

# THE MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ACT: FACTORS INFLUENCING ACCEPTANCE

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**Abstract.**—In New England, urban sprawl creates a need for protecting open space. In 2002, residents of Southwick, MA, voted to accept the Massachusetts Community Preservation Act (CPA), which helps communities implement smart growth by providing funds for affordable housing, open space protection, and historic landmark preservation. This paper summarizes the findings of a survey administered before the town-wide CPA vote. Survey and demographic data from Southwick and other Massachusetts communities are compared in order to anticipate additional acceptance of the statewide initiative. The data suggest that communities that have higher median household incomes and more extensive housing stock are more likely to adopt the CPA.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Urban sprawl is often associated with the expanded built-up environment surrounding cities. At one extreme, highly populated areas are found across the globe and are coined “megacities” (Uitto, 1998); Bombay, India, Lagos, Nigeria and Tokyo, Japan are classic examples with populations approaching 25 million. Stateside, much of the New England population resides in our own Megalopolis (Gottmann, 1961) which stretches from Boston to Washington, D.C. and in recent decades has “sprawled” as far north as Portland, Maine, and south toward the Carolinas.

Common to both megacities and megalopolises is a large population dependent on extensive transportation networks to move people from their homes to places of employment and all areas in between. As cities expand, natural habitats and farmlands are lost to make way for the development needs of a growing population (Harvey & Clark 1965; Sierra Club 2000). One of the more prominent negative impacts of sprawl is pollution from increased energy consumption that contributes to urban heat islands and global warming (Sierra Club, 2007). While some may see benefits in the form of more jobs, housing stock, and opportunities for the citizens, population growth and the development of accompanying infrastructure needs careful planning in order to offset the potential consequences of environmental and social degradation.

Suburban sprawl is development of the built environment far away from urban centers at the edges of cities and existing suburbs. While development typically follows transportation corridors, a community some distance away from existing development may grow because of its ability to attract people to the location. To address this growth, the research by Hamin et al. (2006) found that rural communities usually spend some portion of their general funds on open space; at the same time, suburban communities concentrate more of their spending on affordable housing despite concerns about how in-migration of people seeking such housing might affect the local community. Thus residents’ perceptions may vary depending on whether or not the community views itself as rural or suburban.

The need to preserve open space while also increasing housing and protecting historic heritage is an ongoing struggle in New England. As early as 1921, and again in 1962, Regional Planner Benton MacKaye proposed strategies for greenways (MacKaye, 1921, 1962). Population growth in the region has always had an impact on the natural resources.

## 1.1 Case Study

Southwick, MA, is a “bedroom” community of 9,000 people on the border north of Hartford, CT; it is located in western Massachusetts on the fringe between large metropolitan areas and expansive public lands. The lack of local industry and employment means that most of the working population commutes daily to neighboring Springfield, MA, along Route 57 or south to Hartford, CT, on Routes 10/202. Southwick is also a gateway tourism community for the fall foliage season and spring maple sugaring operations in northern New England and western Massachusetts. Southwick is easily located on national maps since much of the town extends south into Connecticut and is locally known as the “jog” (Town of Southwick, n.d.).

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 97.4 percent of Southwick’s 8,835 residents are white. Thirty-seven percent of the 3,316 households, have children younger than 18 years old, while 8.3 percent have children younger than 18 and are headed by a female householder. Twenty-one percent of the households are made up of one person living alone. Overall 40 percent of the households have individuals under 18 and 23 percent have individuals older than 65 years of age. The median age in Southwick is about 38.

In 2002, we administered a survey to the citizens of Southwick in order to understand their views of different land use planning strategies and to collect information on their recreation patterns. This study was commissioned by the Southwick Conservation Commission and Westfield State College to support the Community Open Space and Recreation Demand Study. Specifically, the survey instrument gathered information about household characteristics (length of residency, number in family and ages), preferences for strategies to protect open space and recreation resources in the community, visitation patterns for local resources, and information about needed expansion and/or provision of recreation opportunities. For the complete report, see Bristow et al. (2004).

## 1.2 Background

The Massachusetts Community Preservation Act (CPA), signed September 14, 2000 (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2003), allows communities to establish a funding mechanism dedicated to open space, historic preservation, and affordable housing. True to the New England philosophy, local citizens must vote to adopt the Act to make it effective in their town, all decisions are local and are administered by a committee of local people subject to local comment and approval, and local citizens may repeal the act if they feel it is not working as they expected.

Housing in Massachusetts is an expensive commodity and the CPA is designed to improve the availability of affordable housing (Kotval, 2004). This goal, along with historic preservation, is enhanced once open space acquisition/preservation is included in the mix (de Brun, 2007). While the vast majority of permanently protected open space in Massachusetts is found in the sparsely populated western third of the state, pockets of growing residential communities exist here as well. Thus smart growth and the protection of open space land are essential to preserving the region’s rural character and high quality of life. Southwick is at a good stage to explore the potential advantages of open space protection; if all of the available space in town were developed to the extent permitted by current zoning, the population could more than triple to more than 29,000 (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2004)

Southwick voted to adopt the CPA on November 5, 2002, by a slim margin of 51.9 percent (Union News, 2002). Question 4 on the ballot asked voters to support a 3-percent property tax surcharge to fund the CPA. The first \$100,000 of property value is exempt from this surcharge.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.0 METHODS

We used a random telephone survey to collect information about the case study. We compared

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<sup>1</sup>Other Massachusetts communities that are considering adoption of the CPA are invited to read *An Introduction to the Community Preservation Act* (Sweetzer, 2004).

the survey data to demographic data from a sample of other communities in Massachusetts. We used tests of association and significance to analyze the characteristics of communities that have voted to accept the CPA.

The 892 total survey calls attempted to reach 26.8 percent of Southwick's 3,318 households (2000 Census). The sample size of 251 is 7.6 percent of the town's population.

We hypothesized that communities of like socio-demographic characteristics are more likely to adopt the CPA. As part of our analysis, we calculated a measure of environmental awareness by asking people whether or not they would support specific land conservation efforts as outlined by Ward (2001). This "green measure" was based on the following questions:

Would you:

- a. Vote for strengthening zoning/development restrictions on wetlands and floodplains?
- b. Vote for town supported land acquisitions?
- c. Sell or donate land to the town?
- d. Donate money to buy land?
- e. Vote for a tax increase specifically for open space preservation?
- f. Vote for a tax on real estate sales in Southwick to establish a land bank to fund town purchases of farmland or open space?

### 3.0 SURVEY RESULTS

A large majority of survey participants (82.1 percent) said that they supported the idea of strengthening zoning and development laws in the community to protect wetlands and floodplains. A majority (71.3 percent) also supported the acquisition of land to preserve open space. Only 48.6 percent, however, said that they would sell and/or donate land to the town. About 52 percent of respondents said that they would donate money and 37.5 percent would support increasing taxes to preserve open space. Almost 53 percent of respondents were in favor of creating a real estate tax to establish a land bank. It should be noted that the acceptance of the real estate tax in our

survey mirrors the CPA election results that occurred a year later (51.9 percent voted in favor of adopting the CPA).

A two-step cluster analysis determined the breakpoint between environmental-minded or "green" households and nongreen households; survey respondents who supported four or more of the six land conservation proposals were considered to be green.

For Southwick residents, we found a significant relationship between the length of residence and greenness (independent samples t-test =  $-1.908$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). In analyzing survey respondents' support of the individual strategies to protect open space, we found only one significant relationship indicating that the aggregate measure of green is a more powerful determinant. Specifically a test of association for the cross tabulation of length of residence and favoring residential growth shows that longer time residents generally oppose additional residential growth (Gamma = 0.213,  $p = 0.05$ ). For example, 27 percent of survey participants have resided in the town for more than 21 years and 69 percent of them opposed residential growth. Among short-time residents (less than 5 years), half favored and half opposed further residential growth.

### 3.1 Adoption of the CPA across Massachusetts

As of autumn 2006, 127 of the 351 communities in Massachusetts had adopted the CPA (see Fig. 1). The towns of Becket, Worthington, Chesterfield, South Hadley, Brimfield, Andover, and West Bridgewater are scheduled to vote on the CPA in the spring of 2008 (Community Preservation Coalition, 2007). For our study, we selected a convenience sample of 50 communities across the state, 25 of which had adopted the CPA and 25 of which had not. Southwick is included in this sample as a community that had adopted the CPA. We collected standard demographic data for each community in the sample.

We used an independent samples t-test to determine if there was a significant difference between communities that adopted the CPA and those that

## Status of Community Preservation Act Adoption

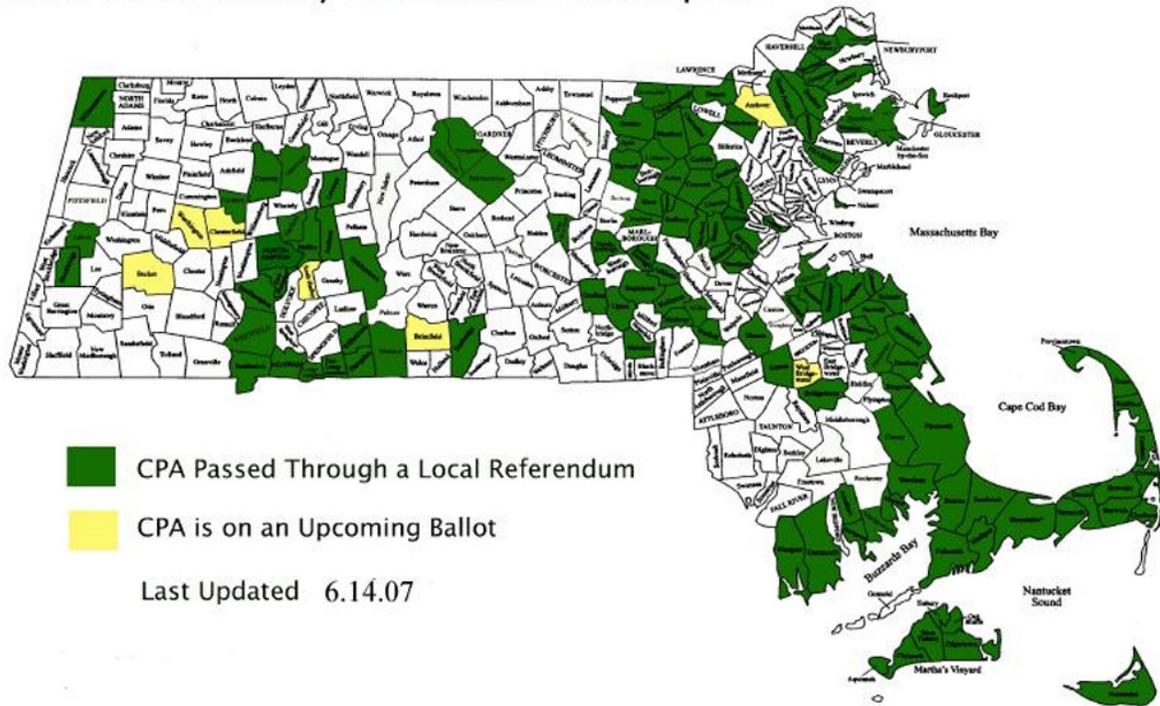


Figure 1.—Current map of CPA communities, 14 June 2007 (Source: Community Preservation Coalition).

had not adopted the CPA based on demographic characteristics. In this analysis, the demographic characteristics of Southwick are found to be similar to those of other communities that have adopted the CPA (see Table 1). We found that, in general, towns with a larger population, higher median income, a larger percentage of college educated citizens, a more diverse population, and more homes owned by the occupants were more likely to have adopted the CPA.

The distribution of citizens who are 35 to 44 years old does not appear to be different in CPA and non-CPA communities but in CPA communities there was a greater standard deviation in people's ages indicating a greater variety in this demographic variable. One might surmise from the total housing units summary that larger communities are more likely to adopt the CPA, but it could also be the case that towns with fewer housing units may have more open space already and therefore do not need to adopt the CPA.

**Table 1.—Statistics of CPA vs. non-CPA adoption communities**

CPA vs. noCPA		Median household income (\$)	% Bachelor's degree or higher	% Age 35-44	% White	% Owner occupied	Total housing units
CPA	Mean	59899.96	26.2	17.8	94.7	72.1	4913.88
	S.D.	15460.03	8.9	3.6	4.4	13.1	3996.66
noCPA	Mean	49377.84	21.4	18.2	96.5	67.2	1704.80
	S.D.	7511.31	8.5	2.1	2.4	16.3	1732.17
Total	Mean	54638.90	23.8	18.0	95.6	69.6	3309.34
	S.D.	13150.86	8.9	2.9	3.6	14.9	3452.58

While Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances (F-test) is only significant for income and total housing units (Table 2), the percent of residents ages 35 to 44 years, and percent white population deserve some additional consideration. The Independent Samples t-test highlights a significant difference for income and total housing units. Higher education and a more diverse population are also worthy of additional consideration. Middle-age and home ownership do not seem to correlate with the adoption of the Community Preservation Act in Massachusetts.

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION

This research has identified some of the characteristics that may define communities that are more likely to support the CPA. Communities with a higher median household income and a larger housing stock appear to be more likely to adopt the CPA. These findings can be used to identify other communities that can be expected to adopt the CPA.

While higher income seems to correlate with communities that are more likely to adopt the CPA, the large standard deviation in this variable across communities (s.d. = \$15,000) indicates that towns with widely varying median incomes will adopt the CPA. Statewide, the average household income was \$68,437. Therefore our study may under-sample communities that have higher incomes.

Our sample may also misrepresent the educational attainment across Massachusetts. Approximately 33 percent of the state’s population has a bachelor’s degree or higher; the majority do not have a 4-year college degree. In our sample, the CPA communities had a larger percentage of college educated citizens

(26 percent compared to 21 percent in non-CPA communities) but this variable was not significant in our t-test.

Our cohort of 35 to 44 year olds is the modal group in the state – that is, 16.7 percent or >1,000,000 state residents are 35 to 44 years old. Future studies should consider the age characteristics of CPA versus non-CPA communities. For example would a community with a larger elderly population be more or less likely to support the CPA? Recall that in our case study, length of residence was inversely related to a preference for residential growth.

It appears that towns with a slightly more diverse population are more likely to vote for the CPA. One might speculate that this variable is actually a surrogate for an urban vs. rural measure: rural communities may be more likely to be more ethnically homogeneous.

Homeowners may be more willing to vote for the CPA according to our descriptive statistics, but this variable was not found to be significant in our t-test. However, there is less variation among the group of communities that had adopted the CPA. Massachusetts has recently lost population, in part, due to the high cost of living. While the CPA can provide for affordable housing, people who need affordable housing may not be around to vote for it.

Finally, our measure of population density was based on total household units. Large towns appear to be more willing to adopt the CPA, although there is a great variation (standard deviation) in the number of housing units in those communities. This may suggest, contrary to what Hamin et al. (2006) found, that

**Table 2.—Independent samples test**

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.
Median household income	7.40	0.009	3.06	48	0.004
% Bachelor’s degree or higher	0.51	0.477	1.92	48	0.061
% Age 35-44 yr	3.25	0.078	-0.50	48	0.623
% White	3.31	0.075	-1.83	48	0.073
% Owner occupied	0.75	0.392	1.16	48	0.252
Total housing units	10.76	0.002	3.68	48	0.001

towns with fewer homes may not have the interest or motivation to vote on a measure to enhance open space since it may not be viewed as a priority.

Open space, as Benton MacKaye (1921) envisioned, provides a mechanism for smart growth to address urban sprawl, while enhancing needed habitat for wildlife. The M&M Trail found on the eastern edge of Southwick represents one such “dam” to encroaching urban sprawl. Additional greenways in the area would benefit the native wildlife. While some research suggests that statewide initiatives such as the CPA might have questionable value in mitigating sprawl, any proposal can yield some success (Anthony, 2004).

Given the rural nature of Southwick and many other New England communities, the potential conversion of farmlands to housing developments needs immediate attention. Protecting viewsapes is one possible tool since “farmscapes” are one of the factors that attract new people to the area.

Finally, Figure 2 shows one agricultural vista of the 180-acre Brzoska Farm along Coes Hills Road in Southwick. CPA funding provided the needed matching money to purchase an agricultural preservation restriction (APR) on the farm in 2003 thereby preserving this farmscape and the land’s agricultural character for future generations to enjoy. Such landscapes still exist even in Gottman’s Megalopolis.



Figure 2.—Brzoska Farm, Southwick. A viewshed protected by the CPA (Source: Author, June 2007).

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