

Casco Open Space Commission
Annual Report
October 26, 2010

This report describes activities of the past year including budgetary and financial information, and outlines the coming year. In 2009-2010, the Commission focused on:

- organizing its procedures
- reviewing Town and other properties
- researching legal mechanisms for conservation of open space
- supporting the Town's participation in the regional Greenprint planning project, and
- preparing maps for understanding Casco's resources and opportunities.

Getting Started

The Board of Selectpersons appointed five Commissioners, and the first Commission meeting was held August 17, 2009. The Commission elected Grant Plummer, Chair; Lisa Willey-Critchfield, Vice Chair; and Eric Dibner, Secretary. The other members are Jim Stepp and Barbara York.

Meetings are held monthly on the third Monday at 7:00 at the Library.

With the Open Space Conservation Ordinance as its basis, COSC adopted a mission statement and methodology on 2/15/10:

The COSC mission is to preserve Casco open space for public access, appropriate use, and natural resource values for all beings for future generations. The Commission will accomplish its mission by:

1. inventorying open space,
2. planning for conservation and public uses,
3. educating landowners and the general public,
4. using traditional and innovative protection mechanisms such as acquisition or easements with willing landowners,
5. involving the community, and
6. partnering with other groups.

The Commission developed a first year work plan (see Budget) and presented a progress report to the Board of Selectpersons in February.

Community Coordination and Outreach

The Commission established a web presence on Town of Casco's website (go to http://cascomaine.org/CM_Conservation_ConservationInfo.php), where documents, agendas and minutes are posted.

COSC and its members met several times with members of the Casco Conservation Committee (CCC), a group with a similar but distinct purpose. CCC's focus is the preservation of and education about natural resources, while COSC targets Casco open space, including public uses and protection mechanisms. Like CCC, the Commission has joined the Maine Association of Conservation Commissions. Other linkages that support open space planning come from COSC members who are part of Loon Echo Land Trust, SWOAM, and local lakes associations,

Maps and Planning

The Commission worked with volunteer Pam Edwards, who provided mapping and consultation to COSC. COSC reviewed the 2006 Open Space Plan, the 2003 Comprehensive Plan's survey results, and Town-owned lands. COSC researched what information is already available on maps and through local/state/federal databases.

The Commission has developed a series of maps that show (1) lands that are publicly owned or under conservation protection; (2) natural features like wetlands, rare plants and animals, and hilltops; and (3) tree growth and parcels 100 acres or larger.

On June 9, the Town Meeting approved funds for open space planning and participation in the Lakes Region Community Greenprint project. For the Greenprint process, COSC recommended a list of Casco residents to be interviewed, and it identified large connected tracts of undeveloped lands as Casco priority areas, such as around Pine Hill/Owl Pond/Heath, both sides of Quaker Ridge, and the Crooked River area.

The Commission considered possible actions regarding the property called Hacker's Hill, which is currently on the market, but has not taken any action.

A summer intern from Vermont Law School, Eliza Donoghue, volunteered legal research for the Commission and presented a report about innovative land conservation mechanism, "Alternatives to Traditional Conservation Easements: Term Conservation Easements, etc." This is will help COSC prepare a brief guide about easement and lease easements for landowners.

Town Properties

The Commission discussed priorities for taking care of land the Town owns. A first step was identifying the locations and current conditions. In October 2009, the Commission met on-site and walked five properties in the Sebago Lake State Park and Crooked River vicinity and documented their condition. Other parcels are yet to be seen. Commissioners noted that public use and safety should be maintained and natural resources not be degraded.

Budget

The Board of Selectpersons carried forward the Town's account designated for Open Space (\$4,468) to be used for COSC administrative costs such as mailings, printing, education, and maps. In April, the Commission prepared an annual budget for \$3500, which it presented to the Finance Committee:

Education and outreach

Public workshops, mailing, printing and workshop materials \$1900

Conservation planning (separate from the Greenprint project)

Inventories of natural resources, consultant, production of maps \$1200

Land protection mechanisms

Legal research and consultation \$ 400

The COSC will require a similar budget to conduct its work in future years.

In its first year, COSC's only expense was \$150 (annual membership in MeACC). Web administration and map printing were contributed by the Town Office. COSC did not complete all items in its work plan (most of its time was devoted to laying solid groundwork for the future) and a lot of volunteer work was contributed. Also, the Commission recognized that

information resulting from the Greenprint project will constitute a substantial part of the inventory and maps the Town needs for open space planning. The cost of Greenprint was presented at Town Meeting and COSC agreed to forego its additional request for operating budget.

The Commission began review of the Land Protection Fund, which the Town created to support future costs of potential land acquisitions, including surveys and legal expenses. COSC intends to develop guidelines based on the original article describing the fund. In several years past, Town Meeting contributed \$30,000 to this capital fund. The Commission will continue to recommend this, in keeping with the adopted Open Space Plan that stressed the importance of building Town capacity for land conservation.

Future Direction

To accomplish the duties called for by its founding Ordinance, the Casco Open Space Commission plans to:

- increase educational activities,
- build awareness about open space and its values for the people of Casco,
- develop rankings of resources to be protected,
- prepare materials describing possible ways landowners and the Town can retain or protect open space,
- propose criteria for what lands deserve Town focus, and
- recommend potential uses for Town-owned properties.