
6.0 OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

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6.1 Regional Overview

Corte Madera has an extensive array of open spaces and parks. The system combines dedicated open space areas and preserves, primarily under the jurisdiction of Marin County, with Town owned and maintained parks. Corte Madera also provides a wide range of recreation and leisure program services for Town residents.

6.2 State and National Perspectives on Open Space and Parks

California Government Code Section 65560(b) defines “open space land” as any parcel or area of land or water that is unimproved and devoted to an open space use. Open space land is designated on a local, regional, or state open space plan as any of the following:

- 1) Open space for the *preservation of natural resources*, including but not limited to areas required for the preservation of plant and animal life, including habitat for fish and wildlife species; areas required for ecological and other scientific study; rivers, streams, bays and estuaries; and coastal beaches, lakeshores, river and stream banks, and watershed lands.
- 2) Open space used for the *managed production of resources*, including but not limited to forestlands, rangeland, agricultural lands and areas of economic importance for the production of food and fiber; recharge areas for ground water basins; bays, estuaries, marshes, rivers and streams important for the management of commercial fisheries; and areas containing mineral deposits.
- 3) Open space for *outdoor recreation*, including but not limited to areas of outstanding scenic, historic and cultural value; areas particularly suited for park and recreation purposes, including access to lakeshores, beaches, and rivers and streams; and areas that serve as links between major recreation and open space reservations, including utility easements, river and stream banks, trails and scenic highway corridors.
- 4) Open space for *public health and safety*, including but not limited to areas that require special management or regulation because of hazardous or special conditions, such as earthquake fault zones, unstable soil areas, floodplains, watersheds, high fire risk areas, areas required for the protection of water quality and water reservoirs, and areas required for the protection and enhancement of air quality.

Recreational lands are different from other open space lands by their availability for public access and direct recreational uses. These lands vary by size, use, and facilities. The National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) has developed definitions for types of recreational facilities which, with modifications, are as follows:

Mini-park: A specialized facility that serves a concentrated or limited population or specific group such as tots or senior citizens. This facility should be located

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within neighborhoods and in close proximity to apartment complexes, townhouse developments, or housing for the elderly.

Neighborhood park: An area for intense recreational activities such as field games, court games, crafts, playground apparatus, skating, picnicking, wading pools, etc. Neighborhood park sites should be suited for intense development, easily accessible to neighborhood populations, and geographically located for safe walking and bicycle access.

Community park: An area of diverse recreational value including intense recreational facilities such as athletic complexes and pools, as well as more passive uses such as picnicking, viewing, nature study, and other types of recreational development.

Regional park/Park preserve: An area of natural or ornamental quality for outdoor recreation such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping and trail uses, with much of the land reserved for conservation and natural resource management.

The NRPA also describes several other types of recreational facilities such as “linear parks” for hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding; “special use” areas for such activities as golf, gardens, outdoor theaters, and other specialized recreations; and “conservancies” designated for the protection and management of natural or cultural resources.

State law and policies, as expressed in the requirements for the Open Space Element of the General Plan, promote the retention of open space for recreational purposes. Beyond the general requirements, however, no specific standards have been established. Rather, it has been left to the local governments to decide how much land should be set aside as open space. The NRPA has established guidelines for the amount of recreational land necessary to serve a given population. These guidelines are oriented largely toward more metropolitan areas. For example, a “neighborhood park” as defined by the NRPA would serve a population of up to 5,000 people. Therefore, the NRPA advises each jurisdiction to establish its own standards that are tailored to the unique characteristics of the area, rather than to adopt the guidelines verbatim.

The NRPA noted that increased development density and trends toward apartment living are inducing a greater reliance on public recreation space. As community development proceeds, informal recreation spaces such as streets and vacant lots will become increasingly scarce. In addition to public recreation spaces, there will be a need to provide adequate on-site recreational space as a part of proposed housing developments, particularly in multi-family developments.

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6.3 Community and Neighborhood Parks

Corte Madera is equipped with neighborhood parks varying in size, and generally distributed through the community. Recreational facilities include play equipment, soccer fields, softball fields, picnic areas, tennis courts, basketball courts, roller hockey, and volleyball courts.

Existing Parks

Town Park, the community's centerpiece, is a 22.7-acre park with a downtown location at Tamalpais Drive between Eastman Avenue and Pixley Avenue. In 1946 the Corte Madera Volunteer Fire Department presented a Master Plan for development of the Town Park. When the Neil Cummins Elementary School was opened in 1953, adjacent to the Park, cooperative use of the park and school site were considered, and in 1957 preliminary drawings were submitted for the Corte Madera Park Development. As time passed, the Town Council decided to update the park plan with a new plan that would not only salvage the park's amenities, but create new ones. The new Master Plan, with a phased renovation and redesign program, was adopted in 1979. The extensive park now contains numerous picnic areas with barbecues, softball and soccer fields, tennis courts, a basketball court, skate park, and playground equipment at various locations, restrooms, and parking.

Other park sites include *San Clemente*, *Granada*, *Skunk Hollow* and *Menke Park*. The Town also owns a small boathouse and dock at *Higgins Landing* along Corte Madera Creek (accessible to boats primarily during high tides), a linear park near the Bay (*Bayside Trail*, formerly known as San Clemente Linear Park), as well as *Shorebird Marsh Park*, which is a designated park just north of The Village Shopping Center. The location of these parks is shown in **Figure 6.3.1**, while details on park size, facilities and ownership status are summarized in **Table 6.3.1**.

Corte Madera residents may also use Larkspur parks and other Town of Corte Madera facilities such as the Teen Center, located across from the Recreation Center on Tamalpais Drive, the San Clemente School's multi-use room, as well as local church meeting rooms.

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Figure 6.3.1

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Table 6.3.1 Corte Madera Parks

Park Site	Size of Park	Park Facilities	Ownership Status
Town Park	22.7 Acres	Picnic area, softball and soccer fields, tennis courts, basketball courts, playground, skate park, restrooms and parking lot.	Primarily Town-owned. Joint use agreement (JUA) with Larkspur School District for small portions of playfields.
San Clemente Park	8.5 Acres	Softball field, picnic area, volleyball area, restroom and parking lot.	Larkspur School District owns site; JUA with Town for park use expires 2017.
Granada Park	.5 Acres	Tennis court, picnic area and parking area.	Reed School District owns site; JUA with Town for park use expires 2005.
Skunk Hollow Mini-Park	.25 Acres	Playground and picnic area. On-street parking required.	Town owned.
Menke Park	1.0 Acres	Picnic area, bandstand/pavilion, parking lot.	County owns old transportation right-of-way; Town owns remainder of site.
Bayside Trail Park	2.75 Acres	Hiking trail area in linear park.	Caltrans owns site, with JUA with Town.
Higgins Landing	.1 Acres	Small boat house, dock. On-street parking required.	Town owned.
Shorebird Marsh Park	N/A	Marsh area situated between Highway 101 and Ecological Preserve	Designated park.
<i>Total Acreage: 35.8 Acres* Parks Acreage/1,000 Population: 3.88 Acres/1,000</i> <i>*Acreage does not include the Shorebird Marsh Park, which consists of marsh habitat</i>			

Park Ratios per Town Residents

There are several “standards” of park acreage that can be considered in Corte Madera. Table 6.3.1 identifies that Corte Madera has a total of 35.8 acres of parkland (not including the Shorebird Marsh Park), equating to a parks ratio of 3.88 acres/1,000 Town residents. This falls short of meeting the General Plan’s (Policy 2.8.3) desired ratio of 5.0 acres/1,000 residents, but exceeds the National Recreation Association standard of 2.5 acres/1,000 residents. Rather than seeking new park sites, the General Plan emphasized retention and upgrading of existing park facilities, keeping the 5.0 acres/1,000 residents goal in the event additional parklands became available.

Additionally, the Corte Madera Municipal Code (Section 17.30.020) utilizes a standard of 4.0 acres/1,000 residents. (This latter requirement is applicable to subdivisions of 50

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units or more; smaller projects are required to pay an in-lieu fee to the Town. The fee is based on an estimate of the current market value of the land.) The existing ratio of 3.88 acres/1,000 comes very close to meeting the Municipal Code standard.

Perhaps somewhat misleading when considering Corte Madera's parkland situation is to discount the extensive array of regional open space lands, both in the Town and adjacent to it, as well as marsh and wetland sites along the Bay front. While they do not have the same set of recreational opportunities as do the Town's parks (understandable, since the goal of these sites is to provide more passive recreational opportunities), they clearly add to the availability of recreation lands in Corte Madera. Open space and marsh/wetland areas are discussed below in Section 6.4.

Most of the parks in the Town are located within walking or biking distance of residential neighborhoods, with the exception of upslope areas in Christmas Tree Hill. Here, trail connections make access to Town Park more viable. Additionally, these trails provide connections to the Blithedale Summit Open Space Preserve to the west and Camino Alto Open Space Preserve to the southwest.

There are a few "private" park sites in the Town, typically consisting of tot lots or open play fields, that also provide recreational opportunities for residents of the particular subdivision.

6.4 Regional Open Spaces and Marshes

Open Space Preserves

An extensive collection of open space preserves is located in and around Corte Madera. Owned and maintained by the Marin County Open Space District, these areas provide for the preservation and restoration of natural resources, particularly in the ridge lands, and their related habitats.

Since the adoption of *The Parks and Recreation Plan 1990 Outdoor Recreation Plan for Marin County* in 1965, Federal and State park acquisitions have contributed lands for public use. These parks serve the region and are used as a destination for visitors to the region. The Marin County Open Space District was established in 1972 for the acquisition and management of open space lands, with operations funded through an ongoing property tax. Working in partnership with local agencies and a number of county service areas, the Open Space District has been able to acquire over 10,000 acres of land on ridges and hillsides, as well as some creek and wetland acreage. These lands provide open space and community separators in the urban corridor of Marin County.



Hiking trails abound in the Ring Mountain Open Space Preserve.

According to the Marin Countywide Plan Parks and Recreation Element, the total acreage in recreation and open space use in Marin County more than quadrupled between 1965 and 1990. This increase is due to acquisitions by the Federal and State governments and the Marin County Open Space District. The District's aim has been to preserve lands that are of unique importance to county residents, but which are outside the boundaries of State and Federally protected properties. In addition, the 20,000 acres of watershed lands owned by the Marin Municipal Water District, located northwest of Corte Madera, are open to the public for hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, and fishing in seven lands.

There are five Open Space Preserves in and adjacent to the Town, shown in **Figure 6.3.1**:

- Blithedale Summit
- Camino Alto
- Alto Bowl
- Tiburon Ridge, and
- Ring Mountain.

These preserves provide passive recreational opportunities for Town residents, including hiking, mountain biking, picnicking and bird-watching. Access to the preserves varies. Ring Mountain, for example, has a small on-street parking area along its Paradise Drive frontage, while other preserves, such as Blithedale Summit, are connected by hiking trails to the Christmas Tree Hill area below.

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Marshes and Wetlands

Marshes and wetlands provide important and beneficial plant and wildlife habitat, and enhance recreational values as open space and wildlife sanctuaries. In general, these areas include mudflats, tidal salt marshes, diked marshlands, associated uplands and freshwater marshes. Corte Madera marshes are an important part of the San Francisco Bay wetlands system, and provide habitat for many birds, including several rare and endangered species. They also expand the Town's recreational opportunities through use of these open spaces for passive recreational activities.

There are several marsh areas along Corte Madera's Bay front, noted below, and shown in **Figure 6.3.1**:

- *Corte Madera State Ecological Reserve.* The largest holding of marshlands in Corte Madera is the tidal salt marsh and mudflats, which make up the 200 plus acres of the Reserve. The Ecological Reserve includes lands previously known as the Heerdt Marsh, the Muzzi Marsh, and Marta's Marsh. This area has been fully restored as a tidal wetland as a mitigation for the dredging and filling associated with the operations of the Larkspur Ferry. It includes hiking trails and wildlife observation areas.
- *Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District Site.* This 72-acre site is surrounded on three sides by the Corte Madera State Ecological Reserve. Approximately half of the site is classified as a seasonal wetland by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It includes trail access (along the Old Northwestern Pacific Railroad right-of-way).
- *Madera Bay Park Site/Shorebird Marsh Park and Humber Marsh/The Habitat Site:* These marsh and upland sites, north of The Village Shopping Center, provide access to the marsh areas from Paradise Drive and through parking areas.
- *Triangular Marsh:* This area of tidal mudflat and salt marsh is privately owned, but includes access points for wildlife viewing from Paradise Drive and Cay Passage.

6.5 Hiking Trails

Subtle in their appearance and therefore largely known only to area residents, Corte Madera hosts an extensive array of hiking trails in its hillside areas. Most of these climb the Chapman and Christmas Tree Hill areas through a series of staircases and earth trails. They vary in width, with some only a few feet wide. Others, such as California Lane, are open, sunny expanses lined with flowers and other landscaping improvements.

These trails provide an important link to the Town and, particularly for those near the base of the Hills, a viable alternative to the automobile to connect to the Town center. They also provide convenient points of access to regional open space and hiking areas

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such as the Blithedale Summit, Baltimore Canyon and Camino Alto Open Space Preserves, as well as serving as gateways for the especially energetic hiker heading toward open space lands in the Marin Municipal Water District or Mt. Tamalpais State Park. The trails also serve as useful alternative emergency evacuation routes, and for public utilities use, such as water distribution and storm water drainage collection.

Most of the trails in the Christmas Tree Hill area are the result of easements created through subdivisions decades ago, intended to interconnect narrow and winding streets by trails and paths. Up to 36 easements were shown in the original Christmas Tree Hill subdivisions. Today, the easements take various forms in terms of ownership and maintenance:

- Some of the trails are still privately owned and maintained, in some instances contained partially within fenced yards.
- Some portions of the easements have become overgrown and neglected, and to passersby no evidence of a trail easement exists.
- Other segments of easements have been dedicated to the Town by adjoining property owners and are used today by the community.

The Town maintains some of these trails (recognized by an on-going Capital Improvement Project in the Town Budget). The trails tend to be accessible mostly to neighborhood residents due to limited availability of on-street parking near the trails.

The Town also has trail systems (suitable in some instances for bicycle use) around Town Park, along High Canal, along Casa Buena Drive and Madera del Presidio Drive, leading to the Quarry Meadows open space, in the Bayside Trail Park and leading to the State Ecological Preserve, and along portions of Paradise Drive. Trail locations are shown in **Figure 5.8.1**.

6.6 Recreation and Leisure Service Facilities and Programs

The Town's Recreation and Leisure Services Department offers a wide range of recreational and leisure programs for Town residents. These include programs for children, teenagers, adults and seniors, and ranging from arts and crafts, gymnastics, basketball, gardening, dancing and organized "field trips" to such places as southern California, Arizona and Nevada. A needs assessment survey is used to indicate needed community programs, and includes evaluations given directly to program participants.

The Recreation Center at 498 Tamalpais Drive serves as the focal point for the Town's recreational and leisure service activities. It consists of an approximately 8,500 square foot facility that includes meeting and administrative rooms, as well as a separate 1,600 square foot youth center. The building is over 55 years old. A geotechnical study was done stating the building is generally safe, excepting possible damage from a strong earthquake occurring at or near the building location. Any remodeling activities would require improvements to the foundation, including ties to bedrock. (Personal communication, Administration, Recreation and Leisure Services staff, 2002).

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Corte Madera Recreation Center at Town Park, Tamalpais Drive.

According to administrative staff at the Department of Recreation and Leisure Services, the Town's facilities are too small to meet the ongoing needs of the community. The small corporation yard (about the size of 1 ½ garages) across from the Recreation Center is used and has been converted into a small dance studio, while the offices were divided into a computer lab and remaining space is used as a teen center. The Recreation Center's useable space includes a patio area, lobby, main hall (for quiet activities), kitchen, and stage, and the room behind the stage is used for classes. The east side of the building houses a long but narrow office.

Other facilities used by the Town's Recreation and Leisure Services Department include the Neil Cummins School classrooms, the San Clemente School's multi-use room, when available, and meeting space within the Church on the Hill on the east side of Corte Madera and Holy Innocence on the west side of town.

Community Gathering Locations

The Town's recreational facilities provide the primary community gathering locations. Town Park/Recreation Center, with its large open areas, community rooms and available off-street parking, tends to serve as the primary gathering location for large community events. Menke Park is the Town's other significant gathering site, and serves as host to the Town's annual Oktoberfest, while its Piccolo Pavilion and adjoining park area allows

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for smaller gatherings. Town residents also utilize privately owned gathering locations, such as outdoor seating areas at the Town Center shopping center.