

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

HOUSE ADOPTS REFORMS TO CPA TO EXPAND USE AND FUNDING FOR PRESERVATION

By Matt Murphy
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, APRIL 23, 2012.. The House on Monday night approved a significant overhaul of the state's Community Preservation Act, voting unanimously for an amendment to the state budget that could double the funding available to cities and towns in what supporters hailed as a vote for local aid and jobs.

The vote for the amendment, sponsored by Rep. Stephen Kulik (D-Worthington), was unanimous, with Rep. Timothy Madden, a Nantucket Democrat, calling it the most important vote the House took all night.

"This is, by all means, in my opinion, the most important bill we are doing tonight. It's a jobs bill. It creates affordable housing," Madden said.

Kulik said the reform would make the CPA, first passed and signed into law in 2000 under Gov. Paul Cellucci, more attractive to densely populated communities by expanding the acceptable uses for CPA funds, and giving cities more flexibility in how they raise funds.

The Community Preservation Act allows municipalities to assess a surcharge of up to 3 percent on property tax bills to fund open space preservation, housing or historic rehabilitation projects. Though the state matched community generated funds at 100 percent at the program's inception, that percentage has dwindled to about 22 percent.

The amendment adopted Monday would potentially double the amount of state funding available to provide matches to cities and towns by allocating up to \$25 million in surplus revenue from the fiscal 2012 budget to the community preservation trust fund. Currently, funding comes from fees collected on deeds and totals close to \$26 million a year.

The proposal would also allow cities and towns to use CPA funding to rehabilitate existing parks, playgrounds and athletic fields, rather than only build new ones, and gives communities flexibility to use revenue sources aside from a property tax surcharge to fund their community preservation accounts.

The proposal's odds of reaching Gov. Deval Patrick's desk appear strong: a pending bill that closely mirrors the House amendment has 26 Senate cosponsors, enough to assure passage if it reaches the Senate floor.

Rep. Sarah Peake, a Provincetown Democrat, invited her colleagues to the Cape this summer to take in a Cape Cod League baseball game at fields that she said communities would be able to be renovate and maintain thanks to the vote taken by the House Monday.

"This is truly a win, win, win," Peake said. The amendment had bipartisan backing with House Minority Leader Brad Jones and Republican Rep. Angelo D'Emilia, of Bridgewater, speaking in support during the debate, and Rep. Paul Schmid, a Westport Democrat, gave his maiden speech on the issue.

Though state tax collections are running about \$87 million below projections through March, advocates said they believed the increase funding would be available for fiscal 2013.

"In an improving economy, we're very hopeful there will be a significant amount of funding to do these projects," said Stuart Saginor, executive director of the Community Preservation Coalition.

The amendment also created an exemption for small businesses similar to the ones available for seniors and low-income residents that would allow communities to exempt business owners from the CPA property tax surcharge on the first \$100,000 of property value.

"This is monumental what happened tonight. It's really a job creation bill and another form of local aid," said Robert Durand, a former House and Senate member and the author of the state's original Community Preservation Act.

Saginor said after trying to get a bill through the House and Senate over the past three sessions, there is "tremendous excitement" among communities for the increased flexibility to raise and use CPA funds, and he said the changes will also make the program more attractive to the 203 municipalities that have not yet adopted the Community Preservation Act.

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