

RANDOLPH

**Tax hike to be put to voters**

**By John Laidler, Globe Correspondence | December 5, 2004**

Randolph voters in April will be asked to approve a tax increase by adopting the Community Preservation Act. The state law allows cities and towns to impose a property tax surcharge to support open space, affordable housing, and historic preservation initiatives. The community's funds are matched by the state.

The owner of an average home valued at \$279,000 would pay an extra \$40 per year in taxes. The town's fund would gain about \$432,000 a year, which would be doubled by the state match.

Special Town Meeting on Nov. 8 approved adoption of the act on a voice vote. To take effect, the measure must be ratified by voters at the annual town election.

In November 2001, Special Town Meeting soundly rejected adopting the preservation act.

Despite their success last month, proponents say it will be a challenge to win approval in a townwide vote.

"We expect it's going to be a hard fight," said Juan Carlos Serna, chairman of the Master Plan Implementation Committee, which together with the Open Space Recreation Committee is leading the push for passage.

"But I think that once they learn about the benefits of the CPA, most people in town will be willing to give up less than a buck a week for those things that [in] poll after poll they say matter most to them -- affordable housing for seniors, open space, and finishing up with the historic building renovations we've started," Serna said.

Town Meeting member John H. Milson hopes it is defeated.

"I regard it as another way for politicians to get more money from the peasants," said Milson. The town can fund needed projects by cutting costs elsewhere, he said.

Milson predicted that "all senior citizens will be against" joining the program. "Ask any senior, how would you like to pay more taxes?"

The Community Preservation Act program allows for up to a 3 percent surcharge, but Randolph's proposal calls for 2 percent. It also includes exemptions for the first \$100,000 of value, property owned and occupied by seniors with low or moderate incomes, and property owned by other residents with low incomes.

At least 10 percent of the revenue must be spent separately on open space, affordable housing, and historic preservation. Town Meeting would determine the expenditures,

with an advisory panel offering recommendations. Last month's Special Town Meeting also voted to create an advisory committee, subject to passage of the ballot question.

Across the state, 75 communities have adopted the CPA, including Braintree, Cohasset, Duxbury, Easton, Hanover, Hingham, Marshfield, Norwell, Plymouth, Scituate, and Sharon. Hanover and Sharon were among 10 communities in the state that adopted the act on Nov. 2, according to Christopher Saccardi, assistant director of the Community Preservation Coalition.

Serna said the promise of state money is an important selling point. "In the long-term, there are going to be projects that the town is going to want to undertake that are eligible for CPA funds," he said. "So why not have the state matching funds to pay for part of it?"

As an example, Serna said, Special Town Meeting last month approved funds to study making improvements to the high school track. "By adopting the CPA, the town could have the state pick up half the bill for the track improvements," he said. The state would have to approve the project before appropriating money.

He said other projects that could qualify for CPA money would include restorations of historic buildings in Crawford Square such as Stetson Hall.

Monique Brown, chairwoman of the Open Space and Recreation Committee, said her panel has identified a number of potential initiatives that could benefit from the preservation money, including the development of walking and bicycling paths.

The surcharge could also provide a source of money if the town needs to move quickly to purchase an open space property that comes on the market, Brown said.

Selectman Jim Burgess said Randolph has watched as other nearby communities tapped into CPA funds to pay for initiatives such as renovating athletic fields.

"These towns could do these things because they had the money sitting here. We couldn't. When we look at fees being paid by our own citizens going into the coffers of other communities, it doesn't make sense," he said, noting that the state pool used to pay matching dollars comes from fees paid at registries of deeds.

Brown said she understands that some residents regard the surcharge as "just another tax," but added, "I think we have the opportunity to convince the residents of Randolph that this is more than a tax, that it's an investment in our community and in our children as well as in our seniors. I think that's our job." ■