

Changes may be on the way in community preservation funding

By David Riley/Daily News staff

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Legislation that would boost the state's commitment to match money that towns and cities collect through the Community Preservation Act has cleared a significant hurdle.

The CPA, passed in 2000, allows municipalities an optional surcharge of up to 3 percent on local property taxes. Proceeds can be spent only on open space, recreation, historic preservation and affordable housing.

Until recently, the state had matched the locally raised money dollar for dollar. But the ailing housing market and a growing number of communities that have opted in have battered state funding for the program, which is generated by a \$20 fee on real estate transactions. The average state CPA match plunged this year to 40.9 percent. That would change under Senate Bill 90, which would require the state to match a minimum 75 percent of the money raised at the local level. A joint legislative committee has now recommended the bill for approval when the Legislature reconvenes next month.

"Those towns that have passed it certainly have committed to additional funds and it was based on the knowledge that the state would assist in that area," said Ashland Town Manager John Petrin. "It would be nice if we could get some understanding on a minimum funding level."

The legislation would be funded by raising fees on real estate transactions, depending on whether the CPA Trust Fund is able to meet the 75 percent minimum. The bill also would remove an exception in the existing program that has prevented communities from using CPA money to rehabilitate existing parks.

Rep. Carolyn Dykema, D-Holliston, a co-sponsor of the bill, said this could aid an effort in her hometown to renovate an old playground at Goodwill Park. "A lot of towns, we don't need more space - we have parks," Dykema said. "We just have to make them more usable."

The bill also would allow an optional commercial exemption and allows funding other than property taxes to be counted toward the local contribution.

The bill's primary sponsor in the Senate is Sen. Cynthia Stone Creem. It is co-sponsored by dozens of other lawmakers, including Dykema, House Majority Leader James Vallee, D-Franklin; Sen. Jamie Eldridge, D-Acton; Sen. Scott Brown, R-Wrentham; Rep. Alice Peisch, D-Wellesley; and Rep. Tom Conroy, D-Wayland.

Dykema said four of the five towns she represents are among the 142 in the state that have opted into the CPA. The program has helped fund "all those things that really form the foundation of quality of life in our communities," she said. Guaranteeing the state's match will encourage towns to stay in the program, Dykema said. "I think just from a trust factor, the towns need to see the state keeping its commitments," she said.

Peisch said of the towns she represents, Weston and Wellesley both use the CPA. "We want to be clear there's going to be a significant match so those communities don't feel that what they expected is not happening," she said. "They're holding up their end of the bargain - we want to be sure the state does the same."

In Ashland, Petrin said, the CPA has helped buy undeveloped land, built pavilions at two parks and performed preservation work like renovating Town Hall and other projects. "It would certainly be of help to us," he said of a 75 percent match. "With everything, of course, balancing the financials - where does it come from - is always of concern."

(David Riley can be reached at 508-626-3919 or driley@cnc.com.)

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