

New Bedford voters strongly back Community Preservation



City Councilor Joe Lopes and MarDee Xifaras look over the final election results with Celeste Paleologos at New Bedford City Hall. DAVID W. OLIVEIRA/THE STANDARD-TIMES SPECIAL

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NEW BEDFORD — By a margin that surprised even its supporters, New Bedford voters Tuesday agreed to raise their property tax bills by an average of \$19, adopting the state's Community Preservation Act.

The CPA, which creates a 1.5 percent surcharge on property tax bills exempting the first \$100,000, was approved by city voters, 8,802 to 7,405, a margin of 54 percent to 46 percent.

"That's a very clear mandate, a substantial affirmation of what we were trying to do, and I'll admit to being very pleasantly surprised by that," said John Vasconcellos, member of the CPA committee and southeast regional director for Trustees of Reservations.

"I thought it would pass, but I thought it would have been closer," City Council President Joe Lopes said.

“We weren’t sure what the margin was going to be,” said Alicia Pimental, member of the CPA Committee and communications director for Buzzards Bay Coalition. “Right now, we’re just happy that it passed.

Under the CPA, funding from the tax surcharge and a state match can be used for maintaining open space; funding parks, playgrounds and recreation areas; historic preservation; and funding the creation or rehabilitation of affordable housing.

While the average increase for residential property taxpayers is \$19 per year, for businesses, the average projected surcharge is \$60 a year.

Pimental said that if the CPA had been in place this year, New Bedford would have received an additional \$1.1 million. That money will be used for “things we should have in New Bedford that now we might be able to do because we now have a dedicated source of funding.”

Lopes also welcomed the additional funding sources. “With the cuts in Community Development funding, the CPA will allow the city to continue moving projects forward.”

"It proves to me that people in New Bedford really want to do right by our town," Vasconcellos said of the vote. "Folks understand that with a little investment ... there are amazing things we can do together.

"I think with all the other things on the ballot, it could have been easy to see it get lost in the shuffle,' he said. "The fact that the ballot wasn't all that easy to read, it really meant that people took the time and understood the issue, understood the benefit and made a really thoughtful choice for New Bedford.

At the polls, those most willing to discuss the issue said they had voted for the proposal.

"It's worth the money," said Sara Neto-Khalife. "I think we should have a nice community and have a good environment for our children."

"I enjoy nature and open space and recreational areas for people to be able to share," said Kathryn Kelly.

"Some folks are concerned about property taxes, but I think it's very doable for what it would accomplish for the city," said Jeffrey Silva.

Tina Bennett said: "I think it's important to preserve the historic and natural resources we have. And it's worth it to me. The tax increase, it's worth it."

But it isn't worth it to Frank Figueira. "I'm extremely dissatisfied with the way funds are handled in the city. I've been a homeowner for 10 years and taxes have done nothing but go up and we've got nothing for it. I don't see any reasons to throw more money at it when I don't know that it will be managed well."