

Editorial: Building a better CPA

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The 10th birthday of Massachusetts' Community Preservation Act was celebrated last month in the Great Hall of Flags on Beacon Hill. But if the CPA is to survive another decade with the same vitality, action must be taken in other parts of the State House.

The CPA is all about local initiative. The state law can only be adopted through a local referendum vote applying a property tax surcharge. Local bylaws establish local Community Preservation Committees to manage the accounts. Every project using CPA funds must be approved by the city or town's legislative body.

The CPA can only be used for a quartet of traditionally underfunded needs: preserving open space, historical preservation, recreation and affordable housing. Through this locally driven, often complicated process, the CPA has conserved 15,000 acres of open space, funded 5,000 historic preservation projects and created 4,000 units of affordable housing.

With municipalities and the state in what seems like a perpetual budget crisis, funds for that kind of investment in community needs might never be found. Thanks to the CPA, \$1 billion was raised for these purposes in the year just ended.

The program is popular: 148 Massachusetts cities and towns have adopted it, and none have changed their minds. But while the CPA is locally-driven, it works because the state provides a significant match for the funds raised locally.

The state match is raised through fees on real estate transfers deposited directly in the Community Preservation Trust Fund. For the first few years, the Trust Fund, benefiting from a surge in home refinancing, was able to match the local money dollar-for-dollar. But as more communities adopted the CPA and the housing market stalled, the trust fund has been depleted. This year, the state match will average just 36.9 percent.

That undermines the goals of the CPA and local support for it. CPA backers have proposed a new bill - HB765, "An act to Sustain Community Preservation" - that would stabilize the state match at 75 percent, make it easier to use CPA funds for certain

projects and make it more attractive to established cities. But the bill, currently before the House Ways & Means Committee, appears stalled.

Meanwhile, the CPA has reserved a seat on the casino gambling gravy train. The House passed an amendment funneling 2 percent of license fees and 5 percent of gambling revenue to the CPA Trust Fund. Even if the provision makes it into the final bill, it probably wouldn't be enough to bring the state match to 75 percent, but it would be a good start.

The best bet to keep the Community Preservation Act working for Massachusetts cities and towns is HB765. The bill has 90 co-sponsors in the House and 26 in the Senate - more than enough for passage. Now it's up to the Democratic leadership of both chambers to bring it up for a vote.