

Metuchen Environmental Commission

2015 Annual Report

Sustainable Jersey

The year started out on a positive note as Metuchen's Sustainable Jersey Bronze Certification was acknowledged at the January 20 Borough Council meeting. Councilwoman Rasmussen asked all members involved with Sustainable Jersey to come forward. She read excerpts from the letter approving the Bronze Certification. She stated how proud she is of all the volunteers that participated in this program including the Shade Tree Commission, Environmental Commission, Bike Walk Metuchen, Farmers' Market, Development Commission and Borough Staff.

In March 2015 the Borough received a Sustainable Jersey Small Grants program grant of \$2000 for construction of a school garden at the Edgar Middle School.

In September 2015 Councilwoman, Green Team and Environmental Commission Liaison Dorothy Rasmussen was named a Sustainability Hero by Sustainable Jersey, in recognition of her efforts in steering the Borough towards its first Bronze Level certification.

<http://www.metuchennj.org/metnj/GOVERNMENT/Boards%2C%20Commissions%2C%20Committees/Environmental%20Commission/September%202015%20Sustainability%20Hero%20Dorothy%20Rasmussen.pdf>

In October 2015, Metuchen received Bronze Certification from Sustainable Jersey for the second year in a row.

Middlesex Greenway

In October 2012, after 20 years of advocacy by environmental groups, the Borough and neighboring municipalities, Middlesex County completed construction of the first portion of the Middlesex Greenway, 3½ miles of bicycle and pedestrian trail along the right-of-way of the former Lehigh Valley Railroad. The Environmental Commission has continued to advocate for Middlesex County to extend the Middlesex Greenway west to South Plainfield and east to Perth Amboy. Destinations for the extension could include, at the western end, trails and natural areas in the Dismal Swamp, and a connection to the Perth Amboy waterfront at the eastern end. Due to its proximity to the Dismal Swamp and several redevelopment areas in the Borough, the western extension of the Greenway can serve as a catalyst for redevelopment and local businesses and increase the desirability of the residential redevelopment projects.

The Environmental Commission participated in a Local Demonstration Project undertaken by Together North Jersey to explore strategies to improve access to the Middlesex Greenway and increase its use by the surrounding communities. This Middlesex Greenway Access Plan initiative is supported by Middlesex County, the Bloustein School of Public Policy, the Regional Planning Association, and the

Middlesex Greenway Coalition. In early January 2015, Together NJ released its report and plan for the Greenway, <http://togethernorthjersey.com/?grid-portfolio=middlesex-greenway-access-plan>.

The Environmental Commission continues to actively participate in the Middlesex Greenway Coalition. The Coalition, which meets monthly, has participants from various community and governmental entities throughout Metuchen, Edison, Woodbridge and Middlesex County was instrumental in establishing the Greenway and works to promote its use and future improvements.

During the year, PSE&G moved forward with a transmission system upgrade involving electrical lines which will cross the Middlesex Greenway. Commission members attended a meeting to provide public comment on the proposed diversion on the Greenway.

Dismal Swamp

The Environmental Commission has continued to advocate for protection of undeveloped parcels in the Dismal Swamp, especially in Metuchen. These parcels are mostly wetlands and flood plains, and their preservation would advance several goals including natural resource stewardship, public recreation and improved flood control. Due to its proximity to the Greenway and current redevelopment areas, the natural areas in the Dismal Swamp could serve as a destination along the western extension of the Greenway and increase the desirability of the residential redevelopment projects.

One issue facing the swamp in 2015 revolved around the proposed expansion of sewer service to several parcels making up the former Gulton redevelopment site. Based on the initial analysis and input from the Environmental Commission, the Borough adopted a resolution against the proposed sewer expansion. Several of the parcels included in the proposed expansion are wetlands and in a flood zone, and portions of the properties have significant contamination issues.

Environmental Commission members and other local environmentalists, residents and Boy Scouts have continued to venture into the Dismal Swamp on the Bound Brook with kayaks and tools, clearing a water trail to allow public access on land and water from Metuchen toward the Edison Wetlands Association's Triple C ranch site in Edison. These adventures have taken place twice a year, in the spring and the fall.

Dorothy Rasmussen, the Borough Council liaison to the Environmental Commission, chairs the Dismal Swamp Preservation Commission. The Commission, created by the State Legislature, was created to provide regional planning protection to the Dismal Swamp. The Commission is working to formalize the metes and bounds of the properties contained within the Swamp.

The Borough successfully applied to be part of a grant from the National Park Service. The grant provides for technical assistance in the protection of the Dismal Swamp and the development of passive and active recreation opportunities.

Earth Day

The Borough held its annual Earth Day event this year on Saturday April 11, in conjunction with the Shade Tree Commission and Garden Club. The first activity was giving away small trees for residents to plant on their property. Species included willow oak, northern red oak and dogwood.

Next, a workshop on the proper cutting and mulching of lawn grass and home composting took place, spearheaded by a representative from Rutgers Cooperative Extension Service. The presenter explained how leaving the grass clippings on the ground enrich the soil and reduce the need for fertilizer and water. Members of the Environmental Commission hosted the events and brought tools to show residents.

Farmers Market

The Environmental Commission periodically conducts educational tabling at the weekly Metuchen Farmers Market. The Borough purchased four composting bins, which were displayed at a table at the August 1 market. The Commission worked to promote an increase in backyard composting as a means of decreasing the solid waste stream and associated collection costs for the Borough. http://www.metuchennj.org/metnj/zumu_user_doc_cache/Backyard%20Compost%20Bin.pdf

Borough Fair

The Borough's annual Fall Country Fair in October is a very popular and well-attended street fair in downtown Metuchen. Each year, Environmental Commission members select specific issues which they prepare and discuss through public outreach from their tented booth at the Fair. In 2015, the Environmental Commission displayed the four composting bins and gave out informational fliers on composting. One of the bins was raffled off to a Borough resident.

Anti-Idling Initiatives

As part of an initiative to educate the public on the hazards associated with unnecessary idling, No Idle Zone signs were posted at the Borough schools and at the NJ Transit train station located in the Borough. Community idle free outreach was coordinated with the schools and PTOs, involving flyers, web, newsletters, social media, and classes.

Scout Projects

The Environmental Commission assisted a Boy Scout who planted twenty trees in Oakland Park. Trees were planted in the grass area between the tennis courts and the parking lot. The project involved extensive watering during the first several months to maximize the number of trees that would survive. Trees that did not were replaced and maintained.

Another Scout completed the last portions of his Eagle Scout project that he had begun in 2014. He and other Scouts cleared a pedestrian trail on a Borough-owned former railroad embankment. The trail runs through the Metuchen portion of the Dismal Swamp. The final step in the project, the Eagle Scout's report on the trail, was posted on Borough web page in January 2015.

<http://www.metuchennj.org/metnj/GOVERNMENT/Boards%2C%20Commissions%2C%20Committees/Environmental%20Commission/Documents/Eagle%20Scout%20Project%202014%20by%20Nikolai%20Krebs%20-%20Opalanie%20Trail.pdf>

Other

Three in-need redevelopment plans are in front of the Borough and some involve input from the Commission. The projects include: the planned relocation of the Borough firehouse, redevelopment of the former Gulton site, which borders the Dismal Swamp, and redevelopment of remaining portions of the former Oakite site.

In June, the Commission was briefed by a representative of a new grassroots organization in Metuchen that raises awareness about the dangers of lawn pesticide use, Metuchen Families for a Pesticide-Free Borough. The representative spoke about the importance of educating the community about healthier landscape practices and about encouraging local landscaping companies to move toward more organic practices, and also suggested a pesticide free zone program within Borough properties such as parks and playgrounds. In December, the Borough Council passed a resolution adopting a Municipal Pesticide Reduction Policy. Among other things, the resolution codified the adoption of IPM on the Borough's public properties and facilities, and designated certain public properties as "Pesticide Free Zones".

In June we were also visited by a representative from the Middlesex Water Company. The representative came to discuss water conservation issues within the Borough. She discussed the history of Middlesex Water Company and its recommended water conservation actions, including detailed suggestions how to encourage water conservation both within residential homes and within Borough municipal buildings. A possible rain barrel design and/or decoration project for school children as a way to encourage active water conservation was discussed. A public filling station for refillable water bottles was also discussed as a means to encourage residents to use less bottled water. The Board of Education has already purchased several of these types of refilling stations and placed them in Metuchen High School and Edgar Middle School.

Environmental Commission members

Dorothy Rasmussen, Liaison

Mark Herzberg, Chairperson

Angela Dohl

Alison Dutemple

Jennifer Kelley

Lynn Nowak (Planning Board Member)

Joe Schaffer

Brian Weeks