Town wins $400,000 grant to help buy Mercy Woods

By NICOLE DOTZENROD, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

CUMBERLAND – The town has landed the big prize in its plan to buy the Mercy Woods Preserve in the northeast corner of town, securing a $400,000 open space grant from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

Local officials received word that they’d received the full grant award Tuesday.

"For the future of Cumberland, this, by far, is one of the most important long-range acquisitions made for all residents and children of (the town)," said Mayor Bill Murray in a statement. He thanked local and state officials, including the town's General Assembly delegation, for all of their work on the award.

Other funding sources toward the $1.5 million purchase of 229 acres of land are:

• $405,000 coming from the town of Cumberland;

• $300,000 from the Pawtucket Water Supply Board;

• $100,000 from the Cumberland Land Trust;

• And a proposed $295,000 grant coming from a Champlin Foundation grant applied for by the Cumberland Land Trust Foundation.

On Jan. 31, the Cumberland Planning Board unanimously approved an amendment to its preliminary plan changing some boundary lines within the Mercy Woods Preserve conservation area.

The town is in the process of purchasing the 229 acres of land at Wrentham Road, Highland View Road and Sumner Brown Road from the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Northeast Community.
The Sisters will retain their administrative building, Mercy Lodge and a house on Wrentham Road. At the center of the property, the Mount St. Rita Center will remain owned and operated by a private entity. The purchase would preserve 94 percent of the Mercy Northeast property as open space, with 7 percent of it used for active recreation.

Once the final pieces fall into place for funding, the town and the Sisters will move forward with a purchase and sale agreement.

Officials applied last November for the $400,000 RIDEM grant, in addition to a $295,000 grant from The Champlin Foundation. The Pawtucket Water Supply Board also has an interest in the project, contributing $300,000 for protection of water in the area. The Cumberland Land Trust, which will manage the property with the help of the Cumberland Highway Department, is in the process of raising money toward its contribution toward the property.

RIDEM’s open space grants do not allow for active recreation space, so the Sisters of Mercy land was recently subdivided into three lots, with a new 17.5-acre plot reserved for active recreation space, which the town will purchase in a separate transaction.

The Sisters of Mercy purchased the first tract of land in 1913 and have since made the property a place of prayer, education and service to those in need, in addition to a sanctuary for plant and animal life.

Also at the Jan. 31 meeting, the Planning Board approved an amendment to the preliminary plan for a five-acre solar farm off West Wrentham Road.

The property owner, Windy Acres, is seeking to lease its land to solar providers Sol Systems after an initial deal with Bella Energy fell through last year.

Director of Planning and Community Development Jonathan Stevens said the project is not expected to significantly impact surrounding scenery or neighbors.

“The board has always felt that this is a site that lent itself to solar development,” he said. The area slated for solar development is surrounded by hundreds of acres of hayfields. The site falls away from the road and drops off into a system of wetlands to the back.

“If it’s (sited) away from the road, the visual impact of the five acres will be significantly mitigated because of the distance to any public visual access,” Stevens said. Running perpendicular to the site is a north-south stream, helping to create a wall of greenery.

In addition, as part of a town ordinance passed last year concerning solar development, the project would require a 20-foot vegetative buffer specifically designed for the site. Planning Board members call it “Harry Potter’s cloak of invisibility.”
The amendment approved by the Planning Board was in keeping with a RIDEM request to move the access driveway to the western side of the property, off West Wrentham Road. Stakeholders will present their final project plan to the council in the coming months. If approved, Stevens expects work to begin by the spring or summer of this year.

Log in or register to post comments

Great News!

Permalink | Submitted by thibodeau on Tue, 2018-02-13 19:07

Team Win Mercy!

Log in or register to post comments