



Committee on Finance and the Northampton City Council

*Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra, Chair
Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge, Vice Chair
Councilor Michael J. Quinlan, Jr.
Councilor John Thorpe*

Online Meeting via Teleconference

Meeting Date: January 21, 2021

Note: The Finance Committee Meeting will take place during the City Council Meeting as announced. The City Council Meeting is scheduled to begin at 7:05 pm.

- 1. Meeting Called To Order**
- 2. Roll Call**
- 3. Approval Of Minutes From The Previous Meeting**

A. Minutes Of December 17, 2020

Documents:

[12-17-2020_finance committee minutes.pdf](#)

- 4. Financial Orders**
- 5. New Business**
-Reserved for topics that the Chair did not reasonably anticipate would be discussed.
- 6. Adjourn**

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Committee on Finance and the Northampton City Council

*Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra, Chair
Councilor Marianne LaBarge, Vice Chair
Councilor Michael J. Quinlan, Jr.
Councilor John Thorpe*

On-line Zoom Meeting

Meeting Date: December 17, 2020

Note: The Finance Committee Meeting took place during the City Council Meeting as announced. The City Council Meeting began at 7 p.m.

1. **Meeting Called To Order:** At 7:45 p.m., Councilor Sciarra called the meeting to order.
2. **Roll Call:** Present were committee members Gina-Louise Sciarra (Chair), Marianne LaBarge (Vice-Chair), Michael J. Quinlan, Jr. and John Thorpe. Also present from the City Council were William H. Dwight, Alex Jarrett, Karen Foster, Rachel Maiore and Jim Nash. Also present was Conservation/Preservation Planner Sarah LaValley.
3. **Approval of Minutes of November 19, 2020**
Councilor LaBarge moved to approve the minutes of November 19, 2020. Councilor Thorpe seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0 by roll call vote.
4. **Financial Orders**
 - A. **20.157 An Order to Appropriate CPA Funds to the Conservation Fund**
Councilor Sciarra read the order.

Councilor Quinlan moved to forward the order with a positive recommendation. Councilor Thorpe seconded.

Councilor Dwight said he hoped they could entreat Conservation/Preservation Planner Sarah LaValley to break down the allowable use of Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds vs. General Fund money. There seemed to be some misunderstanding in public comment about the allocation and distribution of these funds and conflating of them with General Fund resources, he noted.

As a preamble to all five orders, the Community Preservation Act (CPA) is a unique enabling legislation in Massachusetts that established funding for certain types of projects, Ms. LaValley explained. It is a local option that communities can adopt, and Northampton was an early adopter. It requires establishment of a Community Preservation Committee (CPC) comprised of representatives from other boards as well as elected and appointed members. The CPC makes recommendations for funding based on applications

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received. Its decisions are informed by the Community Preservation Plan, which in turn is informed by the city's long-term plans and goals. Funds are created through a surcharge on local property taxes (3%) matched by state funds generated through registry of deeds receipts. CPA funds are dedicated to four eligible areas: open space, historic preservation, recreation and affordable housing. The act requires communities to set aside 10% of revenues each year for open space, 10% for historic preservation and 10% for housing. These funds are separate from all other city funds and cannot be used for general government expenses.

The conservation fund has been funded many times in the past, and this is the 13th iteration of this particular funding recommendation. The conservation fund creates a pool of funding that is readily available for soft costs of open space acquisition such as appraisals, legal research, environmental assessments, etc. It is an invaluable source of funding for time-sensitive acquisitions and has enabled the protection of many acres that would otherwise not be possible. The city council usually sees several large acquisitions each year. Although councilors don't see it, there is always some initial due diligence investment through the conservation fund that makes these big, exciting land protections possible.

Councilor Jarrett said he wanted to speak generally about the priorities of the CPC. He is very appreciative of the CPA and all that it supports, including this order, but he is concerned about the percentages of spending on the various categories of CPA funding. As she detailed, at least 10% of the revenues have to be for open space/recreation, 10% for historic preservation and 10% for community housing. The remaining 70% is discretionary on the part of the CPC. He did some research on the orders approved by the council in the last two years, and it showed that the city spent about 16% on community housing, 23% on historic preservation and 61% on open space and recreation.

This year, 10.5% is being spent on community housing, which is just the order before them - the only application received for the community housing portion. There is not any action they could take tonight to allocate more but he does think it is important for future rounds to have a community conversation about their priorities. He asked how people can engage in planning and priority-setting with the CPC.

Ms. LaValley presented slightly updated figures for spending on the eligible categories as follows: 23.5% for historic preservation, 19.8% for housing and, if open space and recreation are separated out, 30.5% for open space and 26.2% for recreation (not including orders before them now). The CPC makes recommendations based on competitive funding applications, she explained. An affordable housing project might come before them one year but then there might be a gap. Community partners such as Valley CDC and Habitat for Humanity have a few large projects then may have a gap of a few years. If people want to engage, public hearings on the community preservation plan are one way to do that, which will take place this year in early spring. There is also a public comment period before every meeting of the CPC, which meets the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month. And, there is a dedicated public comment session for each of the two rounds of funding held each year.

Councilor Jarrett expressed the understanding that this was the only application for community housing received. If residents want more, he voiced the assumption that they would need to encourage applicants/organizations directly to apply.

Definitely, Ms. LaValley confirmed. The CPC doesn't initiate these projects on its own but works closely with city agencies, non-profits and affordable housing developers to make sure projects are funded when they do come up. If people are interested in the creation of more affordable housing specifically they could reach out to the housing committee as well as to non-profits in the area.

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Councilor Nash asked if it was fair to say that whenever they do have an application for affordable housing before them, the CPC strongly leans towards funding it, and Ms. LaValley said that's absolutely correct. There have been situations in the past when funding was limited and some larger affordable housing projects were only funded partially. Absolutely, the committee has supported every single affordable housing application that's ever come before it, she advised.

Councilor Maiore said she heard Amherst and Easthampton have looked into using some CPA funds for short-term rental relief during the pandemic. She said she assumes some sort of social service agency applies and administers these funds.

CPC representatives specifically reached out to agencies that may be appropriate to do that sort of activity and the agencies let them know they have enough funding available from CDBG and other sources at the moment so that CPA funding is not needed, Ms. LaValley responded.

With the eviction moratorium coming to end, she thinks there will be an increase in need, Councilor Maiore observed.

Happily in Northampton there are some other resources for rental assistance, Ms. LaValley commented.

There being no further questions, Councilor Sciarra called the motion to a vote, and it carried 4:0 by roll call vote.

B. 20.158 An Order to Appropriate CPA Funds for the Smith Charities Emergency Repair Project
Councilor Sciarra read the order.

Councilor Quinlan moved to forward the order with a positive recommendation. Councilor LaBarge seconded.

An historic building assessment was funded through the CPA a few years ago, Ms. LaValley reminded. That thorough evaluation of the Smith Charities building outlined and prioritized necessary work to secure the building envelope. CPA funds will be used as a match for a state grant and the building will also be protected through a historic preservation restriction. The Historical Commission and CPC both agree that 51 Main Street is an important building to downtown and the history of the city and that repairs are really necessary at this time.

Councilor Sciarra asked if it is a 50/50 match.

It was initially intended to be an equal match but she thinks Mass. Historic had its funding cut slightly so the city is contributing more than 50% at this point, Ms. LaValley said.

The motion carried with 4 Yes, 0 No by roll call vote.

C. 20.159 An Order to Appropriate \$55,000 in CPA Funds to AOM Lobby and Salon Rehabilitation
Councilor Sciarra read the order.

Councilor LaBarge moved to forward the order with a positive recommendation. Councilor Thorpe seconded.

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The Academy of Music sought CPA funding to take advantage of the facility being closed to the public during COVID to begin the next phase of interior rehabilitation, Ms. LaValley related. This follows the incredibly successful completion of restoration of the theatre. Lobby and salon areas have been modified over the years with some interesting choices. This work will remove some of the incongruous elements while also improving visitor experience.

Councilor LaBarge asked if this is the last stage of renovations.

It is not, Ms. LaValley replied. The Academy's next phase is to open the upstairs.

The motion carried with 4 Yes, 0 No by roll call vote.

D. 20.160 An Order to Appropriate CPA Funds to the Pine Brook Connector Acquisition Project
Councilor Sciarra read the order.

Councilor Quinlan moved to forward the order with a positive recommendation. Councilor Thorpe seconded.

This acquisition was approved by City Council back in June, so this order is only for the CPA's contribution to the land protection, Ms. LaValley explained. The property is located on Boggy Meadow Road and sandwiched between the city-owned Broad Brook/Fitzgerald Lake property and a protected Lathrop Communities parcel to the east. It includes riverfront area along Pine Brook, a mixed oak forest, a shallow marsh and a swamp associated with a large beaver pond to the west. It will create a new access point from Bridge Road through the cemetery because the property comes with a right of way, lending itself to tremendous trail potential. People are already using it.

Councilor LaBarge expressed her understanding that this is not a new order.

The council already approved the acquisition and this is just approving funding for it. Ms. LaValley confirmed.

Councilor LaBarge said she was going to echo what Councilor Jarrett said. She is for conservation land but when people see a large amount of money going into conservation vs. affordable housing or whatever; she's had people question her about that. When you look at a price tag of \$160,000 vs. \$50,000 or \$85,000, she has some concern with it. She referred to similar concerns raised a couple of years ago.

Councilor Jarrett said he actually went skiing on this property today and so is very glad to see this moving forward. This is very close to Ward 5 so the property is really near the multi-use trail that runs between Florence and Northampton and convenient to nearby economic justice neighborhoods like Meadowbrook Apartments. But it is very difficult to cross Bridge Road where the access point will be. He made a note to the planning department to think about how people are going to access this especially on foot because it is really close but really hard to get to.

The motion carried with 4 Yes, 0 No by roll call vote.

E. 20.161 An Order to Appropriate CPA Funds to the Affordable Housing Fund
Councilor Sciarra read the order.

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Councilor Quinlan moved to forward the order with a positive recommendation. Councilor Thorpe seconded.

This is similar to the order for the conservation fund but to be used for affordable housing, Ms. LaValley advised. It is to be used for pre-development, due diligence and soft costs which for housing could include things like environmental site assessments, surveys, lead paint removal, legal work and permitting. The Office of Planning and Sustainability (OPS) is not in the business of actually building affordable housing units but does all the work necessary to allow its partners to do that. The funds are to be used primarily for three identified affordable housing projects with additional sites possible as opportunities arise: 1) Laurel Street, a former state hospital property where an estimated 20 affordable rental units are proposed, 2) 278 Burts Pit Road, another former state hospital site able to accommodate two affordable housing units, and 3) Woodland Drive, a former tax title property donated to the city in 2020 and most likely developable as one market rate and two affordable units.

These projects are all in the very early stage of due diligence.

Councilor Nash expressed his understanding that the funds are not for affordable housing units per se but to encourage and do pre-planning for affordable housing.

This will set up a Valley CDC or a Habitat for Humanity with a successful project, Ms. LaValley confirmed. This work has to occur - permitting, environmental site assessments, etc. are all incredibly necessary activities. If the city doesn't make these ready for development, these are additional costs their partners would have to take on, and funding is really limited for soft costs. CPA grants are all for three years. If after three years the money is not spent, an extension could be requested.

Councilor Nash expressed his understanding that this could be a way to set aside money for affordable housing that could possibly be done in a more aggressive way. Since the CPC does not have an affordable project before it this year, they could make a decision to set aside a larger portion to increase the money in this account, he proposed.

They certainly could, Ms. LaValley agreed. It was discussed, but they decided that this was what OPS proposed, so this is what they would approve. If additional opportunities come about, additional money could be set aside in the future.

This could be a mechanism to set aside additional money between projects in the future to make sure affordable housing is happening, Councilor Nash suggested. If the money were not spent, it would go into the affordable housing reserve, Ms. LaValley confirmed.

The motion carried with 4 Yes, 0 No by roll call vote.

5. **New Business**

None.

6. **Adjourn:** There being no further business, Councilor Quinlan moved to adjourn. Councilor LaBarge seconded. The motion carried on a roll call vote of 4 Yes, 0 No. The meeting adjourned at 8:16 p.m.

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