Cumberland to purchase 229 acres of open space

This map, with Wrentham Road at left, shows the basic breakdown of the town of Cumberland’s planned purchase of 229 acres of property from the Sisters of Mercy. The Mount St. Rita Health Centre is in blue, and other properties not included are in white. The 211.5 acres in green would be kept as open conservation space, while the 17.5 acres shown in yellow would be fields for town athletic teams. The property is located not far from Diamond Hill Park.

Town would carve out area for athletic fields

By ETHAN SHOREY, Valley Breeze Managing Editor
CUMBERLAND – Officials are in final negotiations on the purchase of 229 acres of open space property in town, says Mayor Bill Murray, a significant step, he says, in protecting the future of the town.

This would be Cumberland’s largest open space purchase in more than 50 years, said Murray, and “is one of the biggest things we’ve pulled off.” A purchase agreement has been three years in the making, he said.

The property, owned by the Sisters of Mercy and situated alongside the Mercymount Country Day School on Wrentham Road, is located in the far northeast corner of Cumberland, near the border with Wrentham, Mass.

Murray doesn’t intend to make the mistake he says was made with the Cumberland Monastery, where restrictions prevent use for town purposes. He plans to set aside 17.5 acres of the acres for active recreation space, to be used for development of athletic fields.

“That’s my intent, because we need them badly,” he said. “We’re going to do that for the kids.”

At the right time, said Murray, officials would design adequate parking to accommodate traffic to the fields. The planned field space, located at the end of Highland View Road next to the Mount St. Rita Health Centre, is already grassy and mostly clear of trees.

Buying the property and maintaining 211.5 acres of it as conservation land prevents it from being sold and used for less desirable purposes, said the mayor.

“If we don’t buy it, then it could go into any other development,” he said. “It works hand in hand.”

Murray plans to wrap up negotiations on a purchase and sale agreement with the Sisters of Mercy this week and will bring a finalized proposal to the Town Council next Wednesday, Oct. 18, for a closed-door session. The council would then vote on the proposal in open session.

The price tag for the property has yet to be finalized, said Murray. He wasn’t offering up estimates, but said the town has a number of partners in the purchase, including the Pawtucket Water Supply Board, which has interest in protecting the water on the property, the Cumberland Land Trust, the Champlin Foundations, and the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

Murray said he took DEM Director Janet Coit on a tour of the property two weeks ago to show show her what the town is trying to acquire through an open space grant from the agency.
Planning and Community Development Director Jonathan Stevens has been doing a great job spearheading the effort to acquire the property, according to Murray.

“This open space purchase stands to be the second largest in the town’s history, the first being the 270-acre Monastery purchase in 1968,” said Stevens.

Conserving the land has many important benefits, said Stevens, including:

- Protecting the drinking water quality of the Diamond Hill Reservoir;
- Preventing the development of a large residential subdivision;
- Ensuring public access to hiking trails;
- Preserving a wildlife habitat;
- And creating educational and active recreation opportunities.

Several parcels on the Sisters of Mercy property are excluded from the purchase, including the Mount St. Rita Health Centre, an administration building, the Mercymount Convent, Mercycrest (a house), and the Mercy Lodge dormitory.

The entire property is owned by the Sisters of Mercy Northeast Community.

Catholic Sisters of Mercy serve in schools, hospitals, parishes, retreat centers, and in social ministries across the Northeast, addressing causes and effects of violence, racism and injustice. The Sisters commit their “lives to God and resources to serve, advocate and pray for those in need around the world,” according to their website.

The Northeast Community has its central offices at the Cumberland property. The group is one of the six communities that comprise the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.