

This was originally published in the *Amherst Bulletin* on October 17, 2008

## Vote yes on Question 4

By DIANA STEIN and GERRY WEISS

Gazing at the Amherst Town Hall, resplendent in its historically appropriate, elegantly refaced brickwork, we can readily appreciate what Community Preservation Act dollars have done for Amherst. But there is another benefit. By using CPA funds for needed repairs to a historically important building, \$395,000 was not removed from our extremely tight budget. For just one example of what we saved, realize that this is equal to the combined salaries of nine teachers. And while we can't hire teachers with CPA dollars, using them for restoration does free up much needed cash in the capital portion of Amherst's budget.

As you know, CPA legislation allows Massachusetts cities and towns to control local planning. Its goal is to provide municipalities new funding for the acquisition and preservation of land for open space and recreation, creation of affordable housing and preservation of historic buildings and artifacts.

A sample of how Amherst has benefited from past CPA funding include improvements to West Cemetery, archival document conservation, the Strong House chimney restoration, creation of the Plum Brook Athletic Fields, the Main Street Housing Project, the Smith Conservation Restriction and the repair of the Town Hall clock.

CPA funds come from a local surcharge on real estate taxes plus matching state dollars. Originally, Amherst voters approved a 1 percent surcharge; then later raised it to 1.5 percent. Northampton, Hadley, Deerfield and Easthampton have adopted the maximum 3 percent surcharge as have 67 other municipalities. Now, we are urging Amherst voters to increase our surcharge from 1.5 percent to 3 percent by voting yes on Question 4 on Nov. 4.

Why? First is what CPA funds do for the quality of life in our community. Saving open space and protecting historic sites preserve the unique qualities of Amherst. This improves the community as a whole and, therefore, protects the investment of homeowners. Studies have shown that preserving open space increases the value of nearby property, perhaps one reason property values have not fallen in Amherst during the latest crisis. Preservation of our historic sites and open spaces is also good for one of our few industries - tourism.

Equally important, CPA funds create affordable housing by land purchase and/or construction. Affordable housing allows those who provide essential services in the community to actually live here. In a few years, many affordable units in town will be taken out of the pool and our 10 percent minimum will be in jeopardy. This would allow developers to build without regard to our zoning laws, endangering the character of Amherst.

Although these are trying financial times, there are significant benefits to raising the CPA surcharge right now. "In a stagnant economy, the Community Preservation Act has provided a vital source of revenue to communities for critical local projects that otherwise would never have happened," (Dorrie Pizzella, executive director, Community Preservation Coalition, 2002). By law, there will always be a state fund to match local CPA funds. The state estimates the fund will provide a first round match of about 65 percent of the surcharge levied by each city and town in FY09. A second round of distribution will add additional state funds but only for those communities that have adopted a 3 percent surcharge. At our current 1.5 percent surcharge, we will never qualify for the second round distribution from the CPA Trust Fund. At 3 percent, we will.

How would we spend this money? One wonderful aspect of the CPA is that monies can be saved for future and more expensive needs. What if Amherst would have had a treasure chest of CPA funds to use, to buy the Boys Club, convert it to affordable housing units and thereby save the historic building and grounds for posterity? Other unique opportunities may arise in the future that a larger amount of funds would allow.

As a relatively progressive tax in Amherst, the surcharge exempts the first \$100,000 of the value of residential property. Also, property owned and occupied by persons qualified for low-income housing or moderate-income senior housing are exempt. And it is a small increase in the tax bill of \$56 a year for a person owning a house assessed at \$322,000. This is a great value for the money; it also brings back to the town some of our tax dollars, so we urge you to vote yes on Question 4.

*Diana Stein and Gerry Weiss are members of the Amherst Select Board.*