

City Council considers adopting Community Preservation Act

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NEW BEDFORD — Taking a page from the suburbs, the city is taking a look at adopting the Community Preservation Act.

The CPA is something most SouthCoast suburbs have — a property tax surcharge that is used for purposes that include maintaining open space; funding parks, playgrounds and recreation areas; preserving historic structures; and funding the creation or rehabilitation of affordable housing.

While the state allows a surcharge of up to 3 percent, the City Council proposed 1.5 percent at its meeting Thursday night.

Under the CPA, the city would also be eligible to receive matching grants from the state's Community Preservation Trust Fund; last year's match was 53 percent.

The council voted Thursday to send the CPA matter to next week's Committee on Appointments and Briefings.

There, councilors will consider adopting the act and sending it to a referendum, which is required for passage.

The act would have to be passed by a majority of the council before going on the ballot at the next municipal or state election, the next scheduled for November.

Councilor-at-large David Alves and Ward 2 Councilor Steven Martins proposed having the committee hold a public meeting next week on adopting the act and what's required to do it.

The current language suggests a surcharge of 1.5 percent, but Alves said during the council meeting that is just a "recommended" amount — one that would go to the voters to essentially take their temperature on the CPA.

"We'll see if the people agree or disagree," he said.

Alves said a committee meeting is the best starting point, so that the public can have a chance to join the conversation.

"Let people come in, ask the questions, and then we'll look to put it on the ballot," he said. He called the CPA "long overdue" and said he isn't worried how a surcharge might be seen.

"It's not an issue of getting re-elected, it's an issue of doing what's right while you are elected and doing what's best for the benefit of your constituents," he said.

By the end of the meeting, the motion already had six co-sponsors, with Ward 1 Councilor James Oliveira, Ward 5 Councilor Kerry Winterson, and at-large councilors Brian Gomes and Naomi Carney adding their names to Alves' and Martins' motion.

Councilor-at-large Linda Morad said while she's in favor of adopting a CPA, it's something that ultimately the voters must decide.

"I'm concerned that taxes are going up, and I don't know if residents in the city of New Bedford support it, or can afford it," she said.

Alves said he's more concerned whether Mayor Jon Mitchell will support it.

"I think based on his preference for maintaining and supporting the historic areas within the city and his commitment to parks and playgrounds, this is a natural," he said.

The mayor said he was "open" to the idea of a CPA for New Bedford.

"I'll take a look at what (councilors) produce and evaluate it on the merits," Mitchell said, adding that his administration would provide assistance if asked.

"There's certainly a need" for dedicated funds for open spaces and historic preservation, he said, but much depends on how the final proposal looks.

"The devil will be in the details," he said.