

# **Community Preservation Act Proposal**

## **August 31, 2012**

Conservation and Planning  
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### **Ricci Project**

#### **Purpose of Acquisition**

For many years the Town of Amherst has worked with landowners, state agencies, land trusts, and the towns of Granby, Hadley, Belchertown and South Hadley to preserve the Mt. Holyoke Range, much of which is now the Mount Holyoke Range State Park, operated by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. The park is known for miles of beautiful trails, scenic vistas, and habitat for many common and uncommon animals and plants. Significant parcels still remain vulnerable to development, including the 20 acres of open space on the Ricci Property.

Located on the southerly side of 615 Bay Road, the Ricci property is one of the few large unprotected parcels along the Holyoke Range. The northern half of the property is open field that transitions to a forested hillside on the southern portion. State and Town owned conservation land directly abuts the property to the south and east, respectively, while much of its land area is considered prime and priority habitat for rare and endangered species. The Baby Carriage Brook, a major local tributary of the Fort River, flows through the southeast corner of the property and then runs parallel just east of the parcel boundary. Due the steep topography on the southern portion of the property, it is highly visible from Bay Road and many other locations in Amherst, such that its permanent preservation will not only protect habitat and water resources, it will preserve the forested and agricultural viewsheds.

#### **Description of Property**

The Ricci property is comprised of nearly 22 acres. The Town would purchase approximately 20 acres for conservation purposes and exclude 2 acres that would encompass the house and all outbuildings. The 20-acre site proposed for conservation has 384 feet of frontage along Bay Road—a paved town road with electricity, telephone and municipal water. Bay Road is also a designated scenic road, protected under MGL Ch. 40 Sec. 15C. This designation has helped Bay Road maintain its agricultural, rural character by preventing egregious removal of shade trees or stone walls within the public way.

Bay Road was also part of the Native American trail systems, linking seasonal settlements west to the Connecticut River and east to other settlements and hunting grounds. In 1716, the Hadley settlers established a roadway system directly over this trail, enabling settlers to begin moving into the area. Although there were no permanent settlements in Amherst until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Bay Road Corridor is a major area for archeological importance. The residence on the property has been inventoried with the

Massachusetts Historical Commission (AMH.579) as the Charles Goodalls House ca. 1870. Mr. Goodall was a Civil War veteran and owner of the woodworking mill in Nuttingville nearby on Bay Road.

The north half of the property is cleared, consisting of a former apple orchard. Most of the trees have been removed so that the area is mowed. It remains relatively level a few hundred feet back from the road and then begins to slope upward; this is the base of the slope of the Holyoke Range. The field extends up the slope to the forest edge, at which point there are almost 180 degree panoramic views to the north and northeast. Beyond the forest edge to the south the property becomes ever steeper and remains forested.

### **Conservation Context**

The most distinguishing geological feature in Amherst is the Holyoke Mountain Range on the Town's southern border. The Massachusetts Scenic Landscape Inventory describes the surrounding area as follows,

*"The Pioneer Valley covers the largest area of relatively unspoiled scenery in the Commonwealth. The valley contains large expanses of flat farmland, dotted with old tobacco barns in an east-west orientation. The steep-sided hills, such as North and South Sugarloaf mountains, Mount Toby, Mount Warner, and the Mount Holyoke Range, all afford impressive views of this productive landscape from above. This area probably contains more vestiges of the 18th century landscape than anywhere else in the Commonwealth."*

Amherst and its surrounding communities are fortunate to have remained relatively unspoiled and have rolling farmland still in production, all of which contributes a great deal to its scenic qualities. The Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan (ORSP) emphasizes the importance of protecting viewsheds in the community, especially those along the Holyoke Range.

The OSRP also notes that the Mount Holyoke Range is one of the largest blocks of continuous forest in Amherst (more than 1,000 acres adjoining an additional 5,000 acres in the three adjacent towns). The uninterrupted forest cover provides a significant corridor for wildlife migration, including migratory birds. The Ricci property, included in this corridor, has many attributes that are identified by the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program: priority habitats of rare species, biomap 1 core habitat, scenic landscape, and nearly 75 percent of the property designated as Biomap 2 Critical Natural Landscape.

### **Proposed Uses**

The Town proposes to purchase the property for conservation purposes, allowing passive, informal recreation in the form of walking/hiking trails and a scenic overlook with the possibility of interpretive material to describe the historic land uses and settlement patterns of Bay Road.

The Town is proposing to install a gravel parking area on the property's frontage along Bay Road that will direct users to an existing farm road that heads southerly through the property to the higher elevations. The trail will culminate in a scenic overlook area that can be used for picnicking and bird watching. There is a possibility to extend a connecting trail to Baby Carriage Brook to the east, however, this involves a stream crossing and navigation of topography.

### **Level of Development/Threat to the Property**

The property is in an estate owned by two members of the Ricci family who do not reside on the property or live in Amherst. Although the family has committed the property to conservation, the

relatively robust housing market in town is an enticing option for any owner of a large parcel, especially when it is in a highly desirable residential area. As the appraisal indicates, there is ample frontage and acreage to develop four single-family house lots from the Ricci property. With municipal water on the street and sewer within 300' of the property, it is a concern of the Town that as the market demand for home sites and housing increases, the owners will seek to develop the property. The adjacent properties to the west succumbed to a similar fate in the early 1980's as a larger property was subdivided into two large single-family house lots.

### **Project Schedule**

Planning staff have submitted a LAND Grant proposal to the Department of Conservation Services (see attached budget) with the expectation that the town will know whether that will be funded by the start of Town Meeting. If this project is recommended by the CPAC and funds allocated a closing would be scheduled for January/February 2013.

After purchasing the property, the Town will need to complete the baseline documentation and installation of the parking and picnic area. Depending on the weather and site conditions, these tasks may not be completed until May.

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## PROJECT FUNDING

### Summary

An appraisal was conducted by O'Connor Real Estate Associates, Inc. in June of 2012 and established the property's market value of \$500,000. This figure reflects a fee simple purchase of approximately 20 acres.

### Local Funding

Town staff is confident this project will receive PARC Grant funding as it is endorsed by the Conservation Commission and achieves many of the major goals of the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP).

\$500,000	Appraisal Value
\$ 1,850	Title Search
\$ 3,000	Survey
\$ 150	Recording Fees
\$505,000	<i>Total Eligible Project Cost (CPA)</i>
\$ 7,500	<i>One-time fee to Local Land Trust to monitor CR</i>
<b>\$512,500</b>	<b>TOTAL PROJECT COST</b>
\$353,500	LAND Grant (70% reimbursement)
<b>\$151,500</b>	<b>Amherst CPA Funding</b>
\$505,000	<i>Total Eligible Project Cost</i>
\$ 7,500	<i>One-time fee to Local Land Trust to monitor CR</i>
<b>\$512,500</b>	<b>TOTAL PROJECT COST</b>