

Community preservation at age 5

By JACK CLARKE

Enacted by Bay State lawmakers just five years ago, the Community Preservation Act, or CPA, has been adopted by 103 cities and towns. Twelve more are considering it next spring as it passes its way across the commonwealth.

The program's rapid acceptance is the result of a record of successful local projects supported with state cash matches. Municipalities yet to adopt the act watch as their neighbors succeed - and they want in.

All towns on the Cape and islands have adopted it and those on the South Coast may be next.

Recent trends underscore the point. While the adoption rate in the first two years was 53 percent, last year 39 of 42 ballot votes were successful - a rate of 93 percent.

This year and last, nearly every municipality that passed the act was adjacent to an existing CPA city or town. Indeed, seven communities approved the act this spring after at least one prior vote rejecting it while seeing their neighbors benefit.

CPA allows municipalities to establish a new, defined source of money for critical investments in community housing, land protection, historic preservation, and public recreation.

Adoption of CPA is a local decision. It occurs through a vote of town meeting or city council, or a petition signed by voters, to put the question on the ballot followed by a vote at the polls.

Municipalities that accept CPA apply a surcharge of up to 3 per-

cent on their property tax bill and establish a Community Preservation Fund making them eligible for state matches. A committee from conservation, historical, planning, parks and housing boards then recommends to town meeting or city council spending in priority areas.

CPA is fair because communities can exempt low-income housing; low- to moderate-income senior housing; up to \$100,000 of a property's value; and people receiving property tax abatements.

CPA is also dedicated. Each time an individual takes out a mortgage or refinances, a small fee is deposited directly into the CPA Trust Fund - the state's source of matching funds. In that sense, all communities pay into the fund but only those that adopt CPA receive the state match.

In the act's first five years, CPA communities generated \$122 million in local funds that were matched with \$122 million from the state trust.

Across the commonwealth, the combined revenue was used to build 747 affordable housing units, protect 5,770 acres of

conservation land and restore 251 historic sites.

Housing funds have been targeted to municipal employees, young families, seniors and others who live, work or attend school in a community but find themselves priced out of the market. CPA has funded feasibility studies, community-based programs to manage and develop housing, down payment and rental assistance, improvements to existing public housing, rehabilitation of existing stock into affordable units, new construction and infrastructure to support future housing development.

In communities with little or no prior experience in community housing, CPA is an incentive to address the issue.

The act has protected open space through land purchases and easements by acquiring land surrounding water supplies, farms, forests, riverfront, ponds, other wetlands and wildlife habitat, as well as restoring contaminated sites.

In the area of recreation, CPA has created 50 new parks, playgrounds and athletic fields. More than \$2 million has gone to

renovate depilated recreational facilities.

CPA has revitalized historic town halls, libraries, schools, firehouses, commons, cemeteries, monuments, canals, bridges and lighthouses. It has restored architectural features as well as handicap ramps and elevators and other renovations necessary to bring historic buildings up to code. CPA has preserved historic properties in nonprofit ownership such as museums, churches, grange halls, mill buildings, commercial storefronts and streetscapes and has provided for the purchase of preservation easements to protect significant properties from demolition or inappropriate alterations.

After assessing local needs, adopting cities and towns have realized that it is not "housing versus open space" or "preservation versus housing," but all of these values that help define and enhance community character.

And in some instances, CPA has been used to advance all of its objectives where historic buildings were adapted for affordable housing with surrounding open space protected for this and future generations.

The citizens of Massachusetts have growing confidence in community preservation because it is a constructive and practical way to build stronger communities.

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