



The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's  
Canoe Access Development Fund (CADF)  
Project Implementation Manual

# A Short Guide to Implementing a Canoe Access Site in Your Community

Western Pennsylvania  
Conservancy



[waterlandlife.org](http://waterlandlife.org)

# DEDICATION

Outdoor enthusiasts Roy Weil and Mary Shaw, members of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy since 1974, established the **Canoe Access Development Fund** in 2008 to encourage others to get outdoors and help make Western Pennsylvania's rivers and streams more accessible for recreation. They strongly believe in the importance of connecting people to nature through hands-on experiences. Roy and Mary hope that when people have easier access to area streams, they will be inspired to preserve our region's natural heritage. When setting up the fund, they chose the Conservancy due to its commitment to conservation, the outdoors, water trails and getting people engaged with the natural world.



*Mary Shaw and Roy Weil generously fund the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's Canoe Access Development Fund.*

*Thank you, Roy and Mary, for entrusting the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy with your generous gift. We are continually inspired by your knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment to connecting people to nature and encouraging them to experience all our region has to offer.*

*Paddling is one of the fastest growing sports for exercise and recreation in the United States.*



## THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Picture yourself floating down a scenic river, occasionally dipping your paddle to steer around a boulder, but mostly enjoying the peaceful quiet and beautiful scenery. You spot a whitetail deer drinking on the shore and birds diving to snatch insects for a mid-day meal. A bald eagle soars overhead, its shadow darkening the water. You take a moment to observe a school of small fish, and a crayfish scoots by. A long riffle adds some excitement to your sojourn, as the cool water sprays your face. Before long, you arrive at a takeout where your vehicle awaits you to load your boat and head off.

If that sounds idyllic to you, you're not alone. According to the 2019 Special Report on Paddlesports and Safety completed by the Outdoor Foundation, paddling remains one of the fastest growing sports for exercise and recreation in the United States, with kayaks leading the choice of boats. Recreational tourism is one of the biggest economic industries in Pennsylvania; our abundant creeks and rivers are an incredible resource. As more people get on the water, it's important that safe, durable, accessible sites are available.

This manual is meant as a guide for groups interested in developing and improving canoe and kayak access sites on Pennsylvania's rivers and streams, such as existing watershed associations, paddling clubs, outdoors groups and community organizations that are able to develop and maintain a public access site.

Although not comprehensive, this manual is as complete as possible while also being useful for a broad audience. It provides an overview of the concerns and considerations in developing river access sites, required permitting and construction logistics, long-term maintenance and sustainability, and promotion of the site and river or stream.



*This access site in Bolivar, Pa., features a gentle, paved slope to the water.*



*A simple gravel path in Laurel Hill State Park is an attractive and practical addition for paddlers.*



*The concrete at this access site in Utica, Pa., has striations to help prevent slipping when entering and exiting the water.*

## GETTING STARTED

Perhaps the most challenging part of building or improving canoe access is just getting started. This section provides some questions that will help your group create a framework during the early planning stages.

### What Makes a Good Canoe Access Site

A canoe access is a place where people can access a stream or river so they can place their canoe or kayak in the water.

However, a number of components are necessary to have a usable site. There should be somewhere to park vehicles and unload boats and gear, and a way to get to the water safely and efficiently. The area should be cleared of brush and trees, and have a gentle slope and a path, steps or ramp made of a sustainable material that is fairly easily maintained.

If space, funds and person hours allow, sites can include amenities such as parking lots, trash receptacles, benches, restrooms, signage and information kiosks, fishing line recycling containers and more. Consider adding trash and recycling containers only if someone has a clear and regular responsibility for checking and or removing waste.

## Who Can Build A Canoe Access Site

Watershed associations, paddling clubs, outdoors groups, municipalities and community organizations that want to encourage people to recreate on streams and rivers are all great candidates for building public canoe access sites. This guide is most helpful for those groups, although individuals are certainly welcome and able to develop access on their own property. Building a public access site usually requires the support of a coalition, organization or other entity for long-term success.

## How to Choose a Canoe Access Site

Consider holding a brainstorming session within your organization. Many factors determine what makes a good location for canoe access. The following questions will help your group address the project's functionality, think about accessibility along the entire river or stream and envision the ideal scenario. By thoroughly discussing the goals early in the process, the canoe access development will be a better project.

- Is there a nearby place to launch or take out?
- How close are connecting sites?
- What is a reasonable distance between sites?
- What is the preferred distance between sites? (Novice paddlers tend to prefer shorter distances of around five to six miles. Experienced paddlers will certainly go for longer distances, overnight or multiday trips.)

Other considerations include:

- What is the waterway's "carrying capacity" — an upper limit of paddlers at which the waterway will be overwhelmed?
- What is the anticipated usage volume and type of user?
- What is the regional geography — developed vs. wild and scenic?
- How many access sites are too many for a waterway?

*A canoe access on Pymatuning Creek in Jamestown, Pa., is located within Pymatuning State Park.*



## Case Studies

*Here are examples to help the thought process:*

### **Example 1: Jacobs Creek Watershed Association**

The Jacobs Creek Watershed Association (JCWA) has worked for years on improving water quality and reducing stormwater impacts on Jacobs Creek. They are invested in educating the community about the resource in their literal backyards. They have completed two access projects in Scottdale that link a section of Jacobs Creek. This creates a short, mile-long paddle that's accessible to beginners, an easy float for summertime tubers and an easy way to explore the water's edge. The organization wanted to make access to the waterway welcoming and easy, to encourage locals to step out of their comfort zones and explore the resource.

In the case above, the distance between access sites was very short, but intentional. The JCWA wanted to provide an amenity to the community, an opportunity to connect people to nature and to support their overall mission: "The conservation of our natural resources, rehabilitation of the creek and watershed, environmental education and recreation."



*The Jacobs Creek Watershed Association has completed two access projects in Scottdale, Pa., that create a mile-long paddle accessible to beginners.*

*A kiosk and bench are amenities at this access site on the Casselman River in Rockwood, Pa.*



### **Example 2: Casselman River Watershed Association**

Sometimes access sites involve coordination throughout an entire watershed area. The Casselman River is a whitewater gem transecting Somerset County as it cuts through a mountain in the Laurel Highlands region. The river shares its path with the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP), a rail trail that runs from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md. WPC's Casselman River Conservation Area protects 644 acres along several sections of the GAP trail and the Casselman River. The nearby Youghiogheny River is a popular waterway for boats and rafters.

The Casselman River Watershed Association is “devoted to the conservation of the natural resources located within the Casselman River Watershed.” The Casselman River Watershed Conservation Plan, authorized in 2001, offers guidance and funding opportunities for conservation and recreation projects. A regional effort has been developed by partnering groups including the Allegheny Trail Alliance, Somerset County Conservation District and WPC's land conservation and watershed programs. The watershed association has improved access at five sites on the river and supported three additional sites on nearby Laurel Hill Creek. Their oldest project has been in place since 2009.

In that case, the organization was looking at a larger system with a much different landscape and geographic nature. That led to a different approach and different questions to consider.

However, not all projects are looking to address river accessibility on a grander scale. If your municipality or organization feels that an existing site needs improvements, it's likely that the site is established and utilized enough that such an exercise is not needed. Ultimately it is up to your group to determine how to implement your vision.

# SITE CONSIDERATIONS

## Where to Build or Improve a Canoe Access Site

A primary goal of WPC's CADF program is to invest funding to make the improvements needed for a good experience. WPC's Canoe Access fund emphasizes its focus on Class I or II waterways, but does fund other projects if they fit well within our guidelines. Often, existing informal canoe access sites are good places to start, as they are evidence of use. These sites typically need improvements to reduce erosion, increase safety and ensure long-term sustainability. In cases where private land is being used for public access, landowners are often receptive to access improvement projects. Contacting the landowner should always be the first step upon identification of a potential site.

## Addressing Land Ownership (Public or Private)

Working on public land (municipal, state or federal) assures that the site will not be closed due to a change of ownership. Often, these landowners have an interest in the improvement and are able to contribute to the project. Long-term, signed agreements with private landowners are recommended for any project. Ten-year agreements are required for the CADF program. These agreements benefit both the landowner and the organization completing the project. The landowner knows that there is a party that will steward the project site upon completion, and the organization can rest assured their work will be accessible for the long-term. Several sample agreements are included at the end of this manual.

## Liability

Often, concerns over liability are raised when discussing projects with landowners. Pennsylvania's Recreational Use of Land and Water Act (RULWA) limits landowners' liability for personal injury and property damage if they make their land available to the public for recreation. Landowners who permit or invite members of the general public onto their properties for recreational purposes, free of charge, can raise this statute as a defense if they are sued for personal injury or property damage. More information can be found on the [WeConservePA \(formerly PA Land Trust Association\)](#).

## Improvements at Existing Facilities

For the reasons above, it's often more practical to complete access improvement projects where recreational facilities already exist. Community parks and playgrounds make excellent candidate sites when located adjacent to waterways and have the added benefit of encouraging non-paddling users to explore their environment. Existing parking areas for rails-to-trails are ideal places to develop canoe access sites. These old rail grades often follow the river corridor, are in close proximity to the waterway, have amenities such as pavilions and restrooms and offer the opportunity for multisport adventures (or self-shuttle for the ambitious).

When completing improvements adjacent to existing recreational facilities, adjustments might be necessary to accommodate additional users. Normally empty parking lots might fill to capacity for sporting events. Families visiting neighborhood playgrounds might not enjoy an influx of river users. Streams popular for fishing sometimes see user conflicts with paddlers. Directional and informational/educational signs can ease the process, and a friendly smile or wave and a little patience go a long way.

## DESIGN, PERMITTING AND ENGINEERING

Perhaps the most time-intensive but important step in developing a canoe access is the project planning stage. Good projects require good planning and often that can take time. Be patient, but persistent with this process. Employ the skills of local partners, such as the county conservation district or the planning commission.

### Site Design Considerations

There are as many different approaches to designing canoe access sites as there are people who design them. Basic considerations include:

- the slope and surface of the access;
- exposure to streambank erosion or stormwater runoff;
- suitability and affordability of materials;
- site limitations or restrictions (such as Wild & Scenic River designation).

The National Park Service has developed a thorough **manual on the design components of access sites** and a **helpful guidebook** in cooperation with the River Management Society.

To an extent, WPC is available for technical assistance with developing a canoe access from start to finish. We hope to grow this aspect of the program as funding becomes available. That said, local partners are almost always the best resource for your project.



*This site on the Little Mahoning Creek near Rochester Mills, Pa., is simple and basic, but the site designers considered slope, surface, ease of maintenance and erosion and flooding factors.*

## Permitting

If the project constructs an actual access within the limits of the waterway or floodplain, a permit is necessary. If it's an access road, trail work or parking improvement, a permit may not be required. The best procedure is to contact your local county conservation district. This agency will be aware of current permitting requirements and often can assist with developing the permit package for submission. Visit the [Pennsylvania Association of Conservation District's webpage](#) to find the contact information for your district office.

Larger projects, such as those requiring significant modifications to a riverbank, involve working around wetlands or are part of a master site plan, might be better suited for design and permitting by an engineering consultant.

Anticipate permit authorization to take at least a month, or longer if the permit must be submitted to the state for approval or is more complex than a general permit. Sometimes it is easier to access funding for improvements when you have a permit in hand, so it's prudent to begin the permitting process once a site has been identified.

*Conservation planning tools are available for planning sites in natural heritage areas, on protected lands and on high-quality streams, such as the French Creek in Meadville, Pa.*



## Minimizing the Environmental Impact

The potential impact to environmental resources is a concern when developing a canoe access site. The inclusion of Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory (PNDI) clearance is a requirement of filing a general permit application. This clearance seeks to minimize disturbance of sensitive species and/or important ecosystems.

The Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Partnership (PNHP) offers the **Conservation Explorer tool** as a “one-stop shop” for conservation planning and PNDI environmental review. Conservation planning tools are available to explore natural heritage areas, protected lands and high-quality streams. The environmental review process requires the user to log in to the system, delineate the work area and screen their project for potential impacts. A small fee is required to complete the PNDI clearance to be submitted with the permit.



*Volunteer work days, like this one in Milesburg, Pa., offer opportunities for community engagement.*



*Often, trails to the water can be constructed by volunteers using hand-held tools, such as this one at Hamilton Bottom near Jersey Shore, Pa.*

## CONSTRUCTION

Approaches to constructing a canoe access can vary greatly depending on the scale and scope of the overall project. There are a number of considerations. Building a trail might seem as simple as just moving dirt, but you must maintain a usable surface and avoid accelerating erosion.

### Scheduling Construction

Construction scheduling is crucial. The permitting required to install canoe access sites dictates a specific time period in which the work can be completed – typically in the low water months of summer. These are ideal working conditions during dry years; however, be prepared to reschedule or delay construction in the event of an especially rainy season.

### Involving Volunteers

Basic trails to the water can be constructed by hand using trail-building tools. It's often a great idea to involve volunteers. Here are some things to consider regarding volunteer labor:

- Experienced trail builders are an asset to a project.
- Volunteer work days offer opportunity for community engagement.
- Local organizations, schools, scout troops, businesses, correctional facilities and more can be great resources for assistance.
- Businesses such as local outdoor shops, outfitters and canoe liveries directly benefit from publicly accessible canoe access sites, so ask them to support the project.

## Considerations for Using Equipment

Machines and small equipment, such as a skid loader or mini excavator, can make quick, efficient work of building a canoe ramp, assuming the site is accessible. Larger equipment can be used if the landscape can handle the impact. Some things to consider regarding equipment:

- Networking within organizations and among partners often leads to connections to contractors and construction companies, who might discount or donate the construction cost.
- If paying for construction services, it is a good idea to get at least two or three bids. Although not a requirement of the CADF program, many other funders follow this procedure. It also ensures you are getting a fair rate.
- Partnering with local government, which is required when the project location is a community park or on municipal property, can also lead to equipment and operators being available to assist with project implementation.



*Canoe ramps can be built quickly with machines and small equipment.*



*Larger equipment can be used if the site can handle the impact.*



*The Allegheny Aquatic Alliance included recycling and trash bins and an information kiosk as amenities at its access sites in Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties, Pa.*

## Including Site Amenities

Although providing access for people to get on the water safely and efficiently is the primary reason for building an access site, some amenities can help keep the site in good condition as well as encourage a variety of users such as families with children, anglers and others.

If space permits, and your organization has the funds and the people to implement and maintain them, consider including the following amenities, but only if someone has clear and regular responsibility for checking and removing waste:

- parking lot
- restrooms
- trash receptacles
- fishing line recycling containers
- benches
- signage and information kiosk

## Additional Funding

There are additional sources of funding for access projects. An important one for many waterways is **Pennsylvania Environmental Council's Water Trail Program**. If your access site is along a designated Pennsylvania Water Trail there are often mini-grant opportunities through the organization. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission also offers a grant program for boating facilities. Leveraging these programs as matching funds can greatly increase your project budget, just be aware each program has specific requirements.

## SITE PROMOTION

Free publicity of your access site will increase use and potentially increase site stewardship and organizational support over time. Celebrating the completion of an access site is essential. Not only will you publicly thank funders, partners, volunteers and other supporters for their hard work and contributions, but you can gain publicity for the site and your organization.

In addition to an opening event such as a ribbon cutting to kick off site use, consider holding organized paddling events, such as a monthly paddle under the stars, a Saturday morning educational float or a multiday river sojourn, all of which can be promoted and bring new users to your site. **The PA Organization for Watersheds and Rivers** offers a sojourn minigrant program and a sojourn planning guide.



*Consider holding paddling events to bring new users to your site.*



*A celebratory ribbon cutting like this one at Bolivar, Pa., is a great way to get local media coverage.*

## To Promote Public Events:

- Create buzz about your soon-to-be completed site by posting regularly on social media and keeping your website up to date.
- Send event announcements to local media.
- Invite local media. Television channels and newspapers are often looking for feel-good, local news.
- Use your group's social media pages and website.
- Ask local municipalities, businesses and partner organizations to promote events on their websites and social media pages and in newsletters. Ask permission to hang fliers in their business.
- After the event, share photographs and video of the event on your group's social media and website and in your group's publications.
- Let WPC know when your site is completed so we can share your good news on our communications channels and provide suggestions for enhanced publicity. Email [jkissel@paconserve.org](mailto:jkissel@paconserve.org) or call 412-586-2328.

Stay in the public eye by posting general information regularly on social media and your website.



*It's helpful to have a small list of volunteers who can check on the site regularly and make minor repairs when needed.*

## ROUTINE MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS

Although once installed a canoe access site does not require extensive upkeep, there is some routine maintenance to consider. It is a good idea to make a schedule of people who can check on the site fairly regularly.

Debris and trash should be removed, outdated flyers in kiosks removed and any signage cleaned and straightened. If there is damage to the site, repairs should be made or reported to the group to be addressed. If access to the water is blocked or impassible, the blockage should be removed or reported to the group to be addressed.

## LONG-TERM MAINTENANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Canoe access sites are constructed in dynamic environments where the natural cycle of rivers or streams can take a toll, so even the most well-installed site will require some regular annual maintenance.

At the very least, groups can expect to complete maintenance:

- following seasonal ice out, high flow or storm events;
- before and after busy holiday weekends.

Typically, maintenance is not a massive undertaking and can be completed by a handful of volunteers. That said, maintenance is essential to a successful access site, thus the 10-year commitment to maintenance is required of CADF-funded projects. It's also the reason that CADF-funded projects are eligible for up to \$1,000 maintenance reimbursement for the 10-year term of the project. Anticipate routine maintenance costs to be minimal and easily accomplished by hand. Consider tapping the same network of organizations that supported the initial installation for occasional maintenance help.

Unfortunately, there are situations in which an access site is severely damaged beyond the scope of basic site maintenance. In those cases, the local conservation district, WPC and other partners are available for guidance to determine what repairs can be done to return the site to functional.



*This site on Pymatuning Creek is welcoming and beautiful in all seasons.*

## LET'S GET ON THE WATER!

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's **Canoe Access Development Fund** has funded dozens of improvements across Western Pennsylvania. Every site has its own challenges and opportunities. We hope this guide provides useful information as you consider developing a canoe access site. May it lead to more river and stream access and more people on the water!

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Park Service Logical Lasting Launches

<https://npgallery.nps.gov/RTCA/AssetDetail/86bb0d45-8417-4904-97ae-771c8eba5a42>

National Park Service River Access Planning Guide

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/river-access-planning-guide-a-decision-making-framework-for-enhancing-river-access.htm>

Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts -  
Find Your Conservation District

[https://pacd.org/?page\\_id=59](https://pacd.org/?page_id=59)

Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources  
Community Conservation Partnerships Program Grants

<https://www.dcnr.pa.gov/Communities/Grants/Pages/default.aspx>

Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection GP-2 Permit Package

<http://www.depgreenport.state.pa.us/elibrary/GetFolder?FolderID=4064>

Pennsylvania Environmental Council Statewide Water Trail Program

<https://pecpa.org/program/statewide-water-trail-program/>

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Boating Facility Grant Program

<https://www.fishandboat.com/Transact/Grants/Pages/BoatingFacilityGrantProgram.aspx>

Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers

<https://pawatersheds.org/>

WeConservePA (formerly PA Land Trust Association)

<https://conservationtools.org/guides/81-Recreational-Use-of-Land-and-Water-Act>

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy Canoe Access Development Fund

<https://WaterLandLife.org/watershed-conservation/canoe-access-development-fund-cadf/>

*We can't wait to see  
you on the water!*



Western Pennsylvania  
Conservancy



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