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A success in Tewksbury, Woburn advocates continue to push for CPA adoption

After losing by 131 votes last year, June MacKenzie plans to again ask Woburn residents to adopt the Community Preservation Act.

MacKenzie said she hopes to meet with the Woburn City Council on March 3 and meet with aldermen individually to ask them to support the initiative.

“We’ll ask them to put it on the ballot,” she said, adding the question would likely be sent to the liaison committee initially. “That’s what happened last year, so that’s what we’re expecting.”

MacKenzie said the majority of the aldermen voted to put the question on the ballot last year.

She said the effort to adopt CPA can be a bipartisan one, noting that a large number of communities have received support from businesses. The Community Preservation Act allows a municipality to assess a property tax surcharge of up to 3 percent to be used toward historic preservation, open space, community housing and recreation. Each year, at least 10 percent of funds collected must be reserved, if not spent, for historic preservation, open space and community housing.

Because the vote was so close, MacKenzie remains optimistic given the number of ballots left blank regarding the CPA question and hopes to educate voters about the benefits of CPA.

She pointed to the number of projects undertaken in neighboring Lexington and is impressed with the number of completed projects in Tewksbury.

Tewksbury

Nancy Reed, chairwoman of the Tewksbury Community Preservation Committee, was one of those who initiated the effort to adopt CPA, which voters approved in 2006.

As MacKenzie is learning, it wasn’t an easy task.

“It took at least two years of education. There’s no 20-second sound bite on CPA,” Reed said, adding it’s a great planning tool for cities and towns.



After voters OK'd funding at Town Meeting, Tewksbury was able to renovate Funway Park last year. Victor Impink of Tewksbury was one of many residents and town officials to volunteer their time at the playground. Wicked Local Staff Photo/David Gordon

Voters approved a surcharge of 1.5 percent on real property. Additionally, voters approved a residential exemption of the first \$100,000 of a property's assessed value as well as a low-income exemption.

In addition to receiving matching funds from the state, Reed said communities are also eligible for grants. In 2008, for instance, voters approved \$150,000 in Community Preservation Act funds to support a grant application to build 32 affordable housing units for seniors. As a result of that approval, Tewksbury, in 2011, was awarded a \$5.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The housing opened this past June on Livingston Street.



Tewksbury Selectman Scott Wilson was among the many residents and town officials that took part in renovating Funway Park playground last year. Wicked Local Staff Photo/David Gordon

In 2013, voters approved \$350,000 to rehabilitate playgrounds at the town's elementary schools and at Funway Park on Livingston Street. The work at Funway Park has been completed, with much of the work done by residents and town employees who volunteered their time to complete the project.

Rehab for the playgrounds at the elementary schools is in the planning phase, Reed said.

She also said the grant for housing was vital to the community.

"We don't have the spare dollars," she said.

Reed also keyed in on planning, reiterating that it is an important tool for communities hoping to renovate or upgrade athletic fields. But just as important, she said, is having open space plans certified.

"With certified plans, you can qualify to apply for state and federal grants," she said.

At a 2013 special Town Meeting, residents approved \$600,000 to build an athletic field at the new high school. The project, according to the committee's 2014 annual report, received matching funds from a PARC grant and additional private funding from the Friends of the Tewksbury Athletic Complex. The field was completed in 2013.

Reed again emphasized the importance of educating voters.

"It's a huge educational process. There's reluctance for people to check off the box, thinking, 'I'm going to give you more money for taxes,'" she said.

Reed said CPA advocates in Woburn are going to have to work to get voters -- and the city -- in the game.

Assistance from organization such as the Community Preservation Coalition is available, and according to Reed, "extremely helpful with their guidance."

"Each city and town that adopts it becomes a steward for the program and the state," she said.

Whether a community adopts CPA or not, it is still paying for the program through the fees paid to the Registry of Deeds. Reed said when the economy nosedived in recent years, the coalition wanted to raise fees at the Registry to properly fund the program, but Beacon Hill lawmakers were reluctant to raise fees at the time. They did, however, provide additional funding at the end of the year, as they have this year. All told, in 2014, \$36 million in CPA funding was distributed to the 155 communities that have adopted the CPA.

"They do recognize this is a good component for cities and towns," said Reed.