



Verona Environmental Commission

600 Bloomfield Avenue
Verona, New Jersey 07044
www.veronaec.org

December 13, 2019

Dear Mayor McEvoy, Deputy Mayor Roman, Verona Township Council Members and Town Manager Cavallo,

2019 Verona Environmental Commission (VEC) Annual Report

2019 Roster: The VEC has seven members plus two alternates, Jessica Pearson (Chairperson starting in January and continuing as Planning Board Liaison), Tony Saltalamacchia (Vice-Chair through May), Sean DiBartolo (Vice-Chair starting in June and continuing on the Plan Review Committee), Martin Golan, Sarah Yauch O'Farrell, Frank Ceccacci (Liaison to Sustainable Verona beginning in January), Michael Auteri (Webmaster beginning in January), Timothy Kiernan (Alternate 2 through June), Kari Baureis (starting in August), Fuad Dahan (Alternate 1 starting in August), and Christen Dietz (Alternate 2 starting in December). All members are Verona residents and serve without compensation. Mayor Ryan was our Council Liaison through July 2019. Councilwoman McGrath became our Liaison in August 2019.

The following outlines our initiatives, ongoing programs as well as a compilation of policy recommendations we have made.

1) Cleanups and Events 2019: Throughout this year, the VEC and its members upheld its commitment to keep Verona's open space and parks free from debris and garbage. Additionally, the VEC made specific recommendations favoring soil erosion control and bank stabilization for the Peckman River. The VEC held three annual cleanup events and participated events sponsored by the Hilltop Conservancy, Verona Park Conservancy and Sustainable Verona.

- A) April 13th: the VEC's Annual Earth Day celebration and cleanup at Grove Park, where for the past 4 years, we were able to give away about 300 tree seedlings each year to residents of Essex County. The seedling program, run by the NJDEP New Jersey Tree Recovery Campaign, will continue for 2020. This year, the VEC was able to contract for 175 seedlings for our scheduled giveaway. Community members also helped in the cleanup of the Grove Park, retrieving multiple bags of garbage and recyclables.
- B) April 13th: after VEC members completed their own Earth Day Celebration, they went up to the Hilltop with the remaining seedlings to donate them to the Hilltop Conservancy Prisoner's Pond Forest Restoration Project. Eighty (80) large tree holes were dug and prepared that day for an upcoming planting event about 2 weeks later. This event was also attended by local Boy Scout troops and many other community members. This

- continues to be an ongoing project, spearheaded by David Freschi and Theresa Trapp from the Hilltop Conservancy that will result in the reforestation of the Hilltop.
- C) April 28th: VEC members attended the Hilltop Conservancy Prisoner's Pond Forest Restoration Project that resulted in planting, staking and fencing 80 trees. Multiple community members committed to reforestation are to be commended. This continues to be an ongoing project, spearheaded by David Freschi and Theresa Trapp that will result in the reforestation of the Hilltop.
 - D) June 8th: the VEC hosted its annual Peckman Trail / River Cleanup (National Trails Day - 51th anniversary). The VEC members, along with local volunteers and their children retrieved many items, both large and small from the banks and waters of the Peckman River. It was decided at this cleanup event that bank stabilization of the Peckman River has become necessary. Vice-Chair DiBartolo reported a widening of the river due to bank erosion that is cause for concern. Chair Pearson reported the flooded conditions of the trails that have made them increasingly less navigable and a notable spread of wetland plant growth as far back from the trails as the FN Brown Playground. This cleanup event spearheaded discussions with Township officials to seek grants to mitigate some of these issues.
 - E) October 2nd: the VEC sponsored its annual Walk to School Day which included the annual VEC Sustainability Contest for all 4th graders and Environmental Club members in Verona Public Schools. Each entry depicted green habits and living trends that are supported by the VEC. Five prizes of \$50.00 each were awarded to each individual school's most outstanding entry at the October 21st Town Council Meeting.
 - F) October 6th: the VEC hosted a cleanup of the western head of the West Essex Trail. This was a family-friendly event with parents and children together learning about how to better maintain our local trails by collecting trash and recyclable materials that were disposed of there. Essex County Officials aided the VEC by sending supplies, bags, gloves, shovels, and wheel barrows and later transported all of the collected trash to one of their pick-up sites.
 - G) October 18th: VEC commended FN Brown for continuing the walk to school theme for the entire month of October, hailing it: "Walk-Tober". Each week, the students of FN Brown organized a Walk to School Day with the help of Verona Kids Rock, and honored different members of our Community. One day honored Police, Fire, and Rescue service members. Another day honored Verona's teachers.
 - H) October 19th: Members attended a Verona Park Conservancy cleanup at Verona Park.
 - I) Throughout the year, the VEC together with Sustainable Verona and the Verona Chamber of Commerce commenced a program of honoring our Green Business Community. Green Ribbon Cuttings were held at a variety of businesses including Healing Treatments Massage Studio, the Guac Spot, and Green Point Juicery. We hope to continue these as more businesses move forward with greener practices.

2) Policy Recommendations 2019: The VEC recommended that the Town Council pass ordinances or resolutions or take actions on the following:

- A) Mini cell towers Ordinance: The VEC supported the implementation of environmental impact study requirements for cell tower installations as well as the drafting of an ordinance that rezones for their appropriate placement while prohibiting them in and around residential areas.
- B) Single-Use Plastic Bag Ordinance that would ban single-use carry out plastic bags in the Township of Verona
- C) Supported a more stringent Stormwater Ordinance: due to the continued loss of open space, exacerbation of flooding and seeming lack of adherence to the basics of the State's Ordinance, the VEC recommended a stricter ordinance with lower thresholds that

would trigger the Ordinance's rules. The State will be adding more strict regulations to their Ordinance in the coming months and Verona will be required to update their ordinance as well.

- D) A new Tree Ordinance that would act to preserve more trees throughout the Township and on privately-held properties. The ordinance that was in place had passed in 1964 and only applied to undeveloped lands, of which Verona currently has very few. The result has been a severe reduction throughout town of hundreds of trees that has exacerbated local flooding during a growing number of severe storm events. A draft Ordinance was sent to the town in September 2018 for review and was discussed and reworked for over a year. Finally, on October 21, 2019, the Tree Ordinance was adopted by the Town Council and went into effect on November 15, 2019.
- E) A new Site Plan Review Ordinance that redefines the complexities of the application process for land use boards was reviewed by the VEC. Currently, many applications are sent through with too little review time for community members or land use board members. In many cases, the applications submitted are not complete, lacking certain necessary materials for proper and complete review. The VEC supports an ordinance that defines a schedule of required documents for submission prior to the scheduling of land use hearings. Members also have pushed for electronic application submissions for ease in sharing and reviewing land use applications.
- F) Supported the Township of Verona joining Sustainable NJ Essex Alliance to collectively purchase renewable energy for its growing list of municipal members.
- G) Supported the passage of a Public Question for an Open Space Trust Fund whereby the Township would be allowed to collect fees equal to \$2 for every \$100 of assessed home value to be used towards the purchase or maintenance of Open Space. Chair Pearson met with Manager Cavallo, Steve Neale, and ANJEC representatives to confer on ideas for public awareness and education on the ballot question. An infographic was created and shared on social media. This public question appeared on our November 5th 2019 ballot and passed with a wide margin of support.
- H) Supported the application of permeable pavement at a planned parking lot at the end of Park Place, behind HBW field. The township has yet to determine the materials that will be used on this site.

3) **Presentations, Meetings, and Actions 2019:**

- A) The Verona Environmental Commission holds open public meetings each month, except for August, on the 2nd Wednesday of each month. Special meetings are formed when scheduling conflicts arise. Members of the community are welcomed to come and public comment periods are opened at the beginning of each meeting.
- B) Ongoing commitment to Sustainable Verona. VEC member Frank Ceccacci, is the liaison to Sustainable Verona. He attends all of their meetings and gives monthly reports to the VEC to keep the channels of communication open and to coordinate some of our events and actions.
- C) Vice Chair Sean DiBartolo, a licensed engineer has an eye on Verona's Stormwater system and soil erosion issues. Multiple times throughout the year, DiBartolo contacted Hudson Essex Passaic Soil Conservation District to report unmitigated soil runoff from properties under construction. These seemingly minor violations do long-term harm to our stormwater systems by clogging them and causing flooding at other points in town. The continued communication and sharing of information with HEPSCD has helped the agency in carrying out its duties in oversight and compliance and the HEPSCD went out of their way to commend the VEC and Verona's Head of Engineering Mike DeCarlo for their efforts.

- D) January 17th: Jessica had a short phone conference with Superintendent Dionisio and Principal Cogdill to discuss increased interaction between the School and the VEC. The VEC also made it clear that more outreach would occur with the local Boy and Girl Scouts, Our Lady of the Lake students and other local organizations that may want to be more involved with the VEC's mission and events.
- E) March 21st: Jessica met with the Verona High School Environmental Club to introduce herself and personally invite them to participate in more of our cleanup events. She also polled the students to see if weekday afternoon events would better suit their busy schedules. The students collectively decided that weekend events are more suitable for their schedules. Consistent communication has been upheld with all of the Schools.
- F) April 1st: Attendance at the Essex County Environmental Commission Roundtable (ECEC) events. The ECEC hosts two roundtable events each year. This year the discussions focused upon legislation concerning the environment in NJ. Executive Director of the NJ League of Conservation Voters Ed Potosnak and Assemblyman John McKeon presented examples of legislation they are supporting in the NJ. Many towns are discussing passing single-use plastic bag bans, multi-town energy consortiums and utility of urban community gardens. Jessica Pearson, Martin Golan, Sarah O'Farrell and Councilman McEvoy attended. The 2nd meeting that was scheduled for November and focused upon Drinking Water was rescheduled for 2020.
- G) April 8th: Sean DiBartolo met with Verona's Boy Scout Troop #2 to lead a brief discussion about the VEC and what our organization does in the community. Sean indicated to the Scouts that the VEC will communicate with the Troop to solicit volunteers to help with cleanup events throughout the year that would also help meet the Citizenship in the Community requirements that the scouts often have to fulfill.
- H) May 13th: Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell presented the VEC's plans for a perennial garden installation at Grove Park to the Shade Tree Commission. The garden was presented on a scaled map drawn by Sean DiBartolo which blocked out the placement of native planting. Plantings were chosen by Jessica and Sarah. After the meeting, Shade Tree Commission Chairman Giovanni Coppa conferred with his members and on May 24th sent forth an approval for the VEC's plans.
- I) October 4th: Mayor McEvoy, Head of Verona's Engineering Dept. Mike DeCarlo, and Town Manager Matt Cavallo attended a meeting with representatives from Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill's Staff and the Army Corps of Engineers to discuss the flooding and erosion occurring on the banks of the Peckman River. No federal funding was secured at the meeting, but other potential sources were conveyed. The Township is currently filing for a feasibility study with FEMA.
- J) October 21st: The Verona Town Council passed a meaningful Tree Ordinance that empowers the Township to regulate private property tree removal for 6-inch DPM (diameter at point of measure) or greater trees. It also requires replacement when healthy trees are removed. The VEC and its predecessors have been in favor of such an ordinance for over 20 years and this VEC fully endorsed the passage of this ordinance.
- K) October 25th: Head of Engineering Mike DeCarlo attended a NJDEP-sponsored meeting in Trenton that focused upon NJ Stormwater utilities. If enacted in a municipality, these utilities could act to collect funds based upon the amount of impervious surface on both residential and commercial properties.
- L) November 5th: The VEC supported and helped to draft information on a Public Question on the November 5th ballot for an Open Space Trust Fund. The information was shared by the Township, Sustainable Verona, and the VEC through social media and emails.

This initiative passed 2115 to 1351 and Verona has now joined 12 other Essex County municipalities in having an Open Space Trust Fund.

- M) Through Social Media, the VEC has educated the public on upcoming meetings, forums and lectures as well as important health and environmental issues. These issues included information on local issues like algae blooms, tree diseases and insects as well as all upcoming cleanup dates for a wide array of Verona's many volunteer agencies including Sustainable Verona, the Hilltop Conservancy and the Verona Park Conservancy.
- N) Throughout 2019, the VEC reviewed 18 Site Plans, one of which had multiple re-submissions, for land development in Verona. Each plan review requires our plan review committee to research the plans and draft comments and recommendation for the land review boards that hear the applications.

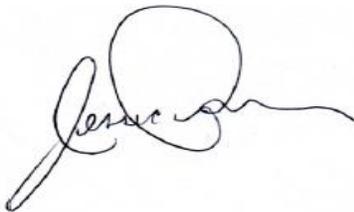
4) Installations 2019:

- A) Perennial Garden at Grove Park and Historic Nature Preserve. As was planned at the inception of Grove Park's creation, the VEC finally was able to install a perennial garden. With the aid of DPW and the support of the Shade Tree Commission, Matt Cavallo, Hillcrest Farms and Pleasantdale Nursery, VEC members Jessica Pearson, Sarah O'Farrell and Tree Commission member and Master Gardener Val Ryan planted the garden in August 2019. The Perennial Garden contains pollinator plants such as echinacea, bee balm, lobelia cardinalis, wild geraniums, salvia and penstemon husker. The Township has pledged that the garden will be watered by Verona's water truck each day during the warm seasons.
- B) Organic Garden. The VEC with Sustainable Verona and a few key community volunteers are working on the installation of a community organic garden Near HBW's running track. After collaboration with the Board of Education, and multiple plans drafted, the two groups are waiting on certain grants and agreements to help with the costs of fencing and supplies. The VEC is quite hopeful that this installation will occur in 2020.

We would like to thank Verona residents and the Township for supporting our programs and helping make Verona a more sustainable community this year. For more information please visit www.Veronaec.org or contact us by email at VEC@VeronaNJ.org.

Regards,

Jessica Pearson



Chair of the Verona Environmental Commission
December 11, 2019