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West

Bill would ease CPA fund use

More recreational needs are cited

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At an Elm Street playground in Acton, the bare frame of a swing set sits abandoned, no swings dangling from its top bar. Town Meeting voters approved money to replace the equipment in 2008, but state law has kept officials from making the improvements.

Now, that law might change.

The budget making its way through the State House includes legislation that would allow cities and towns to use funds raised through the Community Preservation Act to make repairs to town-owned parks, playgrounds, and athletic fields. Currently, communities can use the money for recreation upgrades only on properties acquired or built with community preservation money.

“I am 100 percent, maybe 200 percent, in favor [of the changes],” said Cathy Fochtman, Acton’s recreation director, adding that she can think of dozens of other needs for funds in addition to the Elm Street playground.

Fochtman said a skate park is one of the few recreation facilities the town has been able to improve with community preservation money, because it was created with such funds in the first place.

Fochtman said Acton Town Meeting voters approved spending around \$80,000 on the Elm Street playground project in 2008, but it was shelved when the state’s Supreme Judicial Court ruled in a case involving Newton that community preservation money could not be spent on recreational facilities that were not created with such funds.

“The need we have is for keeping up the infrastructure of what we have and improving it, not creating new things on newly purchased land,” Fochtman said. “There’s not any new land that’s available.”

The Community Preservation Act – passed in 2000 – allows cities and towns to raise money by placing a surcharge of up to 3 percent on real estate tax bills, as long as the

charge is approved by ballot referendum. The monies can only be spent on open space, historical preservation, affordable housing, and recreation.

Across the state, 148 communities have implemented the extra charge, which also makes them eligible for state matching money. In the early years of the law, funds were matched dollar-for-dollar by the state, but the matching rate has since dropped to 26.6 percent due to the flagging economy and the funds being split among more communities.

A budget amendment that would ease the restrictions on recreation spending passed the state House of Representatives unanimously last month, and the proposal will come before the state Senate this month.

The legislation would also pump an extra \$25 million of state surplus funds annually into community preservation, meaning communities would see more state matching funds.

State Senator Cynthia Creem, a Newton Democrat who has advocated for a similar bill in recent years, called the proposal a “jobs bill,” saying that it will lead to a flurry of new projects. “Money is tight. This is a new way to put more monies into our communities to do the things we need to do.”

Allie Lane, recreation director in Northborough, said she “cannot wait” for the proposed changes. “There are so many things we could do when that goes through. I’m sure every town is just chomping at the bit for this to happen.”

Lane said Northborough’s recreation department is funded through programming fees, and that most cities and towns are not able to devote any significant tax revenue to recreation projects. “Anything that needs to be repaired or fixed, there’s no money for it,” she said.

“We’re very excited, because it creates more opportunities for us, and it creates a funding source that was otherwise excluded,” said Robert DeRubeis, commissioner of parks and recreation in Newton.

The restrictions have led to long waits for recreation projects in some communities. Ground broke on a playground project at Goodwill Park in Holliston last fall, but only after residents spent years lobbying for grant money and raising private funds.

Holliston Town Administrator Paul LeBeau said the entire Goodwill Park project is costing around \$200,000. Meanwhile, the town has brought in more than \$5 million in community preservation money over the last decade, but could not use any of it on the park. LeBeau said Holliston has around \$1 million in community preservation funds on hand.

Nancy McShea, recreation director in Wayland, said the proposed change would help her town address its shortage of playing fields. “Right now our fields are incredibly

overused,” she said. “Our natural grass fields are worn, and we don’t have time to rest them.”

McShea said the restrictions tie the hands of town officials, preventing them from using community preservation money to improve existing fields or build new ones on town-owned land. Using tax revenues isn’t an option, she said.

“If you’re going to go to Town Meeting and ask for \$900,000 to do a field renovation project, that’s not going to fly,” McShea said. “But if we’re going to access that through community preservation that’s a much easier pill to swallow.”

“This will help us out dramatically,” McShea said.