



Advocates for community preservation in Massachusetts seek ways to increase state matching dollars

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Monson Conservation Commissioner Leslie A. Duthie, is one of 10 people honored last month at the Statehouse in Boston with 2011 Robert Kuehn Community Preservation Awards for her role in community preservation issues.

BOSTON - Matching state money was basically stable this year for most communities that have adopted a law for buying open space and historic preservation, ending a three-year slide in reduced state funding for the program.

Under the [Community Preservation Act](#), cities and towns receive a state match if voters have approved a property tax surcharge to raise local money. The state [Department of Revenue](#) released the state matches for communities earlier this month.

[Belchertown](#) Selectmen's Chairman Kenneth E. Elstein said the program still is worthwhile despite the lower match from the state in recent years.

"It's been a great deal, but obviously we would like to have more," Elstein said.

Katharine G. Baker, chairwoman of the [Community Preservation Committee](#) in Northampton, said the state matches this year show a need for boosting state funding for the program.

One possible way could be a provision in the House version of [casino legislation](#) that would direct millions of dollars from casino resorts to the statewide preservation program.

"We would be very happy with any increase in state matching funds," said Baker, adding the law has financed 51 projects in the city over the past five years.

The act is a hot issue in Northampton. Voters on [Nov. 8 in Northampton](#) will decide the outcome of a ballot question that, if approved, would repeal the city's 3 percent property-tax surcharge for raising community preservation money. Some residents may not want to pay the surcharge, which is \$79 a year for the average property taxpayer in the city.

Agawam, Amherst, Belchertown, Conway, East Longmeadow, Granville, Hampden, Longmeadow, Shutesbury, West Springfield, Westfield and Wilbraham are among the communities that received generally a stable percentage match from the state. Each of those communities received a 26.6 percent match on money raised in communities under the Community Preservation Act.

Last year, those communities received a 27.2 percent state match. The cut in the percentage was so slight that state funding was generally the same as last year for the great majority of communities.

In prior years, the match fell to 35 percent in 2009, down from 68 percent in 2008. Before 2008, all communities received a 100 percent match from the state.

The state match is a percentage of the money raised locally through the municipality's surcharge on property taxes. Northampton, for example, received a state reimbursement that is 32.5 percent of the \$854,927 raised by the city's surcharge during the fiscal year that ended June 30.

In Monson, Leslie Duthie, chairwoman of her town's [Community Preservation Committee](#), said the preservation program is critical. "To us, it makes a huge difference," she said.

Monson has used preservation money to purchase 40 acres for the [Peaked Mountain Reservation](#) and to restore several historical churches, for example, she said. Monson may also use some preservation funds to help people rebuild their homes after the June 1 tornado, Duthie said.

Monson, which has a 3-percent surcharge for property taxpayers, received a 76 percent state match. Like many other communities, Monson exempts the first \$100,000 assessed value of properties from the surcharge and allows qualified elderly people to apply for an exemption.

Joseph L. Fitzgibbon, chairman of the [community preservation committee](#) in Hadley, says virtually all municipal officials knew the match would never stay at 100 percent.

Fitzgibbon is among those who still believe the program remains a bargain. Hadley this year received \$110,568 from the state, a 54 percent match on local money generated from a 3 percent surcharge.

"At this point, that's a 50 percent return on your money," he said. "Where else are you going to get that?"

The matches for certain communities dropped since 2008 because of the struggling [real estate](#) market. The matches have also decreased since 2008 because of an increase in the number of communities participating in the program, further spreading out the state money.

According to the [2000 community preservation](#) law, cities and towns can raise money locally by approving a surcharge on property taxes as high as 3 percent. The state matches a certain percentage of the money. The state raises its money via \$10 and \$20 fees on real estate transactions.

The money can be used for historic preservation, open space, affordable housing and recreation. The state, through the fees on real estate transactions, this month announced it would distribute \$26.4 million to communities for this fiscal year.

A total of 143 communities received a state match, up from 142 last year. A total of 70 communities received a 26.6 percent match this year. The remaining 73 received matches up to 100 percent, with eight receiving the full 100 percent, including Goshen, Hatfield, Leverett and Whately, according to the [Community Preservation Coalition](#) in Boston.

The average match this year was 37 percent, up from 32 percent last year.

The declines in the state match point to a need to shore up the program by approving a House bill, according to Douglas P. Pizzi, a spokesman for the preservation coalition.

Pizzi referred to [a bill](#) cosponsored by state [Rep. Stephen Kulik](#), D-Worthington, which, if adopted, would guarantee a minimum 75 percent annual state match by raising statewide fees on real-estate transactions. The bill has 26 sponsors in the state Senate and 90 in the House, he said.



Stephen Kulik

The bill is pending in the House Ways & Means Committee.

The state House of Representatives also voted to send 5 percent of tax revenues from casino resorts to the community preservation fund. If that provision remains in a final casino bill being negotiated by the House and the state Senate, the program could receive millions of additional dollars each year.

The preservation program allows communities to complete capital projects, Pizzi said. “Nothing comes out of the state budget,” he said. “It helps communities and puts people to work.”

According to the formula used to distribute state money, communities with less than 3 percent surcharges received the 26.6 percent state match. Communities receive a larger state match if they approved the maximum surcharge allowed under the law. Matches for other communities with a 3 percent surcharge included Monson, 76 percent match; Deerfield, 68 percent; Southwick, 58 percent; Hadley, 54 percent; Easthampton, 51 percent; Northampton, 32.5 percent; Southampton, 76 percent; and Sturbridge, 42 percent.

Under the formula in the law, smaller communities with low property values generally fare better than others. Of the communities that got a 26.6 percent match, Agawam, East Longmeadow, Longmeadow, Hampden, West Springfield and Westfield each has a 1 percent local surcharge. Amherst, Belchertown, Conway, Granville and Wilbraham each has a 1.5 percent surcharge.

PRESERVATION FUNDS

Here is a list showing state matches this year for communities which adopted the Community Preservation Act:

Agawam: \$112,760
Amherst: \$106,414
Belchertown: \$49,991
Conway: \$13,282
Deerfield: \$113,377
E. Longmeadow: \$54,304
Easthampton: \$157,649
Goshen: \$53,846
Granville: \$5,529
Hadley: \$110,568
Hampden: \$14,368
Hatfield: \$92,659
Longmeadow: \$74,628
Northampton: \$277,958
Southampton: \$125,248
Southwick: \$139,344
Sturbridge: \$150,853
West Springfield: \$104,620
Westfield: \$93,961
Wilbraham: \$75,182

Source: State Department of Revenue