

CHAPTER 7

RECREATION & OPEN SPACE

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 the recreational opportunities and open space in Casco.

This Chapter is organized into four sections:

1. Recreational Facilities
2. Open Space Protection
3. Recreational Water Access
4. Unmet Needs

Recreational Facilities

**For a map of open spaces, recreation and water access, see the Connectivity map.*

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “A description of important public and private active recreation programs. ”]

The biggest asset of the Parks and Recreation Department is the Community Center in Casco Village where the majority of the department’s programming takes place. The Community Center houses a gym, two conference rooms, a kitchen, and the department office; outside, there is a playground, tennis courts, and additional basketball courts.

The department hosts recurring activities such as yoga twice a week, open gym time, Lakes Region youth basketball, Girls on the Run, field hockey, pickleball, tennis, playgroup, storytime, and senior meals. The department also hosts annual celebrations including Christmas tree lighting in the Community Center, Halloween in Casco and an Easter egg hunt at the Community Park. The department is dedicated to providing programming for all Casco residents from children to seniors.

Important recreational facilities in Casco include the following:

- Casco Community Center and the adjacent Village Green.
- Casco has two public beaches open to Lake residents: Crescent Lake Beach and Pleasant Beach.
- Casco has three playgrounds including at the Community Center, Casco Community Park and Libby Park.
- There are sports courts and fields at Dingley Field, which is used for Rookie and Minor

League Baseball and 10 and under softball; Libby Park, which has tennis and basketball courts; and the Community center.

- Casco Community Park is a new park that has full-sized fields, lights, a concession stand, and a quarter mile walking trail.
- Although school recreation takes priority of their facilities, Crooked River School is sometimes used to supplement recreational space as well.
- Bushido Karate Dojo and Fitness is a private martial arts studio in Casco that hosts classes for kids, teens, and adults and hosts other classes in Raymond, Bridgton, and Fryeburg.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “A description of local and regional trail systems, trail management organizations, and conservation organizations that provide trails for all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiling, skiing, mountain biking, or hiking. Are recreational trails in the community adequately maintained? Are there use-conflicts on these trails?”]

Casco residents have many opportunities for outdoor recreation on the many hiking, snowmobiling, and ATV trails. While there are no designated mountain biking trails, State Park trails and ATV trails are used. While LEIT Preserve and State Park trails are maintained by their respective owners, recreation clubs are also very active in maintaining Casco’s trails for their members. The Crooked River Snowmobile Club is a Maine Snowmobile Association affiliated club in Casco. The club maintains almost 50 miles of groomed trails. Hancock Land Company as well as large and small landowners have made their land available to the club for snowmobile use. The Casco system of trails connects to systems in Raymond, Naples, Otisfield, and Poland. The Lakes Region ATV Club maintains 57 miles of trails

in Bridgton, Casco, Denmark, Harison, Naples, Sebago, and Otisfield.

Trails in Casco include:

- Hacker's Hill Preserve: the Preserve includes 27 acres of fields and woods that welcomes visitors to take in scenery, picnic, bird-watch, hunt, and walk. The Preserve has restrooms, parking, and picnic tables in addition to a .7 mile loop for walking. The Preserve is maintained by the Loon Echo Land Trust.
- Mayberry Hill Preserve: the Preserve includes 160 acres of woodlands, meadows, and streams and a .9 mile trail loop with benches alongside where visitors can walk and cross-country ski. The preserve is maintained by the Loon Echo Land Trust.
- Jugtown Forest: the Jugtown Forest trail is a 2.7 mile loop. The area is primarily used for off-road driving and snowmobiling as well as cross-country skiing and mountain biking. Some trails are maintained by the Crooked River and Muddy River SnoSeekers Snowmobile Clubs.
- Que Five Trail: 3.9 mile trail primarily used for ATVs and snowmobiles but is groomed by the snowmobile club in the winter so can be used for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing as well.
- Sebago Lake State Park: includes the 3.4 mile Outer Loop trail from Cub Point for hiking, the 3.8 mile Blue Loop for hiking, and private trails for guests of Migis Lodge.
- Owl Pond: 1.7 mile trail for hiking and cross-country skiing, and other snowmobile and ATV trails.
- Rattlesnake Mountain via Bri-Mar Trail: popular 2.5 mile trail that is accessible year-round for walking, running, and snowshoeing with

views of Panther Pond and towards Raymond. Residents have reported a shortage of parking near the trailhead, which is located in Raymond.

Residents have reported that most of the area's trails are well maintained, particularly those facilitated by Hancock Lumber in Jugtown Forest and the ATV club. Due to the multipurpose nature of some trails, such as those that host both hikers and ATV riders, there are some reported use-conflicts.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "Regional recreational opportunities as appropriate."]

See connectivity map for regional trail connections.

Open Space Protection

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "A map or description of scenic areas and scenic views of local importance, and regional or statewide importance, if available."]

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "Does the community have a mechanism, such as an open space fund or partnership with a land trust, to acquire important open spaces and access sites, either outright or through conservation easements? Are important tracts of open space commonly used for recreation publicly-owned or otherwise permanently conserved?"]

Open space conservation has been a priority in Casco for many years, particularly following the establishment of the Open Space Committee, now Commission, by the 2003 Casco Comprehensive Plan. The Committee initially identified four focus areas for land acquisition and protection, which the current Commission continues to use. The areas identified include:

- Pine Hill/Owl Pond/Heath area with 1,800 acres comprising Owl Pond, the only pond in

the town that is undeveloped on the shores, and trails.

- Rattlesnake Mountain with 1,400 acres comprising the Town's highest point, trails, a heron rookery, and rare plant communities.
- Quaker Ridge East with 1,600 acres comprising wetlands, high quality agricultural soil, and trails.
- Quaker Ridge West with 1,800 acres comprising a deer wintering area, old-growth hemlock, trails, and stream and wetlands.

The Open Space Commission has prepared maps detailing public land, natural features, large parcels, and tree growth, and inventoried town-owned properties, supported the purchase of open space land including Hacker's Hill, participated in the Lake Region Greenprint Partnership, and created stewardship plans. The Commission meets monthly at the Casco Community Center and, as of 2018, have been active in trying to acquire private, open, underutilized land. The Commission has an Open Space Fund which is used for direct acquisitions in the name of the Town of Casco with landowners and to negotiate agreements with landowners for conservation easements or leases on land in Casco. The Commission may also engage services of outside professionals such as foresters, ecologists, and land use planners, to accomplish its goals.

Loon Echo Land Trust (LELT) plays a major role in conservation of open space and more generally as well as protecting public access to the outdoors in the Lakes Region. LELT conserves 8,500 acres of land and manages over 32 miles of trails while collaborating with residents, businesses, and organizations to acquire and protect more land through conservation

easements, land purchases, and land donations. In Casco, LELT has multiple focus areas and has worked to protect Hacker's Hill and Mayberry Hill Preserves, the latter of which was acquired in partnership with Casco and was the land trust's first preserve. Although none have public access guaranteed, LELT maintains easement properties in Casco on private land, securing development rights to the land trust. Current LELT projects include the installation of historically and ecologically informative interpretive signage in Hacker's Hill Preserve and improving safe parking access and trails at Mayberry Hill Preserve.

Loon Echo Land Trust uses a regional approach to land preservation and protection. The land trust serves seven towns in the Sebago Lake Region and regularly works with town governments to acquire and manage sites. They collaborate with other land trusts and partners in Maine to work on a landscape-level rather than hyper-locally. The organization is embarking on a new regional conservation strategy with other land trust partners that will focus on climate resilience and resilient landscapes. This includes examining the level of connectivity and areas where resilient habitats can or should be connected, particularly in areas that are fragmented or have habitat loss where conservation of small connecting pieces or corridors could have an outsized impact on larger resilient landscapes. LELT does additional regional work through Sebago Clean Waters (see Water and Natural Resources Chapter) which operates independent of town lines, focusing instead on stakeholders in the Sebago Lake watershed.

[STATE REQUIREMENT: "Is traditional access to private lands being restricted?"]

Jugtown Forest is an example of private lands being made available for public use.

Recreational Water Access

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Does the public have access to each of the community’s significant water bodies? An inventory of any fresh or salt water bodies in the community determined locally to have inadequate public access.”]

There are two public beaches open for exclusive use by Casco residents: Crescent Lake Beach on Edwards Road and Pleasant Lake Beach on Mayberry Hill Road. The director of Park and Recreation has reported sediment build-up issues at Pleasant Beach being difficult to clear. Around Sebago Lake there are a handful of private resorts that have private beaches. Sebago Lake State Park, which costs \$6 entry fee for adult Maine residents, has a beach. Dumpling Pond does not have public access for Casco residents.

There are an adequate number of boat launches located at Coffee Pond, Parker Pond, Pleasant Lake, and Sebago Lake State Park. There is one boat pumpout station in Casco which is located at the Kettle Cove Marina off of Sebago Lake.

Unmet Needs

[STATE REQUIREMENT: “Will existing recreational facilities and programs in the community and region accommodate projected growth or changes in age groups in your community? Is there a need for certain types of services or facilities or to upgrade or enlarge present facilities to either add capacity or make them more usable? identification of unmet needs.”]

While projected population growth in Casco does not show a significant increase, the Parks and Recreation Department has expressed a need to better accommodate the existing population. Despite the fact that a significant amount of Parks and Recreation’s programming takes place there,

the Community Center lacks adequate space to support activities and storage. In addition to Parks and Recreation activities, the Community Center also hosts municipal meetings, which lack a home in other municipal buildings. These meetings further limit the use of the space for recreation activities. If municipal meetings find a space outside of the Community Center, existing recreational facilities and programs in the community should be able to accommodate growth and changes in population in Casco. Additionally, the capacity of the department’s staff, primarily the director, is stretched thin, making adding programming difficult. An additional staff member will join the department January 1, 2023.

The director of Parks and Recreation has reported residents’ desire for the expansion of recreation opportunities in a few specific areas including accommodating the growth of pickleball, creating a covered outdoor ice rink, and making an accessible and dog-friendly swimming area available to the public. Casco currently lacks an ice skating rink and a public area that allows dogs. All three of these growth areas could be addressed through the use of the Berry Property, soon to be the subject of a feasibility study, to expand recreation. The land has space for a new year-round covered pavilion which could be flooded to create an ice rink in the winter and used for pickleball and tennis in the warmer seasons. The property connects to the waterfront at Parker Pond, where a beach and dog park could be built. The property has great potential as a center of recreation as there may be opportunity to connect to the waterfront through a new trail. The potential expansion of the municipal campus and addition of recreational space at the Berry Property would make existing recreation space more available in the Community Center and provide some of the programs and spaces currently missing from Casco.

Improved opportunities for walking have been voiced as a desire by the community. Casco does not have infrastructure for walking in the Village where the Community Center is located. Except for a tiny section, Route 121, which connects the Village and Town Hall, does not have sidewalks. Cars often reach speeds of over 50MPH, making it dangerous for pedestrians and dog-walkers who continue to use the road despite the risk. Additionally, there are no trails in Casco accessible by modes of transportation other than by car. No trails currently connect to the Village or to area schools, although there is potential for trail connections to the Crooked River School. Outside of the Village, there have been complaints that Casco has ATV, snowmobile, and horseback riding trails but not enough ability-inclusive walking trails.

Recommendations

In conversation with the Loon Echo Land Trust, various funding opportunities were suggested for conserving open space in Casco. They include taking advantage of Land for Maine's Future, which was recently funded for the first time in 10 years. The program is the State of Maine's primary funding source for conserving land for its natural and recreational value. It is an opportunity for towns, especially in partnership with a land trust, to secure funding for major conservation projects. Casco has previously partnered with LEIT to conserve open space, including in order to form Hacker's Hill Preserve. Another available funding program is the Land and Water Conservation Fund which Casco accessed to build the Casco Community Park. Under the Land and Water Conservation Fund are the Forest Legacy Program and the Forest Legacy Program which are part of a budget process currently. LEIT has also expressed interest in preserving or supporting working farmland, which Casco currently lacks for the most part. The land trust is willing to assist the town in accessing the Maine Farmland Trust, a statewide nonprofit land conservation organization, for funding.