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Officials hail CPA overhaul despite new curb on spending for artificial turf

By John Laidler | Globe Correspondent

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Area communities are applauding new legislation giving them more flexibility in using funds from the Community Preservation Act, even though the changes also limit their use of money for artificial turf projects.

The recently approved state budget includes an overhaul of the 12-year-old law that allows cities and towns to impose a property tax surcharge of up to 3 percent, matched by state funds, to support affordable housing, open space, historic preservation, and recreation projects.

Local officials welcome changes they say will greatly expand their ability to use CPA funds for recreation projects, as well as provide an easier way to adopt the law. Separately, $25 million in state funds was added to the program for this year.

But the revisions also included a new restriction: a ban on using CPA funds to acquire artificial turf for athletic fields.

The change comes as a growing number of cities and towns are building artificial turf fields. A recent Globe North survey found that 22 area communities have at least one publicly owned artificial turf field, and five others are in various stages of construction.

CPA money can no longer be used to acquire artificial turf but it still can be spent on other features related to turf projects, such as drainage and site preparation, said Stuart Saginor, executive director of the Community Preservation Coalition, a key supporter of the law and the recent changes.

Saginor said that at hearings on the CPA overhaul when the bill was first filed in 2007-08, some argued that CPA money should not be used at all in artificial turf projects because it went against the overriding aim of the law to preserve a community's natural assets. Others opposed such a restriction.

“This seemed to us to be a great compromise,” Saginor said. “The CPA could still participate in a project and pay a lot of the costs involved in creating recreational fields so long as one of the other funding sources covered the cost of the actual artificial turf.

“It’s unlikely a town’s community preservation fund alone would be able to fund an artificial turf project,” Saginor added. “Usually, the project happens by cobbling together a number of different funding sources.”

Local officials said they did not expect the restriction to significantly hinder their use of CPA money for recreation projects.

Michael Dissette, chairman of the Newburyport Community Preservation Committee, said the city is considering artificial turf for its high school football field. He said if the plan is for an artificial surface, CPA money might be sought for other aspects of the project.

Patricia Savage, Westford’s director of Parks, Recreation, and Cemetery, said the town would likely look to use CPA money for future renovations to its three artificial turf fields, which include the high school football field.

To date, 148 communities have adopted the CPA, including 20 in this region. Beverly is among five others statewide that will be considering it on November ballot votes.

Meanwhile, Salem, whose voters rejected the CPA five years ago, is discussing placing the measure before voters again in November.

Local CPA revenues are matched by a state trust fund generated from fees at registries of deeds. Until fiscal 2007, that match was 100 percent, but the base distribution level has since fallen to 22 percent.

Officials and CPA advocates are thrilled the state agreed to chip in another $25 million, to be drawn from year-end surplus funds. The money is for this year alone, but Saginor said state lawmakers have said their intent is to provide it each year going forward.

“I think it will help everyone,” said Bill Power, chairman of the Peabody Community Preservation Committee. When divided among the 148 communities, “it’s not a huge amount of money. But every little bit helps the taxpayers out.”

Until now, communities could use CPA money to upgrade recreational assets only if they had purchased those assets with CPA money.

That rule, which was clarified in a 2008 Supreme Judicial Court decision, had severely hampered communities from applying CPA money to projects to upgrade playgrounds, fields, and other facilities.

“Most cities and towns just don’t have the money to maintain their recreational areas, and they suffer as a result of that,” Power said. “So this will certainly be helpful for us to be able to help the Parks and Recreation Department rehabilitate some of their recreational areas.”

Chelmsford Town Manager Paul E. Cohen believes lawmakers made the change to help communities such as his own that do not have much open space on which to build new recreational facilities.

“This will enable us to go out and improve the condition and prolong the life of our recreational fields,” he said.

In North Andover, similarly, Town Manager Andrew Maylor expects that as part of an upcoming update of its open space plan, the town will look to identify recreation projects it can now undertake with CPA money.

Chelsea City Manager Jay Ash is pleased the CPA overhaul includes a provision he sought along with other members of the Metropolitan Mayors Coalition that is intended to make it easier for cities in particular to adopt the CPA. The change allows municipalities to tap other revenues for their preservation fund as long as they have adopted at least a 1 percent surcharge.

“Especially in this day and age where everyone seems to feel as though they are being overly taxed, to go out and have people who are having a tough time making their own ends meet pony up more money even for noble causes is tough,” Ash said.

“This allows us in a blended way to make the match work and access the state funding available.’’

Ash said he did not know if Chelsea will seek to adopt the law, “but if we decide to go forward, this gives us a fighting chance to secure the support for it from the City Council and the voters.”

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