

OUR OPINION: Bill would be boon for older recreation facilities

EDITORIAL —

The Community Preservation Act is a state/local partnership that has worked well for more than 10 years, but tough times and decreased state support have given purchase to seeds of discontent.

Over the years, many South Shore communities have voted to join the program, which uses an annual real estate tax surcharge to generate money for open space and historical preservation, recreation projects and affordable housing.

In recent years, however, several have entertained motions to withdraw from it.

So far, none have. Earlier this month, Kingston rejected an effort to reduce the surcharge.

We think such resolve is due in large part to the fact that people value CPA goals and the way the program is run. Under the CPA, local committees manage the funds, and every project using CPA funds must be approved by the city or town's legislative body.

Through this locally driven, albeit 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.

But while the CPA is locally driven, it works because the state matches the funds raised by the local surcharge.

Trouble arises, however, in the fact that the match has dropped from 100 percent to about 37 percent because of economic challenges.

The shrinking support has undermined the goals of the CPA, and that has undermined local support for the program.

CPA backers support a bill that would not only stabilize the state match but also make it easier to use CPA funds for certain projects and make the program more attractive to more densely developed communities that don't have a lot of open space.

The bill had been stalled for several years despite broad support on Beacon Hill. But on Monday was finally passed by the House and is all but assured to pass the Senate, where it has 26 sponsors.

The bill calls for an annual \$25 million contribution to the trust fund from budget surpluses at the end of the fiscal year. Sponsors estimate that it would deliver a 50 percent match going forward and eliminate volatility in the fund balance caused by the ups and downs of the real estate market.

The bill would also make it easier for CPA communities to put the money to use, specifically for enhancing older recreation facilities, which makes it more useful for cities and towns without much open space to protect.

We are encouraged that the state continues to seek ways of keeping the CPA viable. And while we recognize that there are many worthwhile uses for any surplus the state might enjoy, the CPA certainly deserves to be a contender.