

OPINION: Inaction on Warren Woods could cost Ashland

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Ashland TAB

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ASHLAND — After reading Mr. Mitchell's article, "Town must consider CPA's role" (Ashland TAB, Feb. 4), I am confused as to what his intended takeaway is for the reader.

There are several circumstances at play in the potential sale of the Warren Woods, and we as a town need to understand that inaction is equally as undesirable as inappropriate action.

An important part of any decision-making process is the need to identify major driving factors. In my opinion, this situation is primarily driven by time and funding. Neither of these is limitless.

Without the luxury of time to exhaust all possible investigations and a crystal ball to see the funding future, we must endeavor to narrow the scope of uncertainty and make the best possible decisions we can, using the information we have available now:

- We know right now that we do not set the deadline – this is up to Northeastern.
- We know right now that CPA is available to us as a community.
- We know right now that open space, historical preservation, recreation and affordable housing are the only legal expenditures for CPA funds.
- We know right now that this property has potential to satisfy three of these four requirements, far exceeding basic requirements for a CPA project.
- We know right now our current infrastructure is strained.
- We know right now our operating budget does not have the means to fund projects like athletic fields and open space.

Mr. Mitchell mentions leveraging funds. CPA funds, by their existence, are leveraged with a state match not less than 5 percent. As Mr. Mitchell pointed out:

"The last year that we received 100 percent matching funds was 2007. In 2008, Ashland received a 78 percent match and in 2009, a 43 percent match. This year, the match as projected by the Department of Revenue is estimated to be 28 percent."

This equates to roughly \$1.5 million in free money since 2007. This funding can be further leveraged with other communities, through state and federal grants or with private organizations.

Mr. Mitchell mentions the proposed SB90 amendments to CPA funds. He is 100 percent accurate. SB90 contains some potentially beneficial language for towns participating in CPA.

If SB90 passes, it will "allow communities to use CPA funds for capital improvements to recreation facilities not originally purchased with CPA money." This significantly increases the inventory of areas qualified for improvements.

If SB90 passes, it also seeks to stabilize the state matching funds at a minimum of 75 percent. A very rough estimate places this 75 percent state match at \$450,000 annually.

I urge you to consider the beneficial impact of increased flexibility and an increased state match on the future of Ashland's CPA funds.

Please also consider the impact if SB90 does not pass. Ashland can not use CPA funds to improve recreational facilities not originally acquired or created with CPA money. This has been reinforced in a recent Supreme Judicial Court ruling here in Massachusetts – Jeffrey Seideman and others vs. City of Newton.

Purchasing Warren Woods with CPA funds provides access to a funding source which can be used specifically for these types of improvements, at a location well suited to this type of development.

Mr. Mitchell mentions Ashland's recent accomplishments utilizing CPA funds. I commend the town for its foresight in accomplishing these improvements and urge it to continue.

If our current operating budget was able to fund the town's needs for athletic fields, open space and recreation facilities, we would not be having this debate. CPA funds are specifically set up as an avenue for cities and towns to resolve these issues.

If we wait long enough, we will not have to worry about what to do with Warren Woods, what Warren Woods means to the future of the town, what needs it may satisfy, how it relates to CPA and what problems we may have avoided with a purchase. The Town of Ashland will only have to contend with funding the increased services associated with developing this property.

The sad reality is we will be required to do more with less on a larger scale. I assure you CPA funds will not be an option for these needs.

Clearly I want to save the Warren Woods. I see multiple uses and benefits. The potential that site offers to the future of Ashland is not quantifiable in dollars and cents.

More importantly, it is not a decision which can be made by me, the Board of Selectmen or our town manager. It is a decision which needs to be made by the people of Ashland. I urge you to join me in letting our decision makers know how you feel.

As a community, once we make this decision, we can get behind a program to best deal with the needs which arise from whatever decision is made.