



David B. Cohen
Mayor

City of Newton, Massachusetts
Office of the Mayor

Telephone
(617) 796-1100

Telefax
(617) 796-1113

E-mail
Dcohen@ci.newton.ma.us

Eligibility of Newton City Hall and War Memorial Preservation Projects for Grants from Other Funding Sources

The Public Buildings Preservation Task Force has proposed three projects related to the preservation of Newton City Hall and War Memorial: restoration of original, deteriorating windows in City Hall and the War Memorial, completion of finishes on the reconstructed City Hall balustrade and the original War Memorial cupola, and restoration of lighting with replicas of original fixtures in the public corridors of City Hall. The first two of the three projects proposed for MCPA funding would be eligible for matching funding from the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund (MPPF) administered by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, which is generally limited to exterior projects. However, the schedule for the next round of grant applications (Round X) would require deferring these projects for a year, during which time the deterioration of the windows and loss of energy efficiency would continue. Moreover, the levels of funding that will be available for Round X and subsequent rounds are also unclear at the present time. For these reasons, and others stated below, the Public Buildings Preservation Task Force has concluded that the MPPF is not a viable source of funding for the proposed projects.

According to Carol DiNinno, one of the MHC staff members involved in the MPPF program, city halls in general are given high consideration because of their prominence in the community. City halls that are individually listed on the National and State Registers of Historic Places (rather than as part of historic districts) are given greater consideration, and buildings that have not received MPPF funding previously are given higher consideration than those that have. Newton City Hall meets all of these criteria.

In addition, MPPF funds (which require a minimum 50% owner match) can be matched with CPA funds with the stipulations noted in the attached page from the MPPF Application Instructions. In response to a question raised by the CPA Committee, we have confirmed that MCPA funding does not require Massachusetts Section 254 review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The state share of the funding is considered a give-back of funds coming from local sources initially and therefore the money is characterized as funding from local sources, not the Commonwealth. Accordingly, no review is triggered.

While these factors make MPPF funds seem promising, the timing of the funding, the application process, and the restrictions attached to the funding make this source of funding unattractive. Round X applications are due at MHC on June 27, 2003 with expected award announcement on November 12, 2003 and a construction start date in Spring 2004. The projects currently under consideration could be completed with Newton CPA funding before the award of funds is even announced.

MPPF funding applications are very time consuming to prepare and require substantial documentation of the historic resource and the work to be performed. The city is not in a position to prepare such an application relying solely on current staff or the volunteer efforts of the Task Force. Most significantly, MPPF funding requires that the City sign a preservation restriction on both the exterior and interior of the building, requiring MHC review and approval of all but minor proposed changes. The restrictions would complicate enormously the process by which the city undertakes its preservation and maintenance efforts, as well as future projects contemplated by the Task Force.

1000 Commonwealth Avenue Newton, Massachusetts 02459

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Finally, Ms. DiNinno cautioned that MHC staff is very concerned about reductions in the funding that will be available in the next and subsequent rounds. A substantial number of applications will likely be competing for what is expected to be a small amount of funding.

In summary, the Public Buildings Preservation Task Force will continue to look for sources of funding to support its ongoing preservation planning for City Hall and the War Memorial, but has concluded that reliance on the prospect of MPPF funding, given its risks and burdens, would be unwise.