

CONSERVATION ADVISORY COUNCILS AND BOARDS



Hudson River
Estuary Program

Building Capacity for Local Conservation in New York

What is a Conservation Advisory Council (CAC)?

In municipalities throughout New York, **Conservation Advisory Councils (CACs)** and **Conservation Boards (CBs)** serve as important advisory bodies to local governing boards, planning boards, and zoning boards of appeals. By providing an environmental perspective on land-use proposals, comprehensive plans, stewardship of natural areas, and other issues, CACs contribute to local land use decision-making, conservation, and quality of life for residents in the community. And, since their mandate includes inventorying natural areas and open space in the municipality, they are uniquely positioned to provide the "big picture" view needed for natural resource-based planning.

How is a CAC established?

CACs are established by a municipality under [Article 12-F Section 239-x](#) of NYS General Municipal Law and are also called "environmental commissions." A CAC may be established by ordinance or by local law and is composed of 3-9 residents appointed by the local legislative body. Members should have a strong interest in the mission of the council, the time and willingness to work on CAC tasks, and ability to work cooperatively with other municipal agencies. It is helpful to have some members with knowledge and experience in the environmental sciences, planning, engineering, and law; however, there are no minimum professional qualifications. CAC members with an eagerness to learn are equally valuable and can attend trainings and educational opportunities to build their knowledge and skills.



Photo: Laura Heady

Resources for CACs and CBs:

- New York State Association of Conservation Commissions
<https://nysacc.org/>
- *A Guide to the Organization of Local Environmental Advisory Councils*
<http://planning.westchestergov.com/images/stories/reports/CACguide97.pdf>
- Conservation and Land Use Webinar Training Series
<https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/120539.html>
- Hudson River Estuary Conservation Planning Guidance
<https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/5094.html>
 - *Conserving Natural Areas and Wildlife in Your Community*
 - *Creating a Natural Resources Inventory*
- *New York State Local Open Space Planning Guide*
<https://dos.ny.gov/open-space-planning>

How do CACs or CBs benefit local governments?

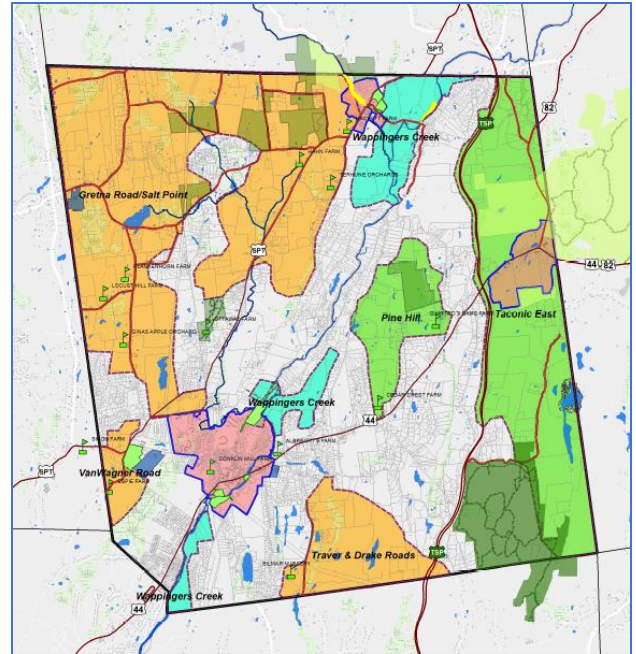
CACs and CBs provide a formal structure within local governments to advise on the development, management, and protection of local natural resources. Members of CACs and CBs may conduct policy research, deliver education programs, implement stewardship projects, and gather and distribute information to other town agencies, land-use applicants, and the general public. In particular, CACs are directed to keep an inventory and map of local open space (e.g., forests, fields, wetlands), which provides an essential foundation for community planning.

CACs and CBs also provide an invaluable service to time-strapped planning boards by contributing to environmental reviews. They can conduct site visits, analyze resources, document potential environmental impacts, and consider how natural areas on a site relate to surrounding resources.

Open Space Definition

“Any area characterized by natural scenic beauty or, whose existing openness, natural condition or present state of use, if preserved, would enhance the present or potential value of abutting or surrounding development or would establish a desirable pattern of development or would offer substantial conformance with the planning objectives of the municipality or would maintain or enhance the conservation of natural or scenic resources.”

- NYS General Municipal Law Article 12-F Section 239-x



Priority Open Space Areas, Town of Pleasant Valley Open Space and Farmland Plan (2013)

Natural Resource and Open Space Inventories

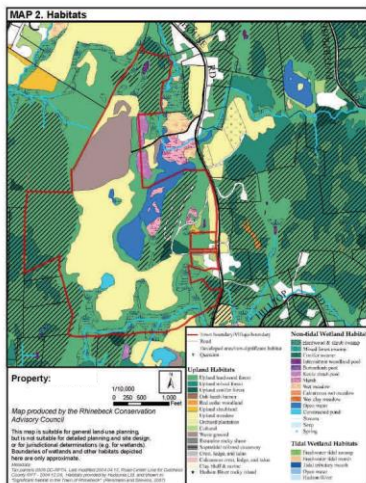
State enabling legislation directs CACs to complete an **open space inventory (OSI)** prioritizing open areas in a municipality for conservation based on natural, scenic, and cultural values. A **natural resources inventory** maps and describes these resources and is the implicit foundation for an OSI. On the basis of this information, an OSI lists important lands in the community according to priority for conservation or acquisition and displays them on an open space map. An OSI is often developed within a broader **open space plan**, which outlines strategies for the conservation and stewardship of priority lands, and serves to complement and inform the local comprehensive plan.

Conservation Board Status

When a local legislature adopts the open space inventory and map prepared by the CAC, the inventory becomes the official **open space index** for the municipality. The legislature may then pass a resolution or local law to designate the CAC as a conservation board (CB). While still advisory in nature, CBs are more formally involved in review of land-use applications affecting areas listed in the index. This process is outlined in [Article 12-F Section 239-y](#) of NYS General Municipal Law. Note that in some communities CACs participate in environmental reviews without having acquired board status.

Developing a strong advisory role:

- Establish good working relationships with other local agency members by regularly attending their meetings.
- Take a collaborative, constructive approach.
- Maintain a scientific, objective perspective.
- Build expertise by attending educational trainings.
- Engage from the start of a project.
- Provide reviews and recommendations in a timely fashion.
- Ask questions!



Natural resource maps compiled by the Rhinebeck CAB are used to inform environmental review.

CASE STUDY: Town of Rhinebeck Conservation Advisory Board (CAB)

In the Town of Rhinebeck in Dutchess County, **the CAB provides natural resource information to the planning board** for all new development proposals. The CAB maintains a database of publicly available information about soil, slopes, habitats, floodplains, wetlands, etc. When a new proposal is referred to the CAB, the members use computer mapping software to prepare site-specific maps and identify sensitive natural resources for the planning board. The Rhinebeck CAB also maintains a database of **habitat-based conservation recommendations** from scientific reports and literature. For each development project before the planning board, the CAB assembles a set of development guidelines based on the types and configuration of habitats shown on the natural resource maps they’ve created. The maps and recommendations provide objective, science-based information to the land use review process. In one instance, the CAB maps alerted the planning board of an area protected by the town’s wetland watershed zoning provisions and changes were made to the project design. The planning board now relies on the CAB’s analysis and provides a **site resource analysis assessment checklist** to applicants to streamline the review process and get everyone on the same page.