

To the Editor;

I know you're new to the Island so let me give you some facts and historical perspective that I hope you'll take into account before you write your next editorial about Aquinnah. On Tuesday you chastised some Aquinnah voters for "impoverishing" the town" by "refusing to open their checkbooks." Actually, we've been opening our checkbooks to solve our problems by throwing money at them for the last 10 years and now it's time for a change; it's time to increase revenues!

Since fiscal 1995 our budget has doubled, growing at an average annual rate of 7 ½ percent. If we had kept our checkbooks closed and stayed within Proposition 2 ½ guidelines our budget would have only increased 30 percent during this period instead of 100 percent. Our single greatest expenditure, education costs, represented 24 percent of our budget 10 years ago but accounts for 40 percent of our budget today. These school costs have tripled in the last 10 years increasing at an average annual rate of 11 ½ percent. Please don't accuse us of cutting essential services for children.

Likewise, please don't accuse us of "slashing the police budget" and weakening our public safety efforts. As your own paper reported, the same voters that turned down the \$260,000 override for the operating budget voted to approve all five override articles for improved ambulance/EMT/paramedic service at an annual cost of \$47,500. The police budget was cut, but there will be no reduction in staffing levels. Your own paper pointed out on June 22 that, "The town police department was also able to give up some money because of an unusual situation." Our police chief has been on extended medical leave and will now retire on disability. Consequently, the town can eliminate most of that extra salary from the budget.

You are right about one thing. We are trying to send a message, but it's not a message about cutting costs and efficient government, it's a message about keeping promises and increasing revenues.

For over 10 years we've all known that our operating costs, and in particular our educational costs, would skyrocket to levels that could never be offset with cost cuts. The primary reason for this was the construction of 30 units of housing by the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). These would increase the year-round population of the town and the demand for services but wouldn't increase Town revenues because Tribal lands are exempt from real estate taxes. Some voters were concerned that these increases in educational expenses would bankrupt the town or cause taxes to increase dramatically and they wanted some reassurance that revenues would be found to offset these costs.

That's why over ten years ago on January 10, 1994 the Town and the Tribe signed a historic Memorandum Of Understanding under which they jointly took the responsibility to "search for funds to defray expenses which may be attributable to the 30 unit low income housing project of the Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribal Housing Authority in Gay Head...including, but not limited to, costs of education, police, fire and other municipal services." This effort was to continue "until

the parties have successfully addressed any adverse financial impacts to the town.” The Town and the Tribe were essentially promising that there would be no negative impact on the Town’s budget from Tribal housing. With that promise, permits were granted and construction began.

Tribal housing has been a tremendous success, making life on the Vineyard affordable for a large group of people who make a major contribution to the island wide community. The Tribe and the Town did work out an agreement whereby the Tribe pays the Town to cover their portion of public safety costs but the promise to find funds to offset educational expenses has not been lived up to; No funds were ever found and the effort to raise them appears to have stopped years ago. With large amounts of free cash rolling in over the last few years there hasn’t been any real pressure on town government to address these problems. Now that the crunch has finally hit it’s time for the Town and the Tribe to live up to their promise and find the revenue to offset these costs. That’s the message we’re trying to send.

In your editorial you stated, “When your brakes need work, do you tell your car to suck it up and do without? Of course not - you open the checkbook.”

Well, Aquinnah may have the oldest cars in Commonwealth but even we know that when your car keeps having costly problems year after year it’s time to junk it and get a new one. It’s time for Aquinnah to stop writing checks and get a new solution to its financial problems by increasing revenues.

Peter Temple
Aquinnah