



# The CPA at Work in Small Towns

By the Highland Communities Initiative



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You can name what makes life in small, rural towns so special – the historic town hall, the swimming hole on the edge of town, and the fact that your grandparents or children can afford to live right down the road. Yet the very elements considered fundamental to small-town life are threatened without money to preserve or enhance them.

The Community Preservation Act (CPA) is helping to change that. By adopting the CPA, towns can access significant funds for historic preservation, open space protection, accessible housing, and public recreation projects. Towns use money raised from

the CPA to create a dedicated, locally controlled fund to support a broad range of important projects that many communities could not otherwise afford.

It is up to you to help care for the things that you see and value every day. Adopting the CPA and choosing which local projects will receive CPA funding require your votes. If you value the character that makes your town special and want your community to get a fair share of state funds, make your voice heard by supporting local efforts to adopt the CPA.

Communities that have already adopted the CPA are some of its biggest fans – they have continually used the CPA to improve their communities and quality of life. Here are some examples of how small towns around Massachusetts have used their CPA funds to protect what is important to them.

ABOVE: Members of the committee that helped the town of Goshen adopt the CPA stand on the steps of the library, which may be one of the town's first CPA restoration projects.

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# What can small towns do with CPA funds?

The simple answer is, a lot! The CPA is a state law that enables cities and towns to create a dedicated fund for important projects that can greatly impact a community's character and quality of life.

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Towns spend CPA funds in three core areas: open space protection, historic preservation, and accessible housing. Each of these areas must receive a minimum of 10% of the total fund each year, but the remaining 70% can be spent or reserved for future spending in any of the three areas, or for public recreation. The CPA is very flexible and can be tailored to suit the needs of individual communities.

Money for the CPA is raised locally through a small surcharge on property taxes (up to 3% of a total tax bill), which is then matched by funds from the state. State funds are collected through surcharges at the Registries of Deeds on transactions in all Massachusetts municipalities. Adopting the CPA brings these funds back to local towns. Once in a town's CPA fund, these funds are controlled exclusively by local residents, for local projects.

ABOVE RIGHT: The CPA gives Southamptton, Massachusetts, a powerful tool to ensure that farming remains part of the community.



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“Adopting the CPA was one of the most progressive things that this town has done in recent memory, and most of us didn’t comprehend just how important it would be. Beyond the projects it has funded, it has also brought our community together.”

– Diana Schindler, Southamptton town administrator

# Open Space

Natural open space can be among a community's most valuable assets. CPA funds, along with a community's dedication and creativity, can bring forth the full potential of natural spaces.

## Southampton (pop. 5,387)

5 Like many historically agricultural communities, the town of Southampton is facing an identity crisis. As population grows, farms are being replaced by house lots, slowly eroding the rural character that both old and new residents value in their town. Using its CPA money, Southampton took a stand, helping to purchase Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APRs) on two important local farms. Now, farming will continue at the Myron Searle and Bruce Fournier farms, and the town will guarantee part of its agricultural heritage for the future.



"Without the CPA, projects like this have no chance when pitted against other expenditures, like a new police cruiser. The CPA is a rainy-day savings account for all of the good things we know we should be doing to save our communities and their history – but we never seem to have the money to do."

– Harry LaCortiglia, chair, Georgetown  
Community Preservation Commission

## Georgetown (pop. 7,377 )

6 For years, Georgetown had been looking for a way to solidify protection of its aquifer. When the town realized that a pristine swath of undeveloped land, already popular for its walking trails, was 1,000 feet from two wells that supply its residents with clean drinking water, it jumped into action.

Luckily, Georgetown had CPA money available to purchase and place the required conservation restrictions on the two parcels. With that single act, Georgetown added protection to their aquifer while also preserving valuable wildlife habitat, a local archeological site, and a beautiful, accessible part of the town's landscape.

Preserving stone walls, and land for future corn harvests, are both possible with CPA funds.



## Leverett (pop. 1,663)

Sometimes the most visible and enjoyable natural places are in the center of town. But in Leverett, the wetlands near the library were not adding much to the town's character. This prime landscape was overrun with Japanese Barberry, Winged Euonymus, and a host of other exotic plants that choked out local wildlife. The town's conservation commission, along with the Trustees of the Library and a local conservation group, the Rattlesnake Gutter Trust, asked for CPA funds to restore the historic landscape, making it a functioning wetland that could serve as an educational resource for a nearby school. Since funding for the project was appropriated at a town meeting, the invasive plants are on the retreat. In their place, a wildflower meadow has been planted, and native wetland plants are soon to follow.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Willbraham preserved the Rice Fruit Farm as part of a conservation area with CPA funds.

"I am really excited that our town has received over a half million dollars for purposes we value and that this amount will continue to grow each year. It means that if a significant opportunity arises to make a major land purchase, to restore an historic resource, or to create some housing, at least some of the required funds are available."

– Laurel Kahn, Leverett Community Preservation Committee

## Need More Inspiration?

- Accessing open space is half the fun. Southborough is using CPA funds to create a wildlife viewing area at Breakneck Hill Conservation Area.
- Hopkinton is exercising its right of first refusal under Chapter 61a to purchase eight acres of farmland with CPA funds.
- Invasive, exotic plants are a problem across Massachusetts – but the towns of Weston and Grafton are fighting back. Both used CPA funds to purchase eradication materials to restore local lakes.
- Hamilton is exploring how to turn trash into treasure. The town is using CPA funds to analyze conditions at its former landfill to determine whether the land could be used for open space or recreation.



# Historic Preservation

History often lives in small details – a stained glass window, a stone wall, a row of cemetery stones. Towns can accomplish big things with the CPA. They can also use it for paying respect to all of the little things that deserve our attention.

## Rowley (pop. 5,500)

9 Rowley has reason to be proud of its history. Its circa 1643 Jewel Mill was the birthplace of the American wool industry, a development that ultimately threatened Great Britain's textile industry and helped spark the American Revolution. The town also boasts the nation's oldest keystone arch bridge (also dating to 1643), which is still in use – a living testament to

the quality of these old structures. It's no surprise, then, that Rowley's first CPA-funded projects involved restoring the Jewell Mill's water wheel and conducting an engineering study of the Old Stone Arch Bridge. When history means so much to the character of a town, the CPA's value is unquestionable.

## Leverett (pop. 1,663)

Known as "one of the prettiest buildings in town," Leverett's Village Meeting House in Moore's Corner, built in 1850, has served as a community center, a school, and a performance space. But warped floors and a rotting wall brought it to the brink of demolition. The Leverett Historical Society, dedicated and undaunted, set out to restore the derelict building and re-hang its signature tower bell. Community involvement and fundraising efforts for the project were valiant, but the people of Leverett still needed

10 Not content to let its Village Meeting House fade into history, Leverett, used CPA funds to restore it to prominence.



“We felt good about providing the Meeting House project with CPA funding. The community had demonstrated they were solidly behind the project with their tremendous volunteer efforts and fundraising.”

– Betsy Douglas, Chair, Leverett Community Preservation Committee

11 more money. They turned to the CPA for help in purchasing siding materials and completing the bell tower for the old, chestnut-framed structure. With vision, hard work, and the CPA, the Meeting House bell rings again in Leverett.

## Upton (pop. 5,642)

Everyone loves a good mystery. For years, no one in Upton could shed light on the origins of the Pearson Chamber, an old, beehive-shaped stone structure near the town hall. But that didn't matter to Upton residents when the seven acres on which the Chamber sits came up for sale. Spurred by a desire to save the historic site, the town used its CPA funds to purchase the land, creating a new park in the center of town with a shoreline on Mill Pond. Since then, the town's Men's Club has built a gazebo in the park; an Eagle Scout candidate is designing and constructing a footbridge; and there are plans to build a canoe

launch on the pond's edge – which would be eligible for CPA recreation funds. Given the return on their investment, figuring out the right thing to do was no mystery for the residents of Upton.

## Need More Inspiration?

- The town of Ashland used CPA funds to reconstruct the original oak floor in their fire department building.
- Georgetown replaced the old Union Cemetery's rusting chain link fence with a more historically appropriate wrought iron structure. Belchertown and Hamilton also took steps to preserve their historic cemeteries.
- Previously chilly meeting participants can now take comfort that Leverett Town Hall's historic windows have been restored by a local company and fitted with historically compatible storm windows.
- Several towns, including Upton and Southborough, have used CPA funds to preserve, bind, and store town documents in a manner that is more accessible to the public.



# Accessible Housing

Accessible housing assures that we can keep the wisdom and company of our elders and the energy of our youth close by, for the benefit of all.

## Stow (pop. 5,903)

For the town of Stow, keeping things manageable means thinking big. Given Massachusetts' high real estate prices, Stow's senior citizens, young adults, and others have a difficult time finding new homes – or just staying where they have lived for years. Stow responded with a program that is the first of its kind in the Commonwealth. The town plans to use CPA money to purchase affordability restrictions from

seniors, which allows them to stay in their homes while ensuring accessible housing options for the future through deed restrictions on their homes' future sales.

## Southampton (pop. 5,387)

How can senior citizens make needed improvements to their homes when living on a fixed income? Southampton found one solution – CPA funds. In 2005, the town devoted resources to help senior citizens install ramps, guide bars, and other accessibility improvements in their homes. The funds were appropriated to a town board that accepts applications and administers distribution of the CPA money.

Georgetown took a slightly different approach to achieve a similar goal. The town awarded a grant from CPA funds to Rebuilding Together, a volunteer organization that benefits low-income, elderly, or

The CPA were once of several critical partners involved in helping Chatham meets its housing needs.

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disabled homeowners by providing necessary repairs (including roofing, plumbing, and electrical repairs) free of charge.

## Bedford (pop. 12,000)

Bedford is a town that respects its past, cares about its future, and realizes that keeping houses affordable for its residents can help protect both.

When a historic farmhouse with 3.47 acres of land was offered for sale, the town of Bedford and Habitat for Humanity of Greater Lowell used CPA funding to help realize a remarkable vision. The farmhouse will be saved by renovating and retrofitting it as part of a new neighborhood of affordable, energy efficient homes. Altogether, four duplexes will offer

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“For years, Bedford residents have expressed a strong interest in preserving our small town character.... It should be no surprise, then, that Bedford residents moved decisively to adopt the Community Preservation Act.... Bedford envisions its small-town character enhanced over the next twenty years as it moves into the twenty-first century.”

– Town of Bedford Community Preservation Program and Plan, Spring 2006

eight families homes that are less costly to buy and maintain. The structures themselves will employ the latest in green-building technology, enabling the entire neighborhood to obtain a prestigious Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certification.

With the flexibility of CPA funding, Bedford is proving that everything old really can be new again.

## Need More Inspiration?

- Bedford was the first community to pass the CPA in 2001, which it immediately used to create a housing plan for the town. Towns including Ashland and Acton also are using CPA funds to assess and plan for their community’s housing needs – helping them to understand and respond to the reality that people face as they try to secure local housing.
- The towns of Rockport and Chilmark created rental and mortgage assistance programs with CPA funds, providing families facing temporary hardships, including illness or job loss, with the necessary funding to stay in their homes.
- Buildable space can be limited by a number of factors. Towns including Boxford, Holliston, Wayland, and Bedford all have employed CPA funds to prepare site assessments, evaluating whether affordable houses should be built on specific parcels of land.

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# Recreation

Outdoor recreation brings countless benefits to individuals and communities. Recreation is not a required category of expenditures for CPA dollars, but it can still receive up to 70 percent of a town's total CPA funds.

These towns have taken full advantage of the opportunity:

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- Through CPA funds, Belchertown is finally realizing its dream of developing an unused parcel into the Constantino Memorial baseball field.
  - Wenham, West Tisbury, Acushnet, Belchertown, and Hamilton have all used CPA funds to either build walking paths and trails or to improve them for safety.
  - To make the most of small, unused sections of town land, Hamilton is creating gathering spaces by building bike racks, picnic tables, and trash receptacles.

Small towns in Massachusetts value character – in their land, in their buildings, and in their people. You have the ability to make choices that will preserve your town's character and rural way of life. Adopting the Community Preservation Act is one clear and concrete step toward rallying your community's resources, spirit, and creativity around what it values most.







The Highland Communities Initiative (HCI) is a program of The Trustees of Reservations that works to enhance the quality of life and rural character of the Highlands region of Massachusetts.

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