



TOWN HALL
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DATE: May 2, 2016

TO: Town Meeting

FROM: David Ziomek, Assistant Town Manager

RE: **ARTICLE 20. Amend Prior Community Preservation Act Authorization
(Community Preservation Act Committee)**

The Town of Amherst has sought grant funding in recent years to rehabilitate the 'North Common', a section of the Town Common in downtown. The North Common is located at the geographic center of the Town, surrounded by downtown stores and shops and used by residents and visitors alike. See image below.



The North Common is more like an urban park with a paved pathway, shade trees, benches, planters, 1904 Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) Fountain, and seating walls around trees. The North Common is also surrounded by restaurants and shops with dense residential neighborhoods nearby. It experiences heavy use from downtown workers, local residents and visitors who picnic, sightsee, and attend special events like the Amherst Farmer's Market, Puerto Rican flag-raising, and Lighting of the Merry Maple in the winter.

With these attributes in mind, the Town applied to the Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Grant Program in 2013 and 2015. The goal was to seek funding that would rehabilitate and modernize the North Common to provide the community with a more flexible, programmable space that preserved and highlighted the historic integrity of a landscape that is central to Amherst's civic and social core. And this remains the goal and commitment of the Town today.

Although the Town's PARC grant applications were competitive, the project did not qualify for funding. The rehabilitation of the Town Common is not an eligible project for many grant programs because of its unique history and character as an original Town Common that is part of the public way; it is not a park or a piece of property and it is not used for active recreation. The PARC grant program is targeted more to active recreation projects. For instance, the Town has been awarded PARC grants to restore War Memorial Pool and the pool at Mill River Recreation Area.

As part of the PARC grant requirements, communities must have an affirmative vote of Town Meeting or City Council that authorizes the full project cost and also identifies the source of local matching funds. The PARC grant reimburses communities after the project is complete. Amherst's reimbursement rate for the PARC grant is 70%, meaning that after expending the total project cost, the State reimburses the Town 70% of the funds, up to a maximum reimbursement amount of \$400,000. The Town's 2015 PARC grant application, submitted in July 2015, had a cost estimate of approximately \$590,000 to rehabilitate the North Common, with a local match of approximately \$190,000 from Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds and \$400,000 reimbursed by the PARC grant. The CPA Committee recommend this funding amount to the 2015 Special Fall Town Meeting, which voted affirmatively to authorize the project cost and the use of \$190,000 of CPA funds as a local match. This vote and the allocation of funding, however, was contingent upon the Town being awarded the PARC grant.

The Town did not know the results of its grant application at the time of the 2015 Special Fall Town Meeting. It is now clear that the rehabilitation and modernization of the North Common is unlikely to receive PARC grant funding. The Town remains committed to restoring the Common as it is the centerpiece of the downtown; it is an important and much needed undertaking that should continue. Article 20 would help Amherst continue this project.

Article 20 asks two things of Town Meeting:

- 1) To appropriate the \$190,000 to be used for rehabilitation of the North Common without the funds being contingent upon a PARC grant. This funding was approved in Fall 2015 and was set aside at that time, so it was not factored into this year's CPA funding. Voting to approve the \$190,000 does not take away any funds from this year's proposals.
- 2) To authorize the Town (Select Board, Town Manager, Historical Commission and/or LSSE Commission) to continue to apply for grants, gifts, or other funding to help rehabilitate the North Common. The Town may seek funding sources other than the PARC grant to help cover the costs of the project.

The \$190,000 would allow the Town to begin improvements to the North Common. The funds would be spent on completing the design and specifications by a professional architect with input from the community. The plan is to have a comprehensive design that is constructed in phases. The first phase, which would also be paid for by the \$190,000 would include improvements to the drainage and utilities, soil compaction, erosion, internal walkways and accessibility issues.

In future years the Town would seek CPA funds in the range of \$300-350,000 to complete the modernization of the North Common. Phase II would include the installation of plaza(s), additional seating and decorative lighting, planting and landscaping, an interpretive area around the WCTU Fountain, and other elements identified through the public design process that would attract families and residents.