



Massachusetts Senate weighs vote critical for open space, historic preservation

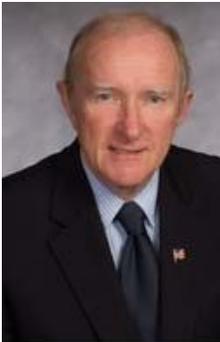
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By Dan Ring, The Republican

BOSTON — The Massachusetts Senate this week will take up a plan to raise state matching money for a popular law that allows communities to purchase open space, restore historic properties and create affordable housing.

Under the Community Preservation Act, cities and towns receive a state match from a pot of money raised from real estate fees if municipal voters have adopted a property tax surcharge of up to 3 percent to generate local money. State matching money has been down in the past four years because of a slump in real estate transactions and more participation in the law, stretching out the funds.

Nearly 150 communities have approved the program including, about 30 in Western Massachusetts, according to the web site of the Community Preservation Coalition. The money goes for projects such as buying conservation land, upgrading important historic sites and elderly housing and building new playgrounds.



Sen. Stephen Brewer

As part of its debate on the \$32.3 billion state budget for the next fiscal year, the Senate is set to act on a proposed amendment by Sen. Cynthia S. Creem, D-Newton, to take \$25 million from any net state budget surplus for next year and apply it to state funds for the community preservation act. The state House of Representatives in April unanimously approved the plan as part of its version of the fiscal 2013 state budget.

The \$25 million was left out of the preliminary budget unveiled last week by the Senate Ways and Means Committee, though other long-sought changes to the preservation act were included. The full Senate, starting Wednesday, will debate proposed amendments to the committee's budget.

After the Senate finishes its budget this week, legislative conferees will combine the House and Senate budget versions and send a compromise to Gov. Deval L. Patrick, likely in time for the July 1 start of the fiscal year.

Sen. Stephen M. Brewer, D-Barre, the chairman of Senate Ways and Means, said the

budget is a difficult fiscal challenge and he can't predict the fate of the money proposed for the preservation law.

"We'll have to see where the spending goes," Brewer said. "This is a budget that can't be all things to all people all the time."



Sen. Karen Spilka

Here are a couple of other important budget amendments among the 694 filed by senators:

- Sen. Karen E. Spilka, D-Ashland, is asking for \$28 million to provide a small salary increase for direct care workers employed by private, nonprofit human service agencies that contract with the state. The money would go to 31,500 employees in the state who make \$40,000 a year and less.

- Sen. James T. Welch, D-West Springfield, is seeking \$11.3 million for busing transient homeless students within and between school districts. Some of the state's highest yearly costs for busing homeless students are in Western Massachusetts, including \$563,000 in Springfield; \$431,000 in Chicopee ; and \$311,000 in Holyoke – where about 10 percent of the student population is homeless.

Advocates of the community preservation act are hopeful the final compromise state budget will include the \$25 million.

"It's been a very successful program," said Sen. Stanley C. Rosenberg, D-Amherst, who said he will support the amendment for the \$25 million. "I would like to see it grow."



Sen. Stanley Rosenberg

The preservation law is set for some other key changes.

According to Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, the House of Representatives approved a budget measure to allow communities for the first time to exempt the first \$100,000 of property value of commercial and industrial properties from the surcharge. The exemption already exists for residential property.



Rep. Stephen Kulik

The House also approved budget language to allow communities to use preservation money for rehabilitating existing recreational facilities, fields and parks, Kulik said. Right now, the money can only be for renovating recreational fields and other assets purchased or created with preservation funds, he said.

Those changes were also approved in the Senate Ways and Means budget and could be effective at attracting more cities into the program, Kulik said.

In Western Massachusetts, Agawam, Amherst, Belchertown, Conway, Easthampton, East Longmeadow, Granville, Hadley, Hampden, Hatfield, Longmeadow, Monson, Northampton, Shutesbury, Southwick, Sturbridge, Sunderland, West Springfield, Westfield and Wilbraham are among communities that have approved the program.

According to the Community Preservation Coalition, more than 5,000 projects have been approved statewide under the program, including creation or support for 5,080 affordable housing units, protection for 14,900 acres of open space, 2,480 appropriations for historic preservation and initiation of 729 outdoor recreation projects.