

Consistency of Casco Heights with Portland's Comprehensive Plan

1. Introduction: Portland's Comprehensive Plan attempts to safeguard Portland's status as a "truly remarkable city" by identifying its distinctive features and then creating a multi-faceted strategy to value, preserve and build upon those features. The Plan seeks to enhance Portland's best qualities and characteristics partially through incremental growth, but also through "bold initiatives tempered by careful consideration and foresight in planning." (Housing Component, p. 9). In some respects, Casco Heights might be viewed as a "bold initiative" due to its imaginative design, the balance it strikes between scale and massing and environmental protection. However, in many other ways, it is consistent with an incremental pattern of development; it is a residential use in a residential zone which preserves open space. This type of development is already anticipated in the R-5A zoning text.

To protect Portland's premier status as a vibrant, small city the Comprehensive Plan adopts the target of **increasing the number of housing units so that Portland grows at the same pace as the region**, maintaining a 25% share of Cumberland County's population (Housing, p. 20). Other components of the community vision seek to: **capitalize on Portland's economic assets**; support and encourage the **creation of an adequate supply of quality housing for all**; create a **sustainable community** while keeping **municipal taxes affordable**; and **protect valued community attributes** including a welcoming and people-scaled built environment, coastal amenities, parks, trails and natural resources, and distinctive sense of place. (Housing, p. 8-9)

As the Casco Heights site is one of the largest remaining parcels of undeveloped land in Portland, it is important for it to be developed in a way that furthers the community vision. The proposal for this site is consistent with that community vision and furthers the Comprehensive Plan's goals and objectives for housing and economic development, open space and recreation, environmental protection and urban design, as further outlined below.

2. Housing and Economic Development: The housing component of the Comprehensive Plan (*Housing: Sustaining Portland's Future*, November 18, 2002) endeavors to build upon Portland's: (1) identity as the regional center for jobs, economic activity and institutional services (social, educational, and medical); (2) unique combination of a welcoming "small town feel" with bigger city amenities; and (3) appreciation of its heritage, including coastal environment, natural resources, and architectural character (p. 8). The Casco Heights developer values and, in turn seeks to attract residents who value these same community attributes. In keeping with the community vision, Casco Heights will be accessible and welcoming, designed to complement the architectural and coastal heritage, and positioned to contribute to maintaining Portland's position as the economic engine of the region.

Accessible/Welcoming

Casco Heights will be welcoming not only to its own residents, but also to the community at large. Public access will be granted over trails which cross the entire site. While the primary trailhead will be located on the former landfill site (where parking will be available), neighborhood walkers from Summer Place, Ocean Ridge, and other nearby residences will be able to access the trail system from Ocean Avenue by walking through the R-5A portion of the site. Similarly, the open space will not be reserved for owners only. A number of neighborhood residents and others already use an informal trail system on the back portion of the site for running, walking, mountain biking, riding ATVs and hunting. While use by motorized vehicles and hunters will no longer be permitted, use by the general public for the remaining low impact uses will be encouraged and facilitated through improvements to be made in cooperation with Portland Trails.

Appreciation of Coastal Heritage

The Housing Plan encourages Portland to build upon the fact that it is a geographically varied and dynamic coastal community with "spectacular views of Casco Bay and the Islands, Back Cove, and Maine's Mountains from the City's promontories," and the fact that residents have ready access to natural features through trails, parks, and scenic viewpoints. Casco Heights is designed to provide water views from most of the units. Similarly, the trails and open space on the R-OS portion of the site will provide residents and the general public with access to wooded land and interesting natural features such as dramatic rock outcroppings.

Need for Higher Density to Maintain Regional Share

The Housing Plan recognizes that, given the limited amount of vacant land, in order for Portland achieve its target of maintaining a 25% share of the County's population, the City will have to allow higher residential density in areas that can support it. The Plan states:

[] locations along arterials, near services, or adjoining public amenities may be appropriate for a medium or high-rise apartment building given appropriate controls, high quality design and neighborhood compatibility. The intent is to identify areas suitable for higher density without adversely impacting the character of Portland's neighborhoods. (Housing Plan, p. 27)

Casco Heights is one of those sites that is suitable for development at a density higher than the existing R-3 zone. It is located on a collector street with capacity to accommodate additional traffic, and it is not too far from Washington Avenue, a principal arterial.

. It is served by public water and sewer, adjoins land which will be dedicated to public open space, is on a site of sufficient size to provide substantial buffers from its neighbors, and, due to the nature of the units to be built, should impact the character of the neighborhood in a positive way.

Need for Continuum of Options for All Income Levels

The Housing Plan also states that Portland needs to encourage a full range of housing types, including private market rate development:

Although there has been much emphasis on affordable assisted housing, the need for market rate housing for mid and higher income households is also critically important to Portland's future. Eliminating barriers to housing development and supporting market rate projects through the approval process can assist in this. (Housing Plan, "Early Achievable Actions, Production, #8, p. 64)

This market rate housing should "provide a continuum of options across all income levels" and should include all types of quality housing including condominium and town-house units (Housing Plan, p. 29). The goal is to allow households to "move up" in the real estate market within Portland (or be attracted back into Portland from outlying communities) so that Portland can remain competitive with suburban communities (Housing Plan, p. 15-16). Casco Heights will supply needed housing options at market rate and penthouses at the higher cost end of the continuum.

Integrate Housing and Economic Goals

The Comprehensive Plan recognizes that Portland is sliding into an unbalanced situation where the City provides much of the employment, educational, medical and social services, and arts and cultural opportunities for the region, but many of the higher income individuals who work in Portland and enjoy these services and amenities live in, and pay real estate taxes to, outlying communities. The Comprehensive Plan recognizes the need to improve the balance between where jobs are located and where housing is located by pursuing strategies to entice these individuals not to leave and/or to return to Portland (Comprehensive Plan, VoL I, p. 22).

The Casco Heights units can make a significant contribution to recapturing real estate tax dollars that would, most likely, otherwise flow to suburban communities. In addition, the net real estate tax benefit may be even greater because the high assessed value per unit may very well be coupled with relatively low service demands as a majority of the residents are expected to be older and/or without children in City schools, and some of them may only be in residence for part of each year.

Similarly, while there is no guarantee, it is very possible that one or more of the households attracted by Graves Hill may make a significant contribution to Portland's economic base. As technology makes it increasingly possible for certain types of businesses to relocate almost anywhere, a prime factor in deciding where to locate a business is often where top management would prefer to live. Allowing the creation of very high quality, innovative housing in our high-amenity community (with coastal resources, spectacular views, diverse recreational opportunities, arts and cultural offerings, historic resources, an authentic sense of place, and easy access to all amenities) may very well attract one or more residents who want to relocate their businesses to Portland, thus serving as an economic development tool.

3. Open Space and Recreation: The component of the Comprehensive Plan addressing open space and recreation (based on *Green Spaces, Blue Edges*, 1995, updated 2001), **recommends that neighborhoods have open space focal points within walking distance.**

The adjacent Ocean Avenue Landfill has been developed into The Ocean Avenue Recreation Area. The addition of 7.92 acres in the R-OS portion of the Casco Heights development will significantly increase the amount of forested open space and expand the length and quality of pedestrian trails available in the immediate vicinity for public recreational use.

In addition, *Green Spaces, Blue Edges* makes a city-wide recommendation to **"develop High Point Parks, open spaces located on the higher elevations of the city,** in neighborhoods throughout the city such as the Ocean Avenue landfill, hilltop on Ocean Avenue by rock shop, Rocky Hill, and hills in Stroudwater" (Comp. Plan Vol. I, p. 56). The second highest listed site is located on the Casco Height's property and will be part of the RO-S property.

Ridge Development will be working in conjunction with Portland Trails to develop the trail system on the site. The **Comprehensive Plan lauds Portland Trails** for its diligent work in creating at least 50 miles of public trails in Portland. Assuming final agreement by Ridge Development and Portland Trails, Ridge Development will convey a trail easement to Portland Trails over all of the trails on the R-5A portion of the site, and will convey all of the land to be rezoned R-OS to Portland Trails in fee, both subject to use restrictions. Between the two zones, at least 3,207 linear feet of trails will be constructed for public use. This is consistent with the strategies contained in the Comprehensive Plan to foster partnerships with nonprofits with similar goals and to continue to attract private funding to enhance recreation and open space goals (Comp. Plan, Vol. I, p. R-5).

4. Environmental Protection: Encouraging growth and development in appropriate areas, and discouraging or prohibiting development where it is hazardous or threatens natural resources is another goal of the Comprehensive Plan. Specifically, it states: **"locate and design housing to reduce impacts on environmentally sensitive areas"** (Comp. Plan, Vol. I, p. 22). The Casco Heights proposal has done this, both within its own site and within the context of Greater Portland.

Within the 18-acre site, the buildings and road infrastructure have been moved down the slope to stay away from environmentally sensitive wetland areas. The roads

have been designed to avoid going up steep inclines where possible, to minimize erosion. Structures have been massed to minimize the need for blasting and to reduce the amount of impervious surface. The developer will place 7.92 acres under the control of Portland Trails; all of the land in that portion of the site not used for pedestrian trails will be left in its natural state. On the R-5A portion of the site, Casco Heights has made a commitment to carefully evaluate construction options relative to the existing vegetation, and has identified tree preservation areas where it will actively work to save mature trees to the extent possible. There is also a 20' "no cut" strip of land in the R-5A zone abutting the R-OS zone for its entire length. These efforts to reduce negative environmental impact are all consistent with the goals of the Comprehensive Plan.

This environmental goal may also be viewed in a **broader context, intended to direct coastal development to sites that can accommodate it.** The State Coastal Management Policies, the Mandatory Shoreland Zoning Act (as implemented by City zoning), and the City's Islands Land Use and Zoning Study all recognize that absent regulation, there will be a very high demand to build residences in locations with views of coastal waters. Yet unless properly sited, building near coastal waters can pose an environmental threat to coastal resources, place residences in hazardous locations, and reduce the scarce supply of land suitable for water-dependent uses. Portland has adopted shoreland zoning and waterfront zoning to regulate setbacks and establish allowable uses along waterbodies. Similarly, Portland has zoned its islands for very low density development, based in part upon a groundwater carrying capacity analysis which sets limits based upon an assumption that each island might need to be self-supporting with regard to fresh water at some point in the future (Comp. Plan, Vol. I, p. 53).

Thus, if Portland wants to capitalize upon the high demand for views of coastal waters, that demand will have to be satisfied by non-harbor, non-island locations. Allowing 94 units on the Casco Heights site, approximately most of which will have spectacular views of Casco Bay, may take some pressure off more hazardous or environmentally fragile locations. This is very much in keeping with state and local policies and with the Comprehensive Plan (Comp. Plan, Vol. I, p. 59).

5. Urban Design: The Comprehensive Plan notes that Portland's topography plays an important role in shaping perceptions of and views from the City. The high bluffs of the Western and Eastern Promenades are said to help accentuate a sense of Portland as a "city of stature." Similarly, the Plan notes: "off the peninsula, the topography of the city includes several high points that provide scenic vistas or are appealing objects for viewing themselves. For example, Graves Hill offers a majestic view of the Presumpscot River Sanctuary and the islands." (Comp. Plan., Vol. I, p. N-15). At an elevation of 174 feet, Graves Hill is the second highest off-peninsula point of land, six feet lower than Summit Hill and one foot lower than the Western Promenade. Graves Hill is the site on which Casco Heights will be built.

The interplay of the natural topography with the built environment can further accentuate the distinctive sense of place. *Green Spaces, Blue Edges* challenges the City to:

[d]evelop a vision of the natural environment that enhances the full range of dynamic contrasts between the landscapes and built forms found in Portland, which will enrich the appearance and enliven the use of our City. (Comp. Plan, Vol. I, p. 24)

The building design proposed for Casco Heights embodies dynamic contrasts between natural features and the built forms. Siting relatively tall, built upon one of the higher hills in Portland emphasizes the natural topography. The buildings themselves will be surrounded by mostly-forested open space. Due to the vegetation, they will be only minimally visible to their immediate neighbors

Even though it addressed primarily non-residential uses, the Downtown Height Study, a component of the Comprehensive Plan, provides important guidance for approaching height issues at Graves Hill (Comp. Plan, Vol. I, p. N-17). Based on an extensive process lead by a skilled consultant, in 1989 the City adopted height overlay zones for the entire peninsula. The process examined the contextual relationship, the underlying topography, the skyline, view corridors, architectural massing, the resulting pedestrian environment, open space, transportation capacity, and build out scenarios.

One of the primary recommendations was that the **tallest structures should be located on the high points already established by the natural topography**. This meant the tallest buildings should be located along the raised spine of the peninsula (along Congress Street/Cumberland Avenue), and that heights should step down as the topography fell off toward Back Cove and Commercial Street. The rationale for this design was that it would produce the most visually interesting, graceful skyline, reflective of the underlying place, and it would also preserve views from multiple locations.

By analogy, the Downtown Height Study component of the Comprehensive Plan suggests that Casco Heights is located at precisely the right location, on one of the points of high natural topography, to create visual interest and avoid blocking views. It also suggests that heights in excess of 150 feet have been determined to be compatible with Portland's sense of a human scale and in keeping with the local context. Casco Heights, at a maximum height of 75 feet, is well under that height. Finally, consistent with the study's conclusion that architects needed to pay much more additional attention to the tops of buildings, the Casco Heights structures are already designed for maximum visual interest.