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CPA gets spot on Salem ballot

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SALEM — Voters in this city will have one more decision to make in November. It appears almost certain the Community Preservation Act will be on the ballot.

“They have enough signatures,” City Clerk Cheryl LaPointe said yesterday after her office tallied the piles of petitions turned in by Friday’s deadline.

Backers had to turn in 1,350 certified signatures, or 5 percent of registered voters, to get the question on the ballot. They submitted several hundred more than were required, of which 1,601 were certified by the clerk’s staff, according to LaPointe.

They now will be sent to the secretary of state’s office for approval, which is considered routine.

The binding question on the Nov. 6 ballot will ask voters to approve a surcharge of 1 percent on their annual property tax assessments. For the owner of the average single-family home, that will amount to about \$30 a year, according to petition supporters.

The funds generated, which are matched by state grants, can be used to preserve open space, renovate parks, restore historic properties or support affordable housing.

In a close contest, the City Council voted 6-5 last month against a proposal to put the controversial CPA question on the ballot. Some councilors saw it as another tax on beleaguered homeowners and an end-run on Proposition 2 1/2, the tax-limiting measure.

In response, a group of about 40 volunteers launched a petition drive, led by Mickey Northcutt, executive director of the North Shore Community Development Coalition, and Mayor Kim Driscoll.

In less than a week, they collected more than the required signatures at the commuter rail station, the Front Street Coffeehouse and the Hawthorne Hotel and by canvassing neighborhoods.

“That’s great,” Northcutt said yesterday after being told the question was headed to the ballot. “I’m glad we had more than we needed. There’s no way we could have gotten that many signatures without a ton of volunteer support.”

“We’re definitely excited the CPA will be on the ballot,” Driscoll said. “I think it’s a great opportunity for voters to weigh in on this, and that’s really what this whole movement is about.”

Supporters plan a party Friday at Rockafellas to celebrate.

They also are talking about a voter information drive before the November election.

“A committee has been formed and will be getting together in the coming weeks to plan an actual campaign,” Northcutt said.

Since becoming state law in 2000, the CPA has been adopted by 148 communities, including Peabody, Middleton, Hamilton and Wenham, according to the website for the Community Preservation Coalition. It is on the ballot in Beverly this fall.

Under the law, communities can adopt property tax surcharges of up to 3 percent.

In addition to the revenue raised in each community, state matching funds are available. Peabody, for example, has received \$3.9 million in matching funds over the past decade.

Salem voters refused to adopt the CPA when it was placed on the ballot in 2007. In all, CPA ballot questions have been rejected 105 times, sometimes more than once in the same city or town, according to the coalition’s website.

In Salem, election ballots in November will have four questions: three statewide questions and the local question on the CPA.