

Tuesday July 31, 2007

Headlines



CAPE COD TIMES

Guilty as charged

July 31, 2007

We're busted.

Cape Cod towns had the good sense to put the Community Preservation Act to work (and before it, the land bank) to add to public conservation holdings, save scenic views, repair old buildings and help finance affordable housing.

First, Cape residents voted to add a 3 percent surcharge on their own property tax bills, which are high enough as it is. To salve this sacrifice — and further these good ends — the state sends matching funds from a pool of \$10-\$20 fees on deed registrations statewide.

But a bean counter associated with the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard has found a flaw in this seemingly selfless process: Most residents of the state's larger cities haven't voted to tax themselves for these purposes, so they get no matching funds, even as they pay the registry fee. Something like \$50 million has therefore flowed to tonier suburban towns from the pockets of these urban victims.

To this charge we echo Sen. Robert O'Leary, who pushed the Cape's conversion to the more flexible CPA:

"Give me a break."

To be fair, the report issued by the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston is based on award-winning research by a Kennedy School graduate student. We have no doubt the numbers are correct. Neither do we fault the goal of striving for fairness in public expenditure. Balancing the needs of the poor and underserved against the power of the wealthy and well-connected is the highest calling of politics.

But when Rappaport executive director David Luberoff claims the distribution raises "serious questions about equity," we must disagree.

The stolen CPA cash in all of Barnstable County amounts to \$10 million over six years. That's about what Boston paid and didn't earn back because its voters turned down the optional CPA surcharge in 2001.

No community receives back exactly what it pays out through each tax mechanism — local, state, federal, gas tax, lottery. They win on some, lose on others. Cities, for instance, have most of their school costs paid by state Chapter 70

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funds. Some years it has been 100 percent. Cape towns have been lucky to reach 20 percent reimbursement, yet the median wages that must make up the difference are lower than in most cities.

Few cities or towns will see road and bridge repair equal to their gas-tax payouts — not while Big Dig bills loom.


This lack of wider tax context renders the study little more than an academic exercise. The numbers float free of the state's varied landscapes. The "D'oh! Award" goes to this observation: The highest per capita return of matching funds was more than \$600 per resident! Where? Chilmark and Aquinnah, the two smallest towns on Martha's Vineyard, populations 843 and 344, respectively.

There is no conspiracy here. The goals of the CPA happen to reflect the landscape and the character of towns. Cities get plenty of targeted tax money for their own unique needs.

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