

OUR VIEW: Harnessing Fall River's history for a brighter future

Fall River has a historic opportunity to create a local fund that can help harness the city's rich history and turn it into an economic catalyst for the future. If a ballot question is approved by Fall River voters in November, city taxpayers would contribute a slight 1.5 percent surcharge on property tax bills beginning in fiscal 2014 to create a Community Preservation Fund.



The former Abbey Grill on Rock Street is one of the city's historical properties that could potentially benefit from Community Preservation Act funding.

Under the state's Community Preservation Act, local communities are authorized (with voter approval) to create up to a 3 percent surcharge for a variety of purposes: open space preservation, historic preservation, outdoor recreation, and affordable housing.

Fall River's ballot question authorizing local enactment of the Community Preservation Act would authorize a more palatable 1.5 percent surcharge, including several exemptions to ease the burden on taxpayers. Other exemptions would be available for

low-income residents or low/moderate income seniors. Somerset voters will have their own ballot question to authorize the CPA with a 1 percent surcharge.

Under the Fall River CPA question, the first \$100,000 of a property's value would be exempt from the surcharge. With 1.5 percent of the city's average home assessed at about \$215,000, the CPA would only add about \$20 to the annual tax bill, but the benefits to the community would be far reaching. That pool of funds for local preservation, affordable housing or recreation projects would also come with a variable state match of the local surcharge from funds derived from the state registry of deeds, giving the city's taxpayers more bang for their buck. This year's projected state match is 22 percent.

Funds would be distributed to qualifying projects by a Community Preservation Committee, which would be established "to study community preservation needs, possibilities and resources, and to make annual recommendations to the City Council for approval on spending the funds." The Community Preservation Act — which has been in effect in many Massachusetts

communities both locally and across the state since 2000 — would provide a reliable funding source for preservation.

Since its introduction 12 years ago, 42 percent of the commonwealth's communities have signed onto the CPA.

Given Fall River's many historical assets, the CPA would seem to be a winning proposition for Fall River. It can also be viewed as a strong economic development engine, with CPA projects creating local construction jobs and enhancing assets for community development and tourism.

Recent enhancements to the act approved by the Legislature, allowing for an even wider variety of uses, make it even more attractive deal for the city. Under the new authorization by the state, CPA funds may now be used to rehabilitate recreational assets that were not created or purchased with CPA funds.

There have been a lot of good ideas of using the city's history as a means of moving Fall River forward over the years, but a lack of local funding sources have hampered or derailed many of these preservation efforts. Fall River's history is one of the city's strongest assets. The Community Preservation Act could pay big dividends to Fall River for a small annual investment on the part of local taxpayers.

Fall River voters ought to take the time to learn more about the many benefits of the Community Preservation Act and follow the lead of nearly half the commonwealth's communities in adopting the local preservation fund. The Community Preservation Act surcharge is a small price to pay for a brighter future.