Cumberland Land Trust raising funds to pay for Mercy Woods Preserve

CUMBERLAND — Twenty-nine years after the Cumberland Land Trust was formed, the organization with a mission to protect the town’s open spaces is launching its first capital campaign.

The fundraising campaign is designed, in part, to pay the Land Trust’s $100,000 portion of the $1.5 million Mercy Woods Preserve deal, members told The Breeze.

The 229-acre Mercy Woods purchase off Wrentham Road is one of the most important milestones the town has seen in preserving its future, say members of the Land Trust, and they expect many in town will get behind their effort to help pay for it.

Land Trust Treasurer Joe Pailthorpe is heading the campaign, saying he and others will rely on plenty of mailings and networking to meet the $100,000 goal. The group has secured $5,500 toward their goal.

Though a recognition event may be held as the campaign draws near its conclusion next fall, the true satisfaction for donors will be knowing they helped save a huge passive recreation resource for current and future generations, said Land Trust President Randy Tuomisto.

This is a huge opportunity, he said, to create a “contiguous 1,000 acres” of open space in the northeast corner of town.

“It’s a huge footprint,” said Land Trust member Frank Matta.

Land Trust member Marcia Green, former editor of The Valley Breeze, said residents will now be
able to walk unimpeded across a significant portion of town. The acquisition of Mercy Woods Preserve will further attract people from bordering Massachusetts into Cumberland, she said. When they come here, they'll likely shop and eat as well.

Those who contribute to this capital campaign will have the pleasure of participating in a legacy of protecting open space, said Pailthorpe. Land Trust members plan to eventually install a sign at the Mercy Woods Preserve property off Wrentham Road giving proper credit to those who make the purchase possible.

The property will be used mostly for hiking and other passive uses, as well as to protect a watershed area providing water to Cumberland and Pawtucket. The purchase approved by town officials will also protect the trees and wildlife on the property, while preventing development of a potential “huge subdivision” in the future, he said. Residential developments “drain budgets versus add to the economy,” he said.

The Land Trust currently offers workshops on a number of topics, and will expand that programming with the purchase of the new property. Land Trust-sponsored hikes and other activities have become quite popular, said leaders of the group.

The Mercy Woods Preserve, as the Land Trust has dubbed it, has more meaning than simple “Mercy Woods,” said Pailthorpe. “Mercy Woods” could just as well be a shopping mall or bed and breakfast, he said.

The Breeze reported in October that the Town Council had signed off on the $1.5 million purchase of Mercy Woods from the Sisters of Mercy. Mayor Bill Murray and his team negotiated the purchase, making sure along the way to set aside 17.5 acres as new dedicated recreation space for future athletic fields.

The Land Trust has finalized two other purchases this year:

• In April, the organization acquired eight acres of property off Scott Road on Lippitt Estates Little Pond. The purchase was for $56,000 and was funded by a Pawtucket Water Supply Board grant of $28,000, a Cumberland open space grant of $20,000, and a Land Trust investment of $8,000. The property was acquired from Fred and Elizabeth Conklin of Lincoln. The acquisition expands the Land Trust’s existing Scott Road property of 53 acres at Otis Smith Farm and Rowbottom Preserve. The acquisition was meant to preserve the pond water flowing to the Arnold Mills reservoir.

• In August, the Land Trust acquired eight acres of land on Nate Whipple Highway from the Cumberland Beagle Club. The $60,000 purchase was funded by a grant from the Pawtucket Water Supply Board of $30,000, a pending Cumberland open space grant request of $20,000, and a Land Trust investment of $10,000. The property expanded the Land Trust’s 148 acres of watershed conservation land along Nate Whipple Highway, protecting water flowing from Sneeoch Pond to the Arnold Mills reservoir.

The mission of the Cumberland Land Trust is always to acquire as much connected property as possible, said Tuomisto. With more connected open space, and planned downloadable maps, “we’re making it easier for people to go hiking,” he said. New trails will be of varying lengths and ability, he said, but all will provide great opportunities to take in the outdoors and local wildlife.

“It'll be more of a New Hampshire experience,” said Tuomisto.

The Sisters of Mercy were predisposed to preserving the property, he added.

The capital campaign is technically for $200,000, with half of that amount being sought to purchase other properties on the Land Trust’s radar in the near future, said leaders of the organization. Some of that money will also go toward work needed at Mercy Woods.

The Pawtucket Water Supply Board continues to be a great partner with the Land Trust, said its leaders. By having the Land Trust buy up properties, it saves the water supplier from having to pay taxes on the land.

Members of the Land Trust plan to take measures to prevent use of ATVs at Mercy Woods. The best way to discourage use by off-roading vehicles is to encourage frequent use by hikers.

For more on the Cumberland Land Trust and how to contribute to the campaign, visit www.cumberlandlandtrust.org.
The map above shows the area of the Mercy Woods Preserve, a 229-acre parcel the town of Cumberland is purchasing with help from the Cumberland Land Trust and other groups.

Note: The orange outline, excluding the Mt. Saint Rita nursing home, is the 229-acres to be preserved.

Note: The Pawtucket Water Supply Board own 650-acres at the Diamond Hill reservoir, (pond plus land). Not including Arnold Mills reservoir.