

Communities welcome expanded dollars for preservation projects

By John Laidler | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 05, 2013

Chelmsford, Dracut, and North Andover will see a hefty boost from the state this year in their funding partnership for local preservation projects.

The state Department of Revenue recently announced a significant increase in the matching dollars for cities and towns that have adopted the [Community Preservation Act](#), the 13-year-old law that allows a local property tax surcharge to support affordable housing, open space, historic preservation, and recreation projects.

Statewide, 148 qualifying communities, including 21 in the suburbs north of Boston, will each receive a 52 percent first-round match, nearly double last year's level of 27 percent. Those that have adopted the maximum 3 percent surcharge will receive even more, through two additional funding rounds.

The expanded state support will mean \$211,300 more for Chelmsford, \$193,502 for Dracut, and \$401,379 for North Andover.

"It was a welcome increase," said Ann Vandal, Dracut's interim town manager. "The Community Preservation Committee has done a lot of good with the funds we have. Now we have an opportunity to continue to use the funds wisely."

The infusion of expanded CPA dollars comes at a tight fiscal time for Dracut, whose voters in September rejected two Proposition 2½ overrides, tax increases that would have provided \$2.9 million for the schools and \$200,000 for general town services.

Although preservation act funds cannot be used for operating expenses, Vandal said, the program has enabled the town to undertake projects the regular budget will not include, notably for recreational facilities.

She cited Dillon McAnestie Park, a facility completed in 2012 that includes a playground, baseball field, tennis courts, and a walking trail. She said the town has also approved the use of CPA money to add amenities to its Veterans Memorial Park, to renovate several baseball fields, and to replace the track at the high school.

Under the Community Preservation Act, which has been adopted by 155 communities, local revenues are matched by a state trust fund generated from fees at registries of deeds. Until fiscal 2007, that match was 100 percent, but due to the growth in the number of participating communities and the economic downturn, the match declined significantly.

To boost the state contribution, lawmakers in the fiscal 2013 budget set aside \$25 million from the surplus. Other factors contributing to the increased match, included a rise in registry fee revenues resulting from the improved real estate market, and a change in the date of the state funding distribution that added an extra month of registry fees, according to the [Community Preservation Coalition](#), a group that advocates for communities to adopt the law.

“It has been a number of very lean years for cities and towns that have the CPA, so this is the good news they have been waiting for,” said Stuart Saginor, executive director of the coalition, who added that the additional projects will create jobs as well.

Other communities in the region benefiting from the larger state contribution are: Boxford, Essex, Georgetown, Gloucester, Groveland, Hamilton, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Middleton, Nahant, Newburyport, Peabody, Rockport, Rowley, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, Wenham, West Newbury, and Westford.

Groveland, Nahant, Wenham, and West Newbury were among 23 statewide receiving 100 percent matches this year.

Beverly, Salem, Somerville, and four other communities do not qualify for a match this year because they are new to the program.

Robert C. Morse, chairman of Chelmsford’s Community Preservation Committee, said the funding increase “comes at a critical time because with . . . other changes in the law, the use of CPA funds for recreational projects has become very popular in town.”

Morse was referring to revisions in 2012 that loosened the rules for using the funds.

At the annual Town Meeting last spring, Chelmsford voters authorized \$1.5 million in CPA money to help pay for the creation of two artificial-turf fields and related improvements. Morse said there is interest in town in using the fund for other recreational projects.

Town residents have been supportive of the preservation law, which Chelmsford adopted in 2001, Morse said, noting that voters in 2007 approved a tripling of the town’s surcharge — from .5 to 1.5 percent.

Chelmsford has tapped the fund to make significant open-space purchases, rebuild two former town hall buildings, and create affordable housing, he said.

“We are hoping that using the surplus was not a one-time thing,” he said of the state’s decision to add \$25 million to the matching fund. “We hope to see it continue in the future.”

North Andover’s town manager, Andrew Maylor, said the town welcomes the added state money this year, which brought its match to \$805,907.

“We were the second community to adopt the Community Preservation Act locally, and it’s been a success in the community,” he said. “It’s funded a significant amount of projects over the more than a decade we’ve had it. . . . For the folks here who fund it, the taxpayer, to see the state increase the match means we will be able to do more in terms of community preservation.”

Westford saw its CPA state match jump by \$416,157, from \$402,455 last year to \$818,612.

“We are certainly thrilled at the increase,” said Andrea Peraner-Sweet, chairwoman of the Board of Selectmen.

“We really have made very good use of the fund over the last 10 years or so,” she said, citing housing, open space, recreation, and historic preservation projects the town has undertaken.

Judith Grohe, chairwoman of Newburyport's Community Preservation Committee, said the city is "delighted" with the \$170,485 increase in its state match, which roughly doubled what it received last year.

"We have had many many more requests than we've been able to fill in all the areas we fund," Grohe said. "We see great needs in open space, for affordable housing, for recreational facilities, and always in Newburyport for historic preservation. . . . We can never fund as many as we'd like, so this is very welcome."

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