Proposed Amendment to Easton Town Plan of Conservation and Development, 2006
Public Hearing: September 28, 2015

MOREHOUSE CIVIC PARK
A Master Plan, May 2015

Introduction and Summary

When the Town Plan and Conservation and Development was adopted in 2007 it foresaw the need for additional detailed planning for several localities within Easton. The largest and least developed of these localities was the 127-acre tract of Town-owned land along the west side of Morehouse Road, identified for a school site and other "municipal purposes".

For the past several years the Planning and Zoning Commission in concert with the Park and Recreation Commission, the Conservation Commission and the Board of Education has studied the features and characteristics of this property in order to identify the most appropriate uses of the land for public benefit.

The Plan proposes three major functions of the site to enhance the quality of life in the Community: Education, Conservation and Public Recreation. Within the general framework of the plan the proposed uses will serve the needs of the entire community.

Perspective

As the millennium approached, in 1999, the Town of Easton faced a challenge. The Samuel Staples Elementary School, constructed in 1930 and subsequently enlarged six times, could no longer accommodate the basic educational needs of the growing community. Nearby, at the crossroads of Morehouse and Banks Roads, an old farm of 127 acres had just been subdivided into 28 building lots and an open space parcel. Sensing the opportunity of a lifetime, the Town moved with alacrity to purchase the entire "Fairhaven Estates" tract for a new school site and other municipal needs of the future.

The site thus acquired was a magnificent addition to the Town's facilities. A scenic ridge with nearly two thousand feet of frontage along Morehouse road, the site encompassed old stone-wall-bordered fields, forested slopes and along its westerly rim a long stream corridor of East Branch Cricker Brook. A pond, small wetlands and a massive white oak tree embellished the scene.

Planning began at once for the new Samuel Staples Elementary School, located near the confluence of Banks and Morehouse Roads, which opened in 2005. Four athletic fields soon joined the new school, two on the school site and two immediately to the south in an old field area. The Town's first comprehensive Town Plan, in 2006, identified three broad land areas within the tract for future planning purposes -- the school environs, the central meadows for recreation and conservation, and the lowland stream corridor area for natural resource protection and greenbelt.

MOREHOUSE CIVIC PARK PLAN

Recent Development History

In the intervening years there has been much pressure to develop the land for a variety of often-competing purposes. The need for a comprehensive plan, respectful of the natural character of the land, balancing conservation and development objectives for optimum benefit to the entire community, has become urgent. The efforts of the Planning and Zoning Commission to produce this plan have been greatly assisted by the detailed site planning work of John J. Broadbin, ASLA, who has produced a detailed master plan for active recreation facilities on behalf of the Parks and Recreation Commission, much of which is the foundation for the proposed recreation facilities envisioned in this Plan.

This comprehensive Master Plan attempts to bring together the collective vision of many elements of the Easton community, for this "Civic Park" to become a public resource enhancing the quality of life for all residents of Easton.

In addition to the natural features which define the character of the site, existing development has an important influences on all future facility locations.

Since Town acquisition of the property in 2000 the following major facilities have been constructed or established at the site.

- Samuel Staples (new) Elementary School (SSES), including two playing fields, parking lots and circulation drives, the wastewater leachfields and septage lagoon.
- Two Park and Recreation Commission ball fields adjacent to the SSES recreation fields.
- A small baseball diamond at the southeast corner of the SSES site.
- An entrance drive and 50-car parking lot south of the SSES site.
- Public water lines and gas service extended northward along Morehouse Road to serve SSES, Old Staples School and the Town Hall.
- An interior driveway which connects the entrance drive to an old field at the south end of the meadow area, in use by the Public Works Department as a storage and staging area for gravel, stone, logs, pipe, excavated soil and other materials.
- An animal control shelter with access driveway and a small parking lot, at the southerly end of the site, designed to also function as access to nearby on-site open space.

In addition to the above facilities several new structures have been authorized for the site since, 2012, but not yet built. These include:

-- A wireless telecommunication (cell) tower, needed to alleviate weak cell phone coverage in the area, to be located in the southern interior of the site;
-- An array of solar energy panels to be located at the rear of SSES, to meet the school's electric power needs; and
-- An open-air pavilion adjoining the SSES baseball diamond.

Recent Development History (continued)

From the beginning of Town ownership portions of this 127-acre tract have been dedicated to permanent open-space preservation. These include a 24-acre parcel which protects wetland at the south end of the tract and the west side stream corridor, as well as conservation easements within the upper portion of the stream corridor and the central meadow, and an 80-feet-wide greenbelt easement along Morehouse Road. All are shown on the Plan.

The Comprehensive Plan

In its array of user-friendly facilities for all ages and interests, in its provision of spaces for education and cultural activities, and in its layout preserving significant areas of forest, meadow and natural landscape, this Plan aims to be an expression of Easton's civic character and values.

Examples of this aspiration will be found in the Plan's passive recreation meadow, hiking trails, outdoor classrooms, sports fields, picnic groves, meeting rooms, civic fair spaces, winter sport slopes, environmental education exhibits and much more

There are five major geographic units, or functional land areas, which form the basis for this long-range Plan. These are delineated graphically on the Plan map, and are as follows:

A - Samuel Staples Elementary School
Existing school delineated site, including accessory parking areas, septic fields, three ballfields, outdoor instruction areas, and reserve space for expansion. Approximately 31 acres.

B - Active Recreation Area
West central portion of the site, encompassing the two existing ballfields south of the central east/west parking lot, the undeveloped fields west of the central circulation driveway and present Public Works Department storage and staging area. Space is planned for future active recreation facilities in this area as needed. Approximately 18 acres.

C - Upland Meadow
Passive recreation field(s) along ridgeline west of Morehouse Road, for preservation of scenic view and informal recreation activities. Approximately 8 acres.

D - Conservation Lands
Forest, hillside and stream corridor, land areas in south and west portions of the tract, to be preserved as permanent open space for nature study, watershed protection, hiking and cross-country ski trails, and scenic value. Approximately 56 acres.

The Comprehensive Plan (continued)

E - Reserve Recreational and Utility Area
Land area presently in use and committed to solar power generation, school wastewater treatment area, the animal shelter, the wireless telecommunications site, septic reserve area, and potential school or recreation facility expansion. Approximately 14 acres.

The total area of the site is 127 acres.

Carrying Out The Plan's Recommendations

Fulfillment of the recommendations presented in this Plan will be a shared responsibility requiring collaboration among several Town agencies – specifically the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Education, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Public Works Department, and the Conservation Commission. The program described in this Plan is a composite of the goals and perspectives expressed by each of these agencies.

This Plan is both long-range and flexible in character. It is anticipated that the development of future facilities within each area of the site -- whether for education, recreation or other civic needs -- will evolve as the Easton community grows and changes. The value of a long-range plan is to provide general guidelines for land use and goals with detailed site planning to follow at each phase of development.

Consequently the Plan proposes the development of future facilities in three phases. In the following Summary of Phases for Construction the letters within parentheses after each listed project signify its general location on the Plan map. Please refer to the preceding section, The Comprehensive Plan, and to the Plan map.

Morehouse Civic Park: Summary of Phases For Construction

Phase 1
2015 - 2018

- Entrance Drive Relocation & Adjacent Parking, North Section (Plan Areas A & C)
- Expanded Parking Area, North Section (Plan Area B)
- Identification of existing septic functionality and future on-site septic for additional facilities i. e. restrooms (Plan Area A & E)

MOREHOUSE CIVIC PARK PLAN

Summary of Phases For Construction (continued)

Phase 1
2015 - 2018 (continued)

- Hiking / Cross Country Trail, South to Central Sections (Plan Area D, E & B)
- Circulation Road, Middle Section (Plan Area B)
- Passive Recreation Meadow, North & Middle Sections, to serve civic activities and functions. (Plan Area C)
- Solar Collectors Area (Plan Area E)
- Wireless Telecommunication Facility, including access drive (Plan Area E)

Phase 2
2018 - 2020

- Recreation Field Extension, Central Area (B)
- Two Additional Tennis Courts, Central Area (B)
- Skating Pond (C)
- Additional Parking along Inner Rim of Meadow (C)
- SSES Outdoor Classroom Areas (A)
- Hiking Trails, remainder; North and East Sections (D, A)

Phase 3
2021 - 2024

- DPW Yard Relocation & South Meadow Restoration (E, C)
- Recreation Facilities Building, addition to North Pavilion (A, C)

Summary of Phases For Construction (continued)
MOREHOUSE CIVIC PARK PLAN

Phase 3
2021 – 2024 (continued)

- West Central Recreation Complex, including tennis courts, paddle courts, multi-purpose field & parking (B, E)

- South Central Recreation Complex, various facilities to be determined in future (B)

Phase I Program, 2015 -2018
The initial phase for construction of facilities at Morehouse Civic Park is focused on projects already planned or approved, such as the open-air North Pavilion and the Solar Collectors at Staples School, and the essential long-term infrastructure improvements, such as the new entrance drive and expanded parking facility. Actual scheduling of projects will depend on design, financing and construction management considerations.

North Pavilion @ Baseball Field
This open-air 20' x 40'structure was approved by the Planning and Zoning Commission in April 2015 for the location shown on the Plan. It is designed to provide shelter from the elements for spectators and participants in game events, and is centrally located among the group of Samuel Staples School fields. Private financing has been provided by a civic group to underwrite a major share of the cost of this project.

Entrance Drive Relocation & Adjacent Parking, North Section
This new entrance way to the Morehouse Civic Park will significantly enhance the esthetics of approach to the park, will improve traffic flow in and out of the site, and will facilitate internal access to available parking. An additional benefit provided by the relocation will centralize the location of utility pads and enclosures and provide space for a small parking facility to serve the North Pavilion. The new entrance drive will be the first element in a circulation system needed to serve the entire site area.

Expanded Parking Area, North Section
This present 50-feet wide parking lot, serving all of the ballfields, is frequently inadequate to accommodate the many visitors who attend game events at the nearby fields. Increasing the cross-sectional width of this parking lot by an additional 20 feet at its north side will double its parking capacity to 100 spaces and alleviate the crowding and congestion problem. Care must be exercised to protect sections of an old stonewall to the north and to provide shade trees and landscaping along the north side.

Phase I Program, 2015 -2018 (continued)

Staples School Septic Field Reconstruction

The imminent expiration of State of Connecticut Wastewater Treatment Permits issued to the Town for Staples School in 2005 will require design changes to the present septic system, according to DEEP, to eliminate possible effluent discharges to nearby Cricker Brook. Design of an expanded leachfield area is expected to require the use of land located north of the present septage lagoon west of the school. This project must be completed by early 2017. An engineering study, currently underway, will assess the Town's options for either a new specific permit serving only the Samuel Staples School or a general permit which would provide potential capacity for waste water treatment resulting from the addition of other buildings in the future. In either case it is anticipated that up to one acre of site area must be included in the plan to accommodate the future facilities.

Hiking / Cross Country Trail, South to Central Sections

An informal pedestrian trail designed for hikers and cross-country skiers is proposed for the open space portions of the site, from its southerly entrance drive near the animal shelter to the northerly portions of the site. This recreational trail will provide healthful recreation for all age groups and will display the natural and scenic qualities of the land. It is expected to be constructed by Town volunteers.

Circulation Road, Middle Section

Proposed to follow the present driveway to the middle of the site, this improved roadway will complete a major section of the circulation road and provide access to additional recreation facilities in the west central and southerly portions of the site, as well as space for overflow parking along its edges.

Passive Recreation Meadow, North & Middle Sections

This open meadow is a central scenic feature of the site and affords a spectacular opportunity for a public green which can accommodate all types of passive recreation activities, benefiting all visitors to the site. A central wetland area could potentially accommodate a scenic pond, providing summer time esthetics and winter time skating.

Solar Collectors Area

An area of open meadow located to the rear of Staples school was approved by the Planning and Zoning Commission in April 2015 for the installation of Solar Energy Panels which will serve the electric needs of Samuel Staples School and possibly other Town facilities. In accommodating this facility the Town endorses the principle of clean energy for a major facility.

Phase I Program, 2015 -2018 (continued)

Wireless Telecommunication Facility

The WTF site, within a wooded knoll at the south end of the meadow area, will fill an important communication gap for this area of the Town. Access and utilities will be provided through the southerly portion of the circulation drive shown on the Plan. This site has been selected for environmental compatibility and public safety.