

REPORT FROM THE CASCO OPEN SPACE COMMISSION
FOR FY 2017

Please see the FY 2015 Casco Open Space Commission (Commission) report at this site for a summary of information regarding the Commission's establishment history, mission and definition of "open space."

Since the last Annual Report, the Commission has concentrated effort on gathering information regarding undeveloped/open space lands in focus area 1, the Pine Hill/Owl Pond/The Heath Focus Area. Determination of how much open space is possible to protect there is ongoing, and the Commission continues to attempt to bring more landowners into the effort. There has been less attention paid to the areas of Quaker Ridge East (area 3), Quaker Ridge West (area 4) and Rattlesnake Mt. (area 2). However, the Commission remains interested in open space protection in these other focus areas as well. The Commission is still interested in hosting landowners in our meetings and/or having other contact to ascertain what future plans there may be for their open space lands and the potential strategies that could be applied to open space protection.

The Commission completed and provided a general mailing to landowners in the Town of Casco, which invited them to contact the Commission concerning exploring strategies that might be employed to secure protection for any open space they wish to conserve. The Commission received a number of responses to this mailing, but virtually all of the lands were deemed not suitable for open space protection. The landowner letter, with an attached expanded explanation of strategies, is available for viewing at the Commission's section of the Town's website. A copy of the landowner letter, with attachment, is also posted on the bulletin board in the waiting area of the Town Office on Meadow Road; copies may be obtained from the Town Office staff. In the coming year, mailing of a similar letter will be more narrowly directed to most landowners in the 4 focus areas. Nonetheless, open space protections can be applied to other landowner properties if they meet the "standard" of contributing to the more acceptable concept of open space, i.e., is it of a location and size that it clearly adds to the protections of natural resources and open space values enjoyed by the citizens of Casco.

During this period of time, at the request of the Select Board, the Commission reviewed multiple properties that had been acquired by the Town due to nonpayment of taxes. Most properties in this category are quite small, with structures, and not suitable for designation as open space. However, two contiguous unimproved lots off Heath Road, close to Thompson Lake, were recommended to the Select Board by the Commission for retention as open space

for public use. The lots have become part of the Town's open space inventory, available in the future for casual public use.

The Commission worked with the Select Board and Town Manager to effect a timber harvest on a ~50-acre Town parcel on State Park Road. Both this parcel and a ~70-acre parcel also owned by the Town, located west of and fronting on U.S. 302 and near Ring Landing Road, have had recent boundary surveys carried out that were coordinated by the Commission. It is likely that a timber harvest will occur on the ~70-acre parcel but the Commission recommends that a biological survey be done pre-harvest to identify and protect sensitive plant and/or animal communities. There are forestry management plans in place for both parcels.

Open Space Protection Activities – “Projects”:

The Commission unanimously voted “no objection” to the use of a portion of the Town's open space land acquisition funds toward purchase of the Jackson (Barry Farm) property on Meadow Road. At the time there was no alternative opportunity for use of the funds in a more conventional open space manner. Nevertheless, the Commission believes the purchase was a valuable and strategic choice for the Town, and supports the action without reservation.

A “bargain basement” price acquisition of 11.5 acres on State Park Road awaits Town Meeting warrant action in the summer of 2018. The Commission coordinated this effort, and the Town has executed a purchase and sale agreement with the owners. This property is bounded by the currently owned ~51-acre Town property on the south. Thus, the Town could potentially have an area totaling ~61.5 acres of readily accessible open space for day recreational use by the public.

The Commission is now working with landowners on The Heath who wish to sell to the Town ~15 acres that can be protected in perpetuity. The owner, in this case also, is willing to take a large portion of the acreage value as a tax credit and sell to the Town at a “bargain” price. This property is part of the lands that are delineated as containing significant open space values (Focus Area 1; Pine Hill/Owl Pond/The Heath) in the Casco Open Space Plan. In fact, if approved, this would be the first protection for focus area-related property – even though the Open Space Plan dates back to 2006. The Commission would like to have this purchase opportunity on a warrant for the upcoming mid-summer Casco Town Meeting.

An additional effort is underway to put in place, this current year, a conservation easement (CE) on a landowner's Focus Area property (Focus Area 4; Quaker Ridge West) that is as yet undefined in size; however, it should be over 60 acres. Since the Town and the landowner have not previously been involved in carrying out a CE, this effort will plow new ground and progress is likely to be relatively slow for both the grantor and grantee.

Status of Open Space Fund: The \$100,000 open space land **acquisition funds** utilized by the Town for the Barry Farm left a balance of \$20,661.24. The Town Meeting in the summer of 2017 added \$30,000, bringing the fund up to the current \$50,661.24.

The amount currently in the **operations fund** is \$7,662.76.

Value of Town-held Open Space Property:

The Property Map locations and assessed values of the properties currently held by the Town and considered Commission-managed as open space are as follows;

State Park Road ~50 acres (001A/0002; 0003/0036) Assessed Value is \$154,800
Ring Landing Rd./Rte. 302 ~70 acres (0002/0003) Assessed Value is \$140,800
Bass Lane/Heath Rd., 2 Lots~3.68 acres (0011/0017-7;/0017-8) Assessed Value is \$59,200

There are no protected lands, held by the Town currently, that have gained or lost tax revenue strictly as a result of implementation of the Open Space Plan. This may be a reportable item with dollar detail in the future, but is not at present.

2018 Open Space Program – Anticipated: The Commission anticipates that its program in the coming year will focus in large part upon identification and protection of lands in the Focus Areas identified by The Open Space Plan (OSP), and in accordance with the policies and procedures laid in the Open Space Ordinance (OSO). The OSP and the OSP will be reviewed in the months to come and any changes deemed to be appropriate and/or necessary will be recommended for approval by Town Meeting. A short-term goal will be making available open space education materials that target landowners, but principally those in the focus areas. Another main thrust will be the aggressive pursuit of a program that advises, generally, the townspeople of Casco about the value of conserving open space to preserve the rural character of the area while protecting its special natural resources. Further, the Commission, to be successful in carrying out its mission, must concern itself with devising and recommending to the community a strategy to raise funds for carrying-out the open space program.

The Commission can be reached through the Town office at 635 Meadow Road, or by phone at 207.627.4515

Respectfully submitted,

Casco Open Space Commission
Report Filed March 2018