

# Epheta Neighborhood Park

## Conservation and Management Plan

2017-22



Town of Cumberland  
William S. Murray, Mayor

Cumberland Planning Department  
Cumberland Recreation Department

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## Executive Summary

Epheta Park is a Town-owned 21 ½ acre woodland area in Cumberland Hills. Overlooking the Blackstone River Valley, it is the site of an historic American Industrial Revolution rooming house and later church and retreat complex that was destroyed by fire sometime in the 1980's. The Epheta House property was acquired by the Town from the Oblate Fathers in 1998 to prevent development of a 160-unit, residential subdivision.

Between 1960 and 1990, Cumberland Hill, the abutting neighborhood north of Epheta Park, was almost completely developed with more than 950 single-family houses on lots averaging about 4500 sq. ft. each. Residents are largely families with young children, in need of an active recreational site in the neighborhood. On any given sunny afternoon children are playing soccer in the streets.

The highest value of development of Epheta Park would be to retain the current trail system while developing a new one-acre neighborhood playground and multi-use playfield off Branch Avenue. Over time, that playground area could be expanded if needed.

It would also be desirable as a second priority to create a six car gravel parking lot off Manville Hill Road for access to the hiking trail system from the south.

To that end, the Town of Cumberland should seek a \$100,000 RIDEM grant, matched with a \$100,000 in Town funds to install the following Phase I improvements: multi-use play field; and sensory playground equipment designed for children of ages 1-8. Assuming the grant request is successful, the Phase I developed could be completed by the summer of 2018.



## Site History

In the mid-nineteenth century, a large textile mill was built at Manville on the site of an earlier grist mill. In fact, Cumberland Hill at that time was the seat of town government until 1868. With its high topographic profile and cool breezes, by the late nineteenth century Cumberland Hill became a small summer resort.

The Manville mill was mostly destroyed by a fire in the 1950s. Its ruins and one mill building still in use on Flat Street remain, along with rows of well-preserved double mill houses on Boyle and Mount Pleasant View avenues, overlooking the mill site.

Epheta House (c. 1900) was a large, two and-one-half-story, hip-roof, Late Victorian Colonial Revival structure with an irregular plan. It was built as a boarding house for the Manville Mill and at a later point served as a “Roman Catholic retreat house”. The structure occupied a spacious, well-landscaped tract overlooking the Blackstone Valley. The elevation overlooking the river was symmetrical, with a semi-enclosed porch. The rear, drive elevation had a central angled bay attached to an angled wing. The site subsequently served as a church and retreat facilities of the Franco-American Oblate Fathers. By the 1980’s, these buildings had been destroyed by fire, and today only foundation and asphalt surface remnants remain.

*(RIHPHC 1998; Cumberland by the Blackstone, 250 Years of Heritage, 2004 draft Epheta House Conservation and Management Plan)*



1972

Earlier aerial photo shows the Oblate Fathers church and retreat facility. About half the property had been cleared.

Later photo shows absence of interior roadway and structures and a significant increase in woodland area.



1997

The Epheta House property was acquired by the Town from the Oblate Fathers in 1998 to prevent development of a 160-unit, residential subdivision.

The Town subsequently subdivided a four acre parcel which today is the site of the Epheta House affordable housing complex, built in 2011. It is located on the north side of Manville Hill Road abutting Epheta Park.



The remainder of the site is open woodland, with some surface asphalt remaining in the southern area. In 2013 a fire broke out on the property, with the forest floor smoldering for several days afterward. That same year, the Town applied for a \$75,000 grant (with a \$75,000 match) to create open multi-use play field and looped walking path to expand recreation opportunities at existing undeveloped town park property. The grant request was unsuccessful.

### Property Description

The lot is 21.42 acres of woodlands and fields. This photo is from 2008, prior to construction of the new Epheta Complex. Within the park there are two relatively flat areas potentially suitable for playgrounds and or multi-use playfields. The park is laced with well-developed hiking trails (frequently used by ATV's as well.)

The majority of the Epheta House property is deciduous forested uplands. The property contains the foundation remains of the Oblate Fathers church and retreat facilities. Also located on the property are trails and a series of shrines built into the hills and steep slopes. The property has areas of old pasture and abandoned agricultural fields, now grown up with invasive plants such as Multi-flora Rose and Autumn Olive. A sewer interceptor runs parallel to the property's western property line.



A one-acre area already accessible from Branch Avenue would appear the preferred site for developing active recreation.

A second area without a steep grade to the southwest of the lot, and includes a sewer easement on the southwest perimeter. It appears not feasible for recreational development.



Site topography

The southwestern property line abuts a large quarry. Views of the expanse of quarried area and the Blackstone River Valley beyond are among Epheta Park's qualities. However a chain link safety fence erected on the property line is in various state of (dis)repair and should be restored where necessary.

Rare Species noted on site (2004 draft Epheta Conservation and Management Plan)

Species	Common Name	Status*	Identified By
Agalinis tenuifolia	Slender Gerardia	SC	Botanical Survey
Anemone virginiana var. alba	Large or River Thimble weed	SC	Botanical Survey
Asclepias quadrifolia	Four-leaved Milkweed	ST	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Carex albicans	Covered Sedge	SC	Botanical Survey
Corydalis sempervirens	Pale Corydalis	SC	RIDEM
Cryptotaenia canadensis	Honewort	SC	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Desmodium ciliare	Small-leaved Tick Trefoil	ST	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Gentiana bicknellii	Bicknell's or Northern Geranium	ST	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Ulium philadelphicum var. philadelphicum	Wood Lily	SC	Botanical Survey
Penstemon digitalis	Tall White of Foxglove Beardtongue	SC	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Penthorum sedoides	Ditch Stoncrop	SC	Botanical Survey
Quercus prinoides	Dwarf Chestnut (Chinquapin Oak)	SC	Botanical Survey
Ranunculus flabellaris	Yellow Water-Crowfoot	SC	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Viola palmate	Palmate Leaved or Wood Violet	ST	RIDEM, Botanical Survey
Triosteum aurantiacum	Wild Coffee (Orange Horse-gentain)	SC	RIDEM, Botanical Survey

\* ST = State Threatened (likely to become endangered)

SC = State Concern (rare or vulnerable species, but not endangered or threatened)

## 2016 Comprehensive Plan

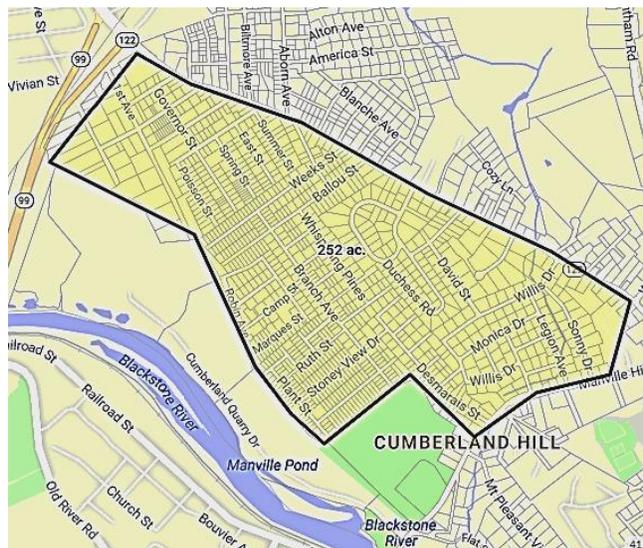
“Epheta Park Improvements. Small scale neighborhood oriented improvements with landscaping such as tennis courts and/or a multi-use grass play field on the flat part of the park along with walking paths on the balance of the property.” p. 122

“Mini-Parks/Playgrounds These active recreational facilities are geared toward serving small local areas. Cumberland has only five playgrounds and no mini-parks. This is generally not problematic in areas of large-lot single family residential development, however, these facilities should be provided in areas of denser, multi-family development such as Valley Falls, Lonsdale, and Berkeley” p. 129

## Park Service Area and Recreation Demand

Epheta Park services a dense residential neighborhood located in the northwestern corner of Cumberland Hill, adjacent to Woonsocket to the north and Lincoln to the west.

About 950 homes are located within the Park’s primary service area, a 250-acre triangular area north of Manville Hill Road and south of Mendon Road. It is anticipated that new recreation improvements may also attract visits from residents in neighborhoods to the south and in Manville village in Lincoln.



## Vision for Phase I Development



Site topography shows relatively flat area at northernmost corner, suitable for a one-acre clearing which would include a small playground and multi-use playfield. Walk in access would be from existing Branch Avenue entrance.

Phase I would include the clearing and grubbing of about 1 acre. The cleared area is to be leveled and seeded for a multi-use field and playground area. Walk in access would be from Branch Avenue (see photo, right).



A playground area including sensory playground equipment designed for children of ages 1-8 would be installed within the cleared area. Two pieces of historic granite block recovered from the Monastery could be installed in or around the playground area to function as seating.



Children's playground equipment, historic granite block



Conceptual layout

## Vision for Phase 2 Development



A small (six car) gravel parking lot would be installed on Town land off the entrance driveway to the Epheta housing complex. This site would be designated a trailhead access point to the extensive trail system within Epheta Park. Signage appropriate to the nature of the recreational resource would be installed.