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HEADLINE: Panel pushes for preservation act adoption

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Patriot Ledger staff For an average cost to homeowners of \$40 per year, the town could raise more than \$432,000 annually to buy open space, fund historic preservation and pay for affordable housing programs.

That's what supporters of the Community Preservation Act told selectmen last night.

Chris Saccardi, the assistant director of the non-profit Community Preservation Coalition, briefed the board on the law. He was joined by members of the open space and recreation and master plan implementation committee.

An article to adopt the four-year-old Community Preservation Act is on the warrant of the Nov. 8 special town meeting. If approved by town meeting, it would go before the voters at the town election in April.

The act allows for a surcharge of up to 3 percent on property tax bills. Saccardi said the proposal going before town meeting calls for a 2 percent surcharge. Saccardi said the first \$100,000 of a home's value can be exempted from the surcharge.

There could also be exemptions for senior citizens and low-income households, he said.

The cost estimate is based on average household value of \$279,000, slightly less than the average of \$292,255 under the preliminary valuations in the town's nearly completed revaluation.

Saccardi said the money collected on the local level will be matched by the state, which distributed \$30 million to the 61 communities that have adopted the law.

How the money would be spent would be determined by town meeting, with recommendations from a committee of up to nine members, he said.

The committee would include representatives from the conservation commission, historical commission, housing authority, planning board and recreation board.

At least 10 percent of the money collected must be set aside for land purchases, historic preservation, and housing programs. Saccardi said. Money can build up in the fund over the years to fund large-scale projects. Saccardi said the money can be used to purchase land for conservation, recreation or aquifer protection.

Unlike the anti-snob zoning law, housing programs under the Community Preservation Act must comply with local zoning.

"There's an emphasis on re-using existing buildings rather than building on undeveloped land," he said.

Members of the master plan implementation committee, which has endorsed acceptance of the law, said the money could be used for projects such as repairing the high school track and completing the renovation of Stetson Hall.

The selectmen offered no comments on the presentation and did not take a position on the article.

Joseph Burke, a Precinct 8 town meeting member, said he felt a decision on the Community Preservation Act should wait until after selectmen decide on property tax classification, which could raise homeowners' tax bills.

"You just hit them with a \$100 increase in the trash fee" earlier this year, Burke said. "What do you want to do, kill (the taxpayers)?"

Three years ago, a proposal to accept the law was defeated by an overwhelming margin on a voice vote at town meeting.

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