

Voters will be asked to approve more money for improvements around the Gay Head Light. *Mark Alan Lovewell*

Aquinnah Voters To Revisit Assessor Question

Landry Harlan *Thursday, March 1, 2018 - 4:21pm*

Money for improvements around the Gay Head Light, changing the town assessors from an elected to an appointed board and a bylaw that would ban the release of helium balloons are all slated to come before Aquinnah voters at a late-season special town meeting Tuesday.

The meeting begins at 7 p.m. in the old town hall. There are 11 articles on the warrant (https://vineyardgazette.com/sites/default/files/downloads/pages/towns/Aquinnah/aquinnah-stm-18.pdf). Moderator Michael Hebert will preside. Business items run the gamut, from unpaid bills to what town administrator Jeffrey Madison called the highlight of the warrant: a bylaw crafted by West Tisbury School students calling for a ban on the intentional release of helium balloons.

The future status of the town board of assessors is a key reason for the meeting in the first place. The request to change the board from elected to appointed came before voters at the annual town meeting last year, but was withdrawn when it was discovered that the town had not met a requirement that the vote take place in two steps: first at a town meeting and then in the ballot box, at least 60 days apart.

During the past year and a half there has been tension between selectmen and assessors (https://vineyardgazette.com/news/2017/04/13/aquinnah-assessors-take-issue-proposed-ballot-changes) over roles and authority. The initiative to change the board from elected to appointed comes from the selectmen.

“I’ve not heard anybody speak out against it, and for that matter I haven’t heard many people speak out in favor of it,” said selectman and board chairman Jim Newman this week. “It will be interesting what people say at the meeting.”

If voters agree to the change, the question will come up for a second vote at the annual town election in May.

Voters will also be asked to approve spending money for ongoing improvements around the Gay Head Light which was moved back from the edge of an eroding cliff three years ago. One article seeks $20,000 to build a permanent walkway from the shops at the Cliffs to the lighthouse, while a second request is for $25,000 to build a divider between a pedestrian path and the roadway at the Circle. A third article seeks a $1,400 transfer for startup funds to begin town-operated tours at the lighthouse. Previously the tours have been managed by the Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

Mr. Madison said the lighthouse had 25,000 visitors last year, with foot traffic increasing consistently in recent years, possibly due to increased publicity around the move of the old brick tower.

The balloon ban bylaw began as a project by science students at West Tisbury School who wanted to develop a petition to see how government works, and chose helium balloons as their subject. They were concerned with the negative environmental impact of helium balloons that land in the ocean and endanger wildlife. If voters approve, the bylaw will ban the intentional release of helium balloons in town. Violators would be subject to a $100 fine.

Mr. Madison said the students circulated the petition and had voters in each Island town sign it.

“That is something they can look back on for a long time,” he said. “It’s really terrific.”

Other requests on the warrant include:

• The creation of a stabilization fund to provide assistance to the Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School to be used for capital improvements.

• Payment of $3,200 for a handful of outstanding bills.

• Making property tax exemptions for senior citizens more favorable by increasing the discount from five to 20 per cent and also lowering the minimum qualifying age from 70 to 65.

A quorum of 36 voters is needed to convene the meeting.



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