

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

SENATORS PRESS FOR CPA CHANGES ADOPTED BY HOUSE

By Michael Norton

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MAY 2, 2012...Thirteen state senators, four Republicans and nine Democrats, have signed a letter calling on Senate budget writers to embrace House-approved changes aimed at shoring up the finances for the popular Community Preservation Act.

Since passing the Legislature and winning Gov. Paul Cellucci's signature in 2000, the CPA has been adopted by about 150 Massachusetts communities looking for sources of funding to pay for open space, housing and historic rehabilitation projects.

But while CPA communities have agreed to property tax surcharges of up to 3 percent, the pool of state funds to match locally raised revenues has dwindled. Instead of meeting the original goal of a 100 percent match, the state matches only 22 cents of every dollar spent locally.

In the letter, Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R-Gloucester) and 12 other senators urged Senate Ways and Means Committee Chairman Stephen Brewer to include CPA changes in its fiscal 2013 budget proposal, due out May 16. The senators said the changes "have tremendous potential to spur economic growth, revitalize precious assets, and promote environmental stewardship in practical, effective ways."

Changes approved by the House and favored by a growing number of senators - Tarr aides said two senators expressed interest in the effort after the letter was sent - include increasing matching funds by \$25 million by committing to use surplus fiscal 2012 state budget funds.

Other changes would enable municipalities to use hotel excise taxes, linkage fees, municipal property sale revenues, parking fines and private gifts to pay for the CPA. The House plan also enables communities to use CPA funds on athletic fields, parks and playground projects and allows communities to create a CPA small business property tax exemption on the first \$100,000 of property value.

Rep. Stephen Kulik (D-Worthington) said last week that the changes would make the CPA more attractive to cities by expanding the acceptable uses for CPA funds and giving communities more flexibility in how they raise funds.

Supporters of the House plan hope it will double the amount of state funding available to provide matches to cities and towns; funding currently comes from fees collected on deeds and totals close to \$26 million a year. However, state tax collections are running \$87 million below budget benchmarks in fiscal 2012 and whether the year will end with a surplus is an open question.

The proposal's odds of being included or added to the Senate budget and reaching Gov. Deval Patrick's desk in some form appear to be strengthening. A pending bill that closely mirrors the House amendment has 26 Senate cosponsors.

Signing Wednesday's letter with Tarr were Sens. Robert Hedlund (R-Weymouth), William Brownsberger (D-Belmont), Ben Downing (D-Pittsfield), Michael Rodrigues (D-Westport), Michael Rush (D-West Roxbury), Richard Ross (R-Wrentham), Michael Knapik (R-Westfield), Brian Joyce (D-Milton), Dan Wolf (D-Harwich), Michael Moore (D-Worcester), James Timilty (D-Walpole) and John Keenan (D-Quincy).

The Community Preservation Coalition keeps a list of communities that have adopted the CPA, with details, at www.communitypreservation.org/pprojects?qid=22&dbid=bca5gqwrk