

New Chilmark school is in a class of its own

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHILMARK - When the time came for the Martha's Vineyard community of Chilmark to build a new school, residents decided to do something unprecedented in the recent history of the state Department of Education.

They decided to pay for the school themselves.

The \$3.6 million facility opens this fall without one brick having been paid for with state funds, or one feature built because of state requirements.

Jim Anderson, administrator of the state's school building assistance program, said he has never heard of anything similar in 21 years in state education.

"It's the first one I've ever seen," he told the Cape Cod Times.

Since 1991, 567 schools have been built or renovated, and all have requested state aid. But Chilmark, with its tax base of \$892 million, is not a typical Massachusetts community.

Chilmark's year-round population is about 974, but that climbs to nearly 5,000 during tourist season. Its combination of green fields and ocean views has pushed property values into the stratosphere, putting more money into town coffers.

The town's budget this year is \$3.2 million, \$400,000 less than the 20-year bond the town took out to pay for the school. Town accountant Amy Tierney said the \$225,000 first-year payment on the bond will add pennies, at most, to the town's dirt cheap tax rate of \$3.21 per \$1,000 valuation.

Residents started investigating replacement of the Menemsha School in

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1993, assuming they would apply for state aid. Chilmark planned to build a school for about 100 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Residents also wanted to use the town library as the school library, and the community center as a gymnasium.

But the state would not provide funding unless the school was built for a minimum of 125 students. In addition, it became clear that the town library and community center, and perhaps the property they stood on, would have to be regionally owned.

The town divided into two camps - those who wanted a bigger school with state-required facilities and those who wanted to preserve Chilmark the way it was.

In the end, the traditionalists won out. And the fact that every penny would come from Chilmark residents' pockets did not seem to bother anyone.

"When we finally got the money and the plan all set, the proposal passed unanimously to a round of applause," said school business manager Dierdre Farrell.