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Our view: A welcome petition on CPA in Salem

The Salem News

Thursday night, the Salem City Council took a surprising vote to deny residents a chance to decide whether to adopt the Community Preservation Act. In a 6-5 vote, councilors said they would decide the issue for voters — and their answer would be no.

It took only three days for those who disagree to rally and launch a petition drive to place the question on the fall ballot. They must turn in an estimated 1,350 signatures by Friday morning, which is a pretty tight deadline, but by Monday morning, backers were at the train station collecting names.

We welcome their effort and congratulate them for standing up for the rights of Salem voters.

Their petition, if successful, merely ensures that Salem voters will get to decide for themselves whether to adopt the law, which provides for a small surcharge on the property tax, to be matched by state money, and dedicated for open space, parks and playgrounds, affordable housing, and historic preservation. Beverly voters will vote on the same thing this fall, and several nearby communities — including Peabody, Hamilton, Wenham, Middleton and Gloucester — have already adopted the law.

In Peabody, CPA funds helped support a Habitat for Humanity project that turned rundown properties on Park Street into affordable condominiums for low-income residents. It paid for a park honoring victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks; restored an 1866 portrait of the city's namesake, George Peabody, in the library; and helped put a new roof on a Historical Society house.

Councilors opposed to the Community Preservation Act in Salem argued that people can't afford any more taxes. It's a good argument, but hardly a credible one, since the additional tax would amount to an average of \$30 per year — and there are exemptions for low-income homeowners and for some seniors. It's hard to imagine that \$2.50 a month would be so devastating a sum of money that people couldn't be trusted to decide the issue for themselves.

Councilor Arthur Sargent went so far as to suggest it wouldn't be fair to put this on the ballot, because people who don't own property have the right to vote in the United States, and therefore

might raise taxes on people who do own property. Of course, all property taxes are paid by directly by homeowners, but landlords generally pass on the cost of any property tax increases to their renters. This is no different than any other use funded by property taxes. Indeed, the only recourse would be to turn the clock back several centuries and deny the right to vote to anyone who doesn't own property.

Sargent didn't go that far. Instead, he decided, along with five others, that he would make the decision for everyone in Salem.

If this gets on the ballot, it's by no means certain to win. Salem voters rejected the law five years ago.

But times are hard now. The schools need to become a major priority in the city budget, and that means some other worthwhile, but not critical, projects will not be funded. The CPA, estimated to raise about \$400,000 in its first year, could offset some of that with a minimum of pain for taxpayers.

But whether you agree or disagree on the merits of the law, you should have the right to decide for yourself. We don't need six men on the City Council making that decision for us.