

[Colrain voters nix CPA, preservation of library busts at Town Meeting](#)

Anthony Cammalleri, Greenfield Recorder

Published: 06-05-2024 4:31 PM Modified: 06-06-2024 7:50 AM

COLRAIN — After lengthy debates, residents voted against putting the Community Preservation Act on the ballot in November and to preserve eight plaster busts of historic figures at the Griswold Memorial Library at Town Meeting Tuesday night.

About 121 voters packed into the Colrain Central School gymnasium for a more than four-hour Town Meeting, voting on 46 separate warrant articles. Among the most thoroughly debated items was a citizen’s petition to levy a 3% CPA property tax surcharge that would leverage state-matching funds and could be used for historic preservation, public open spaces, community housing and recreational land use.

Residents voted 54-52 against the article, with opponents such as Planning Board Member Gregory Olchowski arguing that the burden of five-year taxation – a town has the option to opt out of the CPA every five years after passing it – drastically outweighs the potential benefits of its funding in a small town like Colrain. He noted that ever since the state passed CPA in 2000, the town has voted against it.

“We’ve had CPA at the state level for 24 years, you know why we’ve never did this before? We’re not an urban area,” Olchowski said. “We don’t have affordable housing projects in Colrain. We don’t even have transportation services to deal with that strand of our society that can’t even afford a car – they can’t walk to the grocery store.”

Resident Joe Slowinski also spoke in opposition to the petition and motioned to amend it to remove all tax exemptions, including those for the disabled, elderly and low-income. He said he would prefer to see the town grow through private development, rather than projects funded through taxation and referred to the CPA as adding a layer of “bureaucratic red tape,” that places the burden on taxpayers to prove they qualify for an exemption.

Slowinski’s amendment failed, with CPA proponents such as Planning Board member David Greenberg arguing that opting into the state law would allow the town to fund larger-scale projects, such as the renovation of the Old Brick Meeting House, with state-matched tax dollars.

Resident Jade Mortimer spoke against the amendment, adding that since the exemptions were written in place to provide as much tax relief as possible to those who could not afford it, opting into CPA without tax exemptions would be counter-intuitive.

Mortimer noted that for many portions of the population, such as those living on a fixed income, the town would not be able to afford the tax levy.

“Many of us have parents who have worked 50, 60 years and are on a fixed income. We want to offer an exemption so that they don’t have to pay an additional amount,” Mortimer said. “We have people who have maybe fallen behind or have a disability and can’t work [...] we want to offer an exemption for those people, our neighbors in the community, so that we can all enjoy these positive recreational or restoration projects.”

Library busts petition

Another article that drew engagement was a citizens’ petition, which failed by 55-65 to continue to display eight plaster busts of historical figures at the Griswold Memorial Library.

According to the petition, the busts, which depict George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Julius Caesar, Homer, Christopher Columbus, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ludwig Van Beethoven and Dante Alighieri, were appraised at a combined value of \$12,250.

Library Director Chelsea Jordan-Makely suggested removing the busts from their display in 2021, a choice that, according to a fact sheet compiled by Jordan-Makely and the Library Trustees in February, is being considered for its potential to create funds through the busts’ resale, save valuable library space and make library visitors who are offended by the displays feel comfortable.

Jordan-Makely also noted before Town Meeting that by removing the busts, the library would be working to mitigate the growth of mold and mildew in the building in accordance with findings from a 2020 Northeast Document Conservation Center report. She also explained that the library was putting the monuments at risk of damage by housing them.

“Well-meaning citizens of Colrain tried to take care of these busts and we did more damage than good. I care about these busts, the trustees have shown care for these busts,” Jordan-Makely said.

Slowinski, on the other hand, accused the library of aiming to remove the busts for politically-motivated reasons. He read the library’s “Statement on Social Justice and Equity,” and accused it of being a “political manifesto.”

After Town Meeting voted against the petition, Slowinski voted to amend the town’s \$1.9 million operational budget to cut the library staff line item from \$62,000 to \$32,000. The motion failed.

“These are people that are using their office to pursue their personal political agenda. It has absolutely no place in the library,” Slowinski said. “Christopher Columbus is probably one of the most important people who ever have lived in the history of the world. Now, you may not like him, but you cannot suppress him.”

Jordan-Makely said, contrary to Slowinski's remarks, sensitivity to the figure depicted in the busts is one of many reasons why the library is questioning the monuments.

"There's not one real reason, we are dealing with multiple reasons," Jordan-Makely said. "Our staff are frequently having to deal with people who come to the library and express their very emotional opinions about these figures."

Town Meeting also voted in a number of spending items, such as \$62,133 for the Mohawk Trail School district's capital assessment; \$8,628 for Colrain Central; \$3,637 for Mohawk Trail to upgrade phone systems for enhanced 911 communications; a \$24,000 transfer from the technology stabilization fund to pay for technology-related expenses such as firewall upgrades, a new server room door and locking mechanism, desktop and laptop computer stations.

Other approved articles include funding for a \$80,000 police cruiser, with \$54,251 coming from the Police Stabilization Fund and \$25,749 coming from free cash and a petitioned article to bring the Selectboard, Police Department, and Highway Administration together to study safety enhancement solutions at the intersection of Jacksonville and Main roads.

Anthony Cammalleri can be reached at atacammalleri@recorder.com or 413-930-4429.

Source: <https://www.recorder.com/Colrain-votes-down-CPA-petition-to-preserve-library-busts-55454178>