

Williamstown Community Preservation Committee Plan

A Citizens Guide to the CPA

Thank you for your interest in the Williamstown Community Preservation Plan, a document required of all Massachusetts Community Preservation Committees. The purpose of the Plan is twofold: to fully inform citizens about the origin, history and workings of the local Community Preservation Committee and as a guide for the CPC itself. We encourage you to contact any member of the committee with questions or comments, as the CPC benefits from full citizen engagement in our work.

Please note: references below to the “CPA” refers to the *Community Preservation Act*, the state statute itself while “CPC” refers to the *Community Preservation Committee*, the Williamstown committee administering local revenues.

A Short History of the Community Preservation Act

The Community Preservation Act was introduced in the state legislature in 2000 and was based on an experiment in Nantucket that added a small surcharge to local property tax bills, with the monies raised dedicated to land conservation. The Nantucket Land Bank, a local government agency, allowed for rapid acquisition and protection of open space amidst unprecedented levels of residential development, often taking place in critical habitats and view sheds. The Land Bank was a conservation game-changer for the island.

Intrigued with the success of the land bank, state legislators replicated the program statewide and narrowed the criteria to three areas of public interest: open space preservation; historical preservation; and community housing. These categories were chosen because they were all central to shared notions of community and notoriously difficult for which to find funding. A few years after passage, the open space category was redefined to include recreation projects.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act was voluntary. Not all communities did so, and some that did saw those efforts fail when voting took place, though very few towns have rejected an adoption proposal.

Upon adoption, communities were required to set up Community Preservation Committees, made up of specific town committee representation and at-large members. This requirement of the Act was based on concerns legislatures had about local governments utilizing CPA funds as a backdoor way to fund normal operating expenses. The CPC Committees act as a firewall between town governments (city councils, select boards, mayors, town managers) and the monies raised by the CPA tax surcharge.

The Present

The CPC operates quasi-independently and solely decides which proposals go to town meeting and which do not. The Williamstown CPC committee is composed of representatives of the Finance Committee, Planning Board, Housing Authority, Historical Commission, Conservation Commission, a member of the Select Board who represents the recreation category, two at-large members chosen by the Select Board and one at-large member chosen by the Town Manager.

The state matches funds raised from the local tax levy with revenues collected from the Registry of Deeds and other sources. In the early years, when fewer towns participated in the CPA and there were far more property sales, the state matched locally raised funds 1:1. The benefits were enormous as local funds were doubled and a vast range of projects were funded. As more towns have adopted the CPA and real estate sales have slowed, the state match has been reduced dramatically, often falling as low as a 15% match. However, communities that opt for the full 3% levy see a considerable increase in the state match over towns that opt for lower levies.

The exact amount of the state match is determined annually in consideration of the health of the economy and concurrently, the state budget. CPA match monies are no longer solely tied to real estate transaction fees but include dedicated monies granted by the legislature. The lower match requires some conservatism on the part of local CPC committees, though it does speak to the overwhelming success of the Community Preservation Act.

Williamstown voters adopted the Community Preservation Act in 2002, one of the first Massachusetts towns to do so. Williamstown chose a 2% levy after the first \$100,000 of property valuation. In any given year, the Community Preservation Fund has generated between \$250,000 to \$400,000 in revenues, depending on various factors. For single projects that eclipse the committee's revenues in a given year (usually, but not limited to larger housing projects), the CPC may bond an amount to be paid from CPC funds in successive years.

Low income homeowners whose annual income is less than 80 percent of the Area Median Income, or senior homeowners over 60 whose annual income is less than 100 percent of the AMI may apply for an exemption from the CPA tax levy. Applications must be made annually.

Proposals are gathered in the late fall and reviewed over the winter. In early March the CPC votes on which proposals to recommend to town meeting. Funds can be disbursed on or after July 1 of the year in which they are approved and must be spent in the year in which they are awarded, though in rare cases the Town Manager may grant an extension. Unused funds are returned to the CPC account for use in the following year.

In addition to the state statute, the CPC will consider local assessments of our town's needs and priorities as we make decisions. The overall health of the community will benefit from our working in concert with other governing bodies and groups established to improve our town. Williamstown's Comprehensive Plan, **Envisioning Williamstown 2035**, has set certain

priorities that can inform our work. In particular, we might reference the following themes in the Comprehensive Plan, which are perhaps the most relevant to the CPC:

Overarching themes:

Sustainability and Community Resilience (p.24)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (p.25)

Planning Theme 1: Distinct and Diverse

Diverse Housing Solutions (p.27)

Planning Theme 2: Stewardship and Services

Natural Resource Protection, Nature-based Solutions, Conservation (p.35)

Planning Theme 4: Character and Place

Land Use and Policy Design (p.48)

Arts, Culture, and History (p.51)

Parks and Recreation (p.53)

The four categories under consideration for CPC funding are determined by the language of the Community Preservation Act and cannot be expanded locally.

Categories for CPC grant consideration

Community Housing

Williamstown's beauty and cultural vibrancy make it a highly-valued location for second homes, vacation rentals, and retirement properties, placing considerable stress on the supply of lower cost rental properties and starter homes. The post-pandemic phenomena of remote work has also contributed to the limited supply of housing for low and middle-income residents who work locally or are retired or disabled. CPA funds allocated for housing are almost exclusively awarded to the local affordable housing trust or non-profits like Habitat for Humanity, organizations with deep knowledge and experience in housing issues. CPA funds may be used to acquire, create, preserve, and support (defined as rental assistance, funds for security deposits, assistance to individuals, mortgage assistance etc) housing projects. Rehabilitation and restoration of properties may be supported by CPA funds *only* if the property in question was first acquired with CPA funds. In any given year a minimum of 10% of that year's available funds must be expended on community housing. If no housing proposals are awarded in a given year, that 10% must be reserved for the following year. If funds are awarded but amount to under 10% of the total CPC budget, the difference must be reserved for the following year.

Historic Preservation

For thousands of years prior to the European arrival, the northern Berkshires were home to the Muh-He-Ka-Ne-Ok or Mohican people, whose core territory stretched from the Housatonic River to the Hudson River valley and today are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. While few archaeological studies have been conducted on Mohican homelands in Williamstown, efforts are being prioritized to more fully acknowledge indigenous presence in local history, above and beyond the colonial settlement of Williamstown in the 18th century. Much of Williamstown's 18th century architecture, tools and implements, and documents have been lost to decay or destruction. There is urgency to protect and preserve what remains and CPA funds are indispensable in this effort. Historical Preservation has more restrictions than the other CPA categories, in part because there is a fine line between preservation (allowed for CPA grants) and routine maintenance (not allowed). Approved projects must meet the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Historical Preservation, and must be designated as historically significant by the National Registry of Historic Places or the local historical commission. Historical Preservation grants may be used to acquire, preserve, or restore an artifact or structure but may not be used to create (as in a replica) of an historic artifact or structure. In any given year a minimum of 10% of that year's available funds must be expended on historic preservation. If no preservation proposals are awarded in a given year, that 10% must be reserved for the following year. If funds *are* awarded but amount to under 10% of the total CPC budget, the difference must be reserved for the following year.

Open Space Preservation

Blessed with two dramatic mountain ranges, historic working farms, and rare, uninterrupted scenic vistas, Williamstown is one of the most beautiful towns in the Commonwealth. Organizations like Williamstown Rural Lands and Trustees of Reservations have ensured that some of our most precious resources are protected, often with the financial support of the CPC. And as we confront climate change and political instability, our fertile agricultural lands may need protection in the near term. CPA funds allocated for open space preservation usually come from proposals instigated by the town or from non-profits like Williamstown Rural Lands and Trustees of Reservations, to name two. Lands protected by CPA funds for preservation are protected from development by deed covenants and conservation restrictions. Open Space grants may be used to acquire, create, and preserve selected properties, but may not be used to support protected lands. CPA funds may be used to rehabilitate or restore protected lands *only* if such lands were purchased with CPA funds. In any given year a minimum of 10% of that year's available funds must be expended on Open Space. In any given year a minimum of 10% of that year's available funds must be expended on Open Space. If no preservation proposals are awarded in a given year, that 10% must be reserved for the following year. If funds *are* awarded but amount to under 10% of the total CPC budget, the difference must be reserved for the following year.

Recreation

For families with young children, teens, active adults and seniors, few things help to build and maintain a strong community more than shared recreation facilities. And while Williamstown has a wealth of protected open spaces and historical resources, our recreational infrastructure is lacking. In most communities recreation proposals originate from the town itself, or from non-profits like the local Little League, hiking clubs, or a senior center. On occasion, proposals might come from individuals. CPA funds may be used to acquire, create or preserve a recreational facility but not for support (e.g. routine maintenance, reimbursing town employees). As the recreation category is under the umbrella of Open Space, there is no required minimum 10% expenditure for recreation. However, expenses granted for recreation may be counted in the minimum 10% required for Open Space.

This allowable uses chart will help you further understand how CPA monies may be awarded.

	Open Space	Historic	Recreation	Housing
Acquire	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Create	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Preserve	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Support	No	No	No	Yes
Rehabilitate and/or Restore	No (unless acquired or created with CPA \$\$)	Yes	Yes	No (unless acquired or created with CPA \$\$)

For a deep dive into the Community Preservation Act statewide, we recommend visiting the Community Preservation Coalition website. <https://www.communitypreservation.org/>

Plan adopted by the Community Preservation Committee
10/01/2025

The Community Preservation Committee

Philip McKnight, Chairman, representing the Conservation Commission
Nate Budington, Vice Chair, representing the Historical Commission
Molly Magavern, representing the Finance Committee
Samantha Paige, representing the Planning Board
Steve Dew, representing the Housing Authority
Peter Beck, representing recreation for the Select Board
Polly McPherson, member at-large, appointed by the Select Board
Barbara Halligan, member at-large, appointed by the Select Board
Alison Bost, member at-large, appointed by the Town Manager