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Needham Community Preservation Committee seeks \$4.3 million

The Community Preservation Committee has tentatively identified \$4.3 million to recommend for appropriation at Town Meeting relative to multiple projects to improve parks and other recreational assets in town, plus one affordable housing project.

The \$4.3 million appropriation from the Community Preservation Fund, which draws from a town tax surcharge and state matching funds, would be one of the largest single-year investments ever, second only to 2009, when the fund was used to help finance an \$18 million renovation of Town Hall.

If Town Meeting signs off in May, the fund would dole out \$1 million in design funds for renovating Rosemary Pool; \$2.3 million in construction funds for two separate improvement projects at Eastman Conversation Area and the Newman Athletic Fields; and \$510,000 in construction funds for improvements at Mills Field.

Some of the smaller projects would include \$30,000 to improve a canoe launch on the Charles River near South Street and Dedham Avenue, and \$10,000 for the Student Conservation Association to create a trail loop in the northwest portion of Ridge Hill Reservation, near the Esker Trail.

When consulted on Feb. 10, selectmen expressed support for all projects under consideration except one: a request for \$400,000 to support construction in the downtown of an eight-unit residential development with two affordable units.

Selectmen John Bulian and Matt Borrelli said they opposed including the project, while Moe Handel and Dan Matthews expressed concerns and asked for more information.

Bulian said he couldn't support using that much taxpayer money to support a private development that would yield only two affordable units, especially given the 400-unit affordable housing development possibly coming soon to Needham Crossing, plus other smaller affordable projects potentially on the horizon.

Borrelli said he didn't think the fund had ever given money to a for-profit developer for such purposes.

The Community Preservation Committee has final say on what gets put before Town Meeting, a decision it will make sometime after a public hearing scheduled for March 11.

The committee is also considering an appropriation of up to \$100,000 to ensure that construction on the Bay Colony Rail Trail is able to proceed this year.

The project is already moving forward using privately raised funds and state money; this appropriation would serve as a safety net in case construction costs are higher than expected, according to Park and Recreation Director Patricia Carey.

The one application for funds the committee chose not to move forward would have renovated a 107-year-old piano at the high school. Carey said the School Committee didn't provide enough documentation about the historic nature of the piano aside from its age.

As always, the committee will seek an appropriation of a still-undetermined amount to be used to purchase any open space that may become available in the next year.

Carey, the staff liaison to the committee, said the town was still waiting to hear about the size of the state's match for fiscal year 2016. The match has waived from as low as 26 to as high as 67 percent in the past seven years.

Carey said the town finance director assumed a match of 20 percent when budgeting ahead.

There is a public hearing on the proposed appropriations on March 11 at 7:30 p.m. at Town Hall.