

CHAPTER 5

ECONOMY

This chapter of the Casco Comprehensive Plan is a portion of the Inventory and Analysis section of the plan. The purpose of this section is to provide a current status of economic development within Casco and the surrounding region.

This Chapter is organized into three sections:

1. Economic Overview
2. Labor Market
3. Priorities

Economic Overview

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Are public facilities, including sewer, water, broadband access or three-phase power, needed to support the projected location, type, and amount of economic activity, and what are the issues involved in providing them?”]

Public sewer and water do not exist, and according to town staff are not needed in the foreseeable future, as Casco is still rural and spread out. Water extension along Route 302 would be significantly expensive and would require an intensity of development to support its cost that Casco residents do not support. Residents support discrete locations for intense development, and that type of development can be handled through wells and advanced wastewater technologies. Broadband improvements including wireless communications services are needed, and portions of the Town are covered under the Cumberland Oxford Lakes Area Broadband Initiative. The town’s commercial zones have three-phase power.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “How can/does the community use its unique assets such as recreational opportunities, historic architecture, civic events, etc. for economic growth?”]

Casco’s economy is fundamentally derived from natural resources - woods and waters. With a significant portion of the land enrolled in Tree Growth, and Hancock Lumber headquartered in Casco, it has been thought that the long term socio-economic picture of Casco should continue to be based on resources. That, if trees are no longer harvested and lumber is no longer produced, the large contiguous blocks of woods should be secured for recreational use, habitat and water quality protection. During the public design week, residents identified a number of locations for land and trails connectivity, as

well as increased public access to waters. See “Connectivity” map. The residents want this amenity to remain in perpetuity, as it enriches their quality of life, but they also recognize that people can and will seek out Casco for these very same amenities.

However, tourists come and stay in Casco during the summer but because there aren’t businesses in the Town, they leave and go to other towns to access those places. Casco could be capturing some of that economic activity if additional commercial development happened in strategic locations.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Is the economy experiencing significant change, and how does this, or might this, affect the local population, employment, and municipal tax base?”]

According to ACS in 2020, Casco’s unemployment rate was 3.9%. In 2020, the top three employment industries were:

1. Construction;
2. Educational services, healthcare, and social assistance
3. Retail trade.

In 2010, the top employment industries were retail trade; educational services, healthcare, and social services; and wholesale trade.

Much of the business done in Casco is by contractors. Although it has not impacted their amount of business, COVID-19 has created problems for contractors obtaining supplies.

From 1:1 interviews with staff, Planning Board and leadership, we also heard that the marijuana and solar industries are rapidly growing in Casco, and there is a lack of guidelines or site location criteria. The concern is the deforestation of large

properties currently enrolled in Tree Growth to accommodate acres upon acres of solar infrastructure. Further, the town has no mechanism in place to capture impact fees from solar farm installations.

The indirect impact will come if land valuations decrease because of impacts by either industry - smell, aesthetic, changes to water quality as result of deforestation. The two industries are locating here because of low land costs, and what is built could further reduce land values long term, discouraging higher quality reinvestment in the Rt 302 corridor particularly.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “If there is a traditional downtown or village center(s) in the community? If so, are they deteriorating or thriving?”]

There are five villages in the Town of Casco. The villages are well-kept and mostly residential in nature. Most villages do not have the same level of commercial activities happening in them as they did in historic times. Because it would take so long to travel between villages by horse and carriage, the villages needed to sustain themselves. Each had at least one village store and a handful of industries. Today, much of the commercial activity happens along the Route 302 corridor, and residents travel outside Casco to obtain many goods, services and employment.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Is tourism an important part of the local economy? If so, what steps has the community taken to support this industry? What is the community’s dependence on seasonal visitors?”]

Tourism is a significant part of the town’s economy and is concentrated geographically around Sebago Lake. The town has two vacation resorts, Migis Lodge at Sebago Lake, and Point Sebago Resort; a golf course, restaurants, and bed and

breakfasts making up the industry. There are multiple lakeside summer camps that draw children and families to Casco in the summer. Sebago Lake State Park hosts campgrounds, beaches, and trails and Casco receives visitors to its other trails around town.

In talks with the Comprehensive Plan Committee, residents have observed that the large crowd of tourists that is attracted to Casco in the summer has led to many housing units used for short-term rentals through Airbnb and Vrbo, further limiting available housing stock for permanent residents.

The Committee also recognizes that protection of water quality is fundamental to the local economy of the town, and as such has identified a number of strategies earlier in this plan to protect water quality and address resiliency.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “If there are local or regional economic development incentives such as TIF districting, do they encourage development in growth areas? A description of any economic development incentive districts, such as tax increment financing districts, in the community.”]

Casco does not have a TIF district or local economic development incentive program to direct growth. A TIF district is not anticipated at this time.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “A brief historical perspective on how and why the current economy of the community and region developed.”]

Casco has evolved through time just as it has in many surrounding Lake Region communities. The bountiful and widespread forests that grew here after the last glacier retreated were lightly managed by Native Americans and were still intact when early European settlers arrived in the 1700s. These settlers realized the economic potential of

these forests and built an industry around them. Early sawmills were located next to waterways in South Casco Village, Cook's Mills, Webb's Mills, and Casco Village. These areas, with both water access and industry, proved to be magnets for both residential and commercial development. Farms became plentiful, having sprung up close to these village areas and in other areas where timber harvesting revealed excellent soils for agricultural use. Roads were built to connect these areas together as well as with surrounding towns.

Until after the Second World War, economic activity continued to be non-intensive and characterized by farming, timber harvesting, pockets of small commercial and industrial activity, primarily in the four early village settlements. Summer camps for boys and girls were established on some of the lakes. Seasonal homes were built around Casco's primary water bodies. Farming and commercial businesses started to dwindle. The village areas attracted more housing. Route 302 continued to be the major transportation hub for the town, and as such, over time the majority of economic activity shifted to the corridor.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "A list of local and regional economic development plans developed over the past five years, which include the community."]

Casco does not have a local development plan. Some local initiatives held over the past five years have included:

- Casco has hosted a local business showcase in the past where business owners set up tables at a community event. The purpose of the event was to show community members what businesses existed and make local goods available for purchase. The showcase has not taken place recently. Attempts to produce a newsletter listing local businesses

have not yet been realized.

- Casco also hosted a farmers' market in the Village Green, however low participation and the onset of COVID-19 has meant it is discontinued.

Casco is part of an Economic Development District (EDD), one of 25 communities in Cumberland County. The EDD publishes a "Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy" every five years and provides annual updates. The last document was published in 2018 and identified the following three Strategic Goals

1. Sustain our regional strengths and seize our opportunities. Our first goal focuses on the positive aspects of our analysis in section two, building our economic and social prosperity by increasing jobs and investments, sustaining existing employment and clusters, and growing our exports.
2. Overcome our regional deficits. Our second goal focuses on our weaknesses identified in section two with efforts to address our demographics, our need for better educational and workforce outcomes, and our commitment to reduce poverty and increase equity.
3. Plan for and mitigate our external threats. Our third strategy focuses on economic and environmental resiliency, addressing our need to better plan for the disruptions we can foresee, and those we cannot.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "Do they coordinate with regional development corporations and surrounding towns as necessary to support desired economic development?"]

Casco is part of two Chambers of Commerce. The Greater Bridgton Chamber of Commerce promotes local businesses in 13 towns and villages in the Bridgton region through marketing and social media, including Casco. The Sebago

Lakes Region Chamber of Commerce promotes commerce through marketing, advocacy, education, and networking and is the most active in Casco of the two Chambers.

Casco's leadership participates in the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG), which is not a regional development corporation but convenes Casco's neighbors and other member municipalities within the region (see above re: Cumberland County Economic Development District, which is also housed at GPCOG). Through this connection, Casco participates in regional economic development efforts.

Labor Market

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "Do/should home occupations play a role in the community?"]

Home occupations exist in Casco and, according to the Casco CEO, they will continue to be acceptable as long as they do not impede the flow of traffic or draw traffic in excess to areas.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "Where does the community's population work and where do employees in your community reside? A description of the major employers in the community and labor market area and their outlook for the future."]

- See demographic facts under Big Idea, "Support Diversity and Multi-Generational Community Life".
- Of the Casco working population of 1,959, the top industries for residents are education services and healthcare and social assistance at 368 people, construction at 310, and retail trade at 283. (ACS S2405) Point Sebago Resort is by far the largest employer in Casco with 250-499 employees. The next two largest employers are Hancock Lumber Casco Sawmill and Spurwink School which

both have 50-99 employees. (GPCOG Community Profiles) 85.4% of employed Casco residents work in Cumberland County. (ACS S0801) Although there are some workers that commute into Casco (495), the number of Casco residents that commute out of the Town for work is far greater at approximately 1,568 people. Only approximately 110 people live and work in Casco.

- P&K Sand and Gravel Inc., which is based out of Naples, operates Heath Quarry in the Town of Casco on Route 11. The company does residential, commercial, and development excavation, and produces Redi-Mix concrete and rock products out of the Quarry.
- From Center for Workforce Research and Information (<https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/employers2.html>) the Casco Inn has 20-49 employees, Freeport Nursing and Rehab has 50-99 employees, Fryeburg Health Care Center has 100-249, Momentum has 20-49, Point Sebago Boutique has 20-49, and Sebago Lake State Park has 20-49. Most employers in Casco have under 20 employees. Many of the places with smaller employment in Casco are summer camps like Camp Sunshine and Camp Cedar and municipal offices such as Casco Fire and Rescue Department and Casco Town Office.

Priorities

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Does the community have defined priorities for economic development? Are these priorities reflected in regional economic development plans? What type of economic development activity does the community desire? What is the community’s role in the region?”]

Yes. Through the public engagement process used to create this plan, the community identified priorities for economic development. See Big Idea, “Attract Local Businesses and Entrepreneurs”. The content for this Big Idea was crowd-sourced from the community, and calls for supporting local businesses, attracting a dynamic workforce, and recruiting new local and non-franchise businesses to Casco.

Regionally, while the Greater Portland Region’s 2018 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy mentions the Lakes Region, Casco and neighboring towns are not included with substance.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Are there appropriate areas within the community for industrial or commercial development? If so, are performance standards necessary to assure that industrial and commercial development is compatible with the surrounding land uses and landscape?”]

Appropriate areas for commercial development are identified on the “Conservation, Preservation and Development” Map. This map categorizes the various areas by level of preservation, enhancement or transformative growth. The map also identifies a number of Special Districts, one being the Rt 302 Highway Special District where the most broad range of land uses should occur.

Limited, smaller scale commercial activities are intended for the villages to provide neighborhood services and amenities.

For each area identified on the map, building, site and design standards will be necessary to ensure that new development respects the architectural history and village aesthetic of the town. Buildings on Rt 302 and in industrially zoned lands can be larger and simpler, and those standards should be made explicitly clear through a system of building types in zoning.

Other lands currently zoned for industrial uses will continue to be available for that purpose.