voice vote. Much of the discussion focused on efforts to use the land for affordable housing, or as leverage to gain a site elsewhere in town, possibly through a swap.

Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, chairman of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head, questioned the probity of past town land sales, subsequent to tax takings. Ms. Maltais said she knew that many tribe members had lost land due to a lack of due diligence on the part of the town.

In fact, tribe members have in the past filled many of the official positions in the town, formerly known as Gay Head, including those responsible for tax takings.

Yesterday, in a telephone conversation with The Martha's Vineyard Times, Jeffrey Madison, a former Aquinnah selectman, long-time town assessor, and a lawyer, said that while those accusations might have been true for the distant past, he could not recall one instance where the town had failed to exercise due diligence.

Normally, voters move quickly through those portions of special town meeting warrants intended to take care of outstanding bills. But article nine, a request for \$305.29 for the Dukes County pest management program raised numerous questions: What is it for and what did the town get for its money, and by the way how much did it cost the town?

And, Jim Benoit added, "It just so happens that I have a rat in my house. How is this going to help me?"

Town officials had no answers to any of the questions, and the article was tabled. As it turns out, there will be no need to resurrect the article.

Russell Smith, Dukes County manager, said yesterday that the town was billed \$1,146 for county pest services and the \$305 was a billing error.

The most extended discussion of the evening surrounded a proposal for an outdoor performing arts center by Ted Cammann and James Glavin of Aquinnah, promoters last summer of a music festival in support of local radio station WVVY.

Their proposal was behind an article that would authorize the selectmen to solicit requests for proposals to construct a performing arts center stage. Mr. Glavin stood at the front of the room, and following a brief description of the proposal, answered questions.

Walter Delaney, town moderator, went row by row. Many questions focused on the need for a long-term lease and what if any benefits would flow to the town.

Mr. Glavin explained that the only way the men could make the plan work financially and attract needed support was if they had a guaranteed time frame within which to work and recoup their investment. He said the town would share in the profits, if there were any, and the town and Island organizations would gain a professional performance venue.

Prodded for details, Mr. Glavin said that what was before voters was a concept, and that any individual or group would be able to submit a proposal to selectmen.

Mr. Glavin said he envisioned between four and eight major shows per year and a maximum limit of 2,500 tickets, which he cited as the handling capacity of the roadway.

The men plan to use the land's natural topography to provide a natural amphitheater. The stage would be placed in the lower section so that the audience would be looking out in the direction of Nomans Land Island.

The view and the connection between the circle and the Tribe was a concern for Bettina Washington, Tribal historic preservation officer. She said the issue was whether the town should lease the land at all, irrespective of the proposed use.

Citing her age, 50, and history in town, she said that many of the people in the room were not native born but had come to the town in their later years and come to appreciate the town and its culture.

"Our oral history is bound in that vista," aid Ms. Washington. She asked voters to be very careful. "You don't want to put your soul for sale," she said.

Spa Tharpe, a sailor and builder, took issue with the dividing line laid down by Ms. Washington. "Honestly, when you say something like when you were here 50 years ago and we weren't here what you are doing is you are dividing this entire town between you the tribe, and us," he said. "We are a town together."

Mr. Tharpe said it was not constructive language and said it was time to move on. "I sailed around the corner in 1976 loved the view then and love it now," he said.

To much laughter, Mr. Madison began his remarks by noting that he was going to be 60 years old. Providing a historical perspective, he said he could remember outhouses on the circle, how rocks were placed surreptitiously one night and a bandstand erected for the town's centennial. "This notion that there's never been anything in the circle or that this is going to set some precedent, that it is new, is just not right," said Mr. Madison. While there were many questions still to be asked, he said he had confidence in the selectmen to examine the entire proposal as they move forward.

Just past 9 pm, there was a request to call the question. Mr. Delaney asked for a voice vote. Despite a resounding yea, Mr. Delaney, ever cautious, said he did not want anyone to have a reason to question the outcome and called for a standing count. The tally was 40 in favor and 15 opposed. Selectmen Jim Newman and Spencer Booker voted against the article. Selectman Camille Rose voted in favor.

In all voters approved all articles but article two, the land request. They tabled article three, a

request to utilize funds from the land sale for the stabilization fund and transfer requests in articles seven and eight at the request of the selectmen. Article 12, a request to transfer \$50,000 from the stabilization fund to the general fund was reduced to \$38,000.

Soon after Mr. Delaney gaveled the meeting to a close, one participant announced that it was resident Penny Huff's birthday. The voters stopped their exit and launched into a rendition of Happy Birthday for Ms. Huff. And then they dispersed into the Aquinnah night.

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