

Preserve Medford celebrates victory with Community Preservation Act passage



Preserve Medford will now turns its attention to helping the city implement the Community Preservation Act, following overwhelming support for the question on the Nov. 3 ballot. Courtesy Photo

By [Alex Ruppenthal](#)
aruppenthal@wickedlocal.com

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MEDFORD

Medford residents voted Nov. 3 to adopt the Community Preservation Act (CPA), joining about 160 other municipalities statewide in establishing a fund for improvement projects by adding a surcharge on property taxes.

The vote went 6,290 to 5,007, or about 56 percent in favor of ballot question 1.

"I was thrilled that it did so well," said Alicia Hunt, director of the city's Energy and Environment department. "But I'm not surprised because I know that Medford has a lot of people who understand the value of everybody putting in a little to improve the resources that help the community as a whole."

Starting in fiscal 2017, which begins July 1, 2016, Medford property owners will pay a 1.5 percent surcharge on property taxes, with funds pooled into an account for community improvement projects.

The fund will also receive an annual disbursement of revenues from a statewide Community Preservation Trust Fund, which is funded through surcharges on real estate transactions.

The state's contribution has varied from 100 percent of local money raised in the program's first years to a low of about 27 percent in 2011. Last year, the state contribution was 31 percent. In 2013, it was 52 percent.

"Working in local governments, I see that budgets are tight," said Roberta Cameron, a Medford resident and community planner who spearheaded Preserve Medford, the group that collected signatures to get the CPA on the ballot in Medford. "I see that some portions of the budget are inflating far faster than general [inflation] and state funding has gone down. So communities have a smaller budget to pay for more expensive things. This gives us a chance to grow the pie a little bit."

Based on estimates from local and state funding sources, Medford's CPA fund will raise about \$1 million annually for various projects, according to Preserve Medford.

Projects eligible for funding must fall under one of four categories: open space, historic preservation, affordable housing and recreation. Examples of projects funded through the CPA in other municipalities is available at www.communitypreservation.org.

According to Preserve Medford, the owner of a property with an assessed value of \$400,000 will pay a surcharge of about \$52.65 per year. The average price of a single-family home in Medford is about \$390,000.

Residents qualifying for low-income housing or low-to-moderate income senior housing are exempt from the surcharge. The first \$100,000 of taxable property is exempt from the surcharge for all residential and commercial property owners.

Cameron said the city's assessor's and finance offices would be responsible for collecting the surcharge, adding state resources are available to help City Hall implement the CPA.

"The state Department of Revenue and the Community Preservation Coalition are both available to provide technical assistance," she said.

Next steps

Now that Medford has voted to adopt the CPA, what happens next?

First, the Medford City Council is required to pass an ordinance establishing a Community Preservation Committee, which will recommend projects to the council after receiving applications from community organizations, city departments or other groups.

"City staff would have to make an application just as a private group would have to put in an application," Hunt said.

The committee will include one member each from the city's Conservation Commission, Historic Commission, Community Development Board and Park Commission; one representative from the Medford Housing Authority; and up to four at-large members.

The at-large members can be appointed or elected, based on the ordinance.

“There is a lot of precedent because [the CPA] has been in place for 15 years [in Massachusetts],” Cameron said. “Half the communities in the state already have it. There are models for what the ordinance could like look.”

Earlier this week, Cameron said she was waiting to hear back from Council President Fred Dello Russo Jr. about the council’s plan for drafting the required ordinance.

Once the ordinance and committee members are in place, groups will be able to submit applications for funding. The committee will then review proposals in a public process before recommending projects to the City Council.

No CPA projects can be funded without a favorable vote of the council.

“It would be helpful to know what their timeline is for getting to work on it,” Cameron said of the council.

It will be several years, however, until CPA-funded projects are realized. The city will not start collecting the surcharge until next fiscal year. And once funds are collected, the committee still has to review project applications and recommend projects to the council, which then has to approve projects.

Cameron said it typically takes at least two years for municipalities to begin work on CPA-funded projects.

“I would suggest that people be patient,” Hunt said. “Because it will take some time.”

Open process

Cameron said she also discussed the city’s plan for implementing the CPA with Council Vice President Breanna Lungo-Koehn, who told her opponents of the act had already contacted councilors.

“I kind of think that given the distrust that people have for the political process, that it might be helpful to have a public process in writing the ordinance rather than just drafting it and passing it,” Cameron said. “This is for Medford uncharted territory. I don’t think it would be a bad idea to start showing the transparency.”

Cameron said that while campaigning in support of the CPA, she had repeated discussions with a man who was vehemently against the act.

“I think a lot of people are cynical about the city’s management of funding in the past,” she said. “And I have absolutely no idea whether there’s a basis to their cynicism.”

Cameron said some are concerned residents won’t know whether they are eligible for the surcharge exemption or how to apply for an exemption.

“I think that’s the number one [concern],” she said. “And they’re worried that the projects might be spent on things that they don’t think the city needs.”

But Cameron said the CPA gives residents a new opportunity to participate in city government.

"I have great ambitions that this could actually model a new form of democracy in Medford," Cameron said, laughing. "The funding itself is only part of the benefit."

For more information about Preserve Medford and potential projects in Medford, go to www.preservemedford.org or email info@preservemedford.org.