



Verona Environmental Commission

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

December 15, 2022

Dear Mayor Roman, Town Manager D'Arco, and Verona Township Council Members

2022 Verona Environmental Commission Annual Report

2022 Roster: The VEC has seven members plus two alternates:

1. Jessica Pearson (Chairperson, Planning Board Liaison, and Plan Review Committee)
2. Sean DiBartolo (Vice-Chair and Plan Review Committee)
3. Sarah Yauch O'Farrell
4. Kari Baureis (Liaison to Sustainable Verona)
5. Michael Auteri (Webmaster)
6. Fuad Dahan
7. Brooke Berardo
8. Anthony Castillo (Alternate 1 and Plan Review Committee)
9. Erdal Turnacioglu (Alternate 2)

All members are Verona residents and serve without compensation. Councilmember Holland served as our Liaison through July 2022 and continues to serve as our liaison through July 2023.

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

1) Cleanups and Events 2022: The VEC and its members remain committed to keeping Verona's open space, parks, and waterways free from debris and garbage. The VEC ordinarily holds three annual cleanup events but since joining Clean Communities, we wanted to add some cleanup events to further engage the community and make more headway on our open space properties. When warranted, COVID precautions were followed according to the State Department of Health requirements.

- A) April 9, 2022: Verona Park Conservancy Cleanup: Members of the VEC attended the Conservancy's annual Spring Cleanup event.
- B) April 23, 2022: VEC's Annual Earth Day celebration and cleanup at Grove Park and Historic Nature Preserve was revived this year. The VEC has participated in the NJDEP New Jersey Tree Recovery Campaign, for the past 7 years. This year we received 300 seedlings to distribute at our cleanup event. Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell separated and tagged the tree seedlings to prepare for the public distribution at Grove Park where the cleanup event was scheduled. Sean DiBartolo and Council Liaison Holland invited Cub, Girl, and Daisy Scout groups to help with the cleanup. After the

event, Jessica emailed all seedling recipients, describing the conditions required for each species and general planting directions. The public responded very favorably with multiple emails expressing appreciation. This year's tree giveaway was a great success. All of the trees were distributed to Essex County residents. During the event the Perennial Garden was weeded and DPW mulched the garden for the VEC following the event.

- C) May 21, 2022: West Essex Trail Cleanup: This event was held to maintain one of Verona's County owned trails used by residents throughout the year. At this event, we focused on the trail area between Verona High School and Durrell Street.
- D) June 4, 2022: VEC's Annual Peckman River / Trail Cleanup: Many VEC members and about 15 resident volunteers, including many children, volunteered to help retrieve commingled recycling materials, plastic bags, wrappers, and the like. We note again, the continued erosion of the Peckman banks and the loss of portions of the trails to waterlogged conditions. The southwest portion of the trail continues to be saturated, with some areas under water, and there was a noticeable new growth of skunk cabbage, a known native plant that thrives in marsh areas. Also notable was the spread of invasive Japanese knotweed.
- E) October 15, 2022: Park Place-Peckman Cleanup: This cleanup was located at the end of Park Place and adjacent to the middle school track. Access to the Peckman River was found at the end of this area via a steeply-sloped bank area. The event was very well attended with local resident volunteers accompanying their children (some Cub Scouts) and members of the Verona High School soccer team. Most of the debris consisted of bottles, cans, wrappers, plastic bags, and plastic eating utensils as may come with "to-go" orders from local food vendors. Another notable feature was the existence of Tree of Heavens that were, along with many other native species, infested with Spotted Lanternflies. Sarah O'Farrell oriented the volunteers to this problem and identified trees that have been noticeably affected by a black moldy soot near the lower portion of their trunks. She also identified the Lanternfly and discussed why we need to look for egg deposits so we can destroy them before next Spring.
- F) November 19, 2022: The Wonders of Water Brownie Scouting Journey. This event took place on 2 days behind F.N. Brown Elementary School as an educational journey for the 3rd grader Brownies in Service Unit 26. During the event, the scouts engaged in exploring the Peckman River and gained a better understanding of the effect of erosion and pollution on our riverway. Using a watershed nonpoint source EnviroScape model, the Watershed Ambassador demonstrated to the scouts how pollutants are carried to our waterways and aquifers via runoff during weather events. Councilmember Holland, who serves as the VEC liaison and as the Brownie Service Unit Manager, coordinated this successful event.
- G) The VEC continued to issue Service Certificates for all young volunteers as proof of their service. The certificates are emailed upon request to volunteers that sign in at the cleanup events.

2) Policy Recommendations 2021: The VEC recommended that the Town Council pass ordinances or resolutions or take actions on the following:

- A) Mini cell towers Ordinance: The VEC continues to press for the inclusion of environmental impact study requirements for cell tower installations as well as the passage of an ordinance that zones for their appropriate placement while prohibiting them in and around residential areas or open space properties; especially prohibiting their location on residential homes or accessory structures like garages. The Council

has made great progress on an ordinance that is in the final adoption process and should become part of our Zoning Ordinance early next year.

- B) As the Verona Town Council had passed Resolution 2021-156 entitled “In Support of the Adoption of a Strong Anti-Idling Policy In New Jersey”, the VEC renewed communication with the Verona Board of Education and the Interim Superintendent. The VEC was invited to present an overview of the resolution and its importance at the February 8, 2022 Board of Education meeting. Jessica Pearson provided a short presentation and recommended that the administration raise awareness on this issue by confirming signage is installed at key drop-off and pick up areas outside of schools and sports fields, as well as by sending a mass email out to all families, teachers, administration, staff and SCA Presidents. The VEC further recommended that a short block of time is given to teachers to explain the importance of no-idling to students of all ages. Finally, the VEC asks the schools to promote more walking. Dr. Furnari suggested that the Board adopt a District-wide No Idle Policy. This was adopted at the BOE’s March 8, 2022 meeting.
- C) The VEC was a strong proponent of our Tree Preservations, Protection, and Replacement Ordinance, which passed in October 2019. After a few years of observation, it has become clear that the Ordinance requires updates. Working with Engineering Manager DeCarlo, The VEC submitted a redlined version of the Ordinance for review. The updates include a contractor registration procedure, which ensures that the contractors are aware of and agree to the terms of our Ordinances, and that they are properly insured. Should a contractor submit a falsified tree assessment, the Township may suspend or revoke any registration, which would prohibit the contractor from servicing any properties within the Township. Additionally, the VEC feels that having a shared service agreement with a nearby municipality for engagement of a Forester would allow for proper checks and balances by reviewing the tree health assessments submitted by tree companies. These recommendations are currently under review by the Council.
- D) Supported the Township of Verona’s reauthorization of the Energy Aggregation Program to collectively purchase electricity from a green energy source for its growing list of municipal members. The new contract was set to extend the provisions of the program through December 2025 and the VEC noted that our residents could also “opt up” to have a higher percentage of their energy supply come from green energy sources. Even though the VEC and many others supported this program, during late summer, Township found that the pricing was not beneficial for residents at this time and so opted out. The Township will continue to review pricing as conditions change to look for the opportunity to opt back in.
- E) RSIS Stormwater Resolution: NJDEP adopted new Stormwater Management Rules on March 2, 2020, which become effective on March 3, 2021. All municipalities in New Jersey were required to adopt stormwater control ordinances that meet or exceed the new stormwater management rules. Due to the continued loss of open space and addition of impervious surface, increased frequency, and intensity of flooding in the municipality, and the desire to manage stormwater close to its source using Green Infrastructure, the VEC recommended a stricter ordinance with lower thresholds that would trigger the Ordinance’s rules. That stronger ordinance was adopted at the March 8, 2021 Town Council meeting with most of the VEC recommendations. However, the DCA is considering the passage of RSIS rules which would overrule Verona’s strict rules as they would apply to residential uses. The VEC passed a model resolution against this proposed rule change at our February 2022 meeting, and soon after, recommended that the Verona Town Council pass a similar resolution to send a

message to the DCA that each individual municipality should continue to maintain control of stormwater rules within their respective Townships, regardless of the use on that property. The Verona Town Council passed a model resolution on this at their April 25, 2022 meeting.

- F) VEC members Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell, in collaboration with the Verona Shade Tree Commission member and Master Gardener, Val Ryan, and the Hilltop Conservancy members Theresa Trapp and David Freschi, reviewed and revamped Verona Zoning Code Section 150-11.7: Recommended Plantings list. The existing list contained many species that currently exist on the NJ Do Not Plant List, due to their invasiveness or vulnerability to infestation. These species were removed, and other, mostly native, and all non-invasive species were added. The group relied upon the Rutgers Cooperative Extension site and NJyards.org to add more plantings, along with their size at maturity and deer resistance rating, to the list. Finally, this list was reviewed by Millburn's Township Forester Thomas Doty before the Verona Planning Board sent the Council a recommendation to adopt the new list into the Verona Zoning Code. The new list was adopted by Ordinance by the Council at their July 11, 2022 meeting.
- G) Recommendation for a General Code Ordinance regulating certain destructive and invasive species: The VEC recommends that the Verona Town Council draft an ordinance that would appropriately address the planting, removal, and/or maintenance of, at least the following invasive plant species on all properties within the Township of Verona: Bamboo (clumping and running), Tree of Heaven, Oriental Bittersweet, English and Boston Ivy, Poison Ivy, and Japanese Knotweed. These species are known to overtake, displace, and kill native species through rapid ground and root spread or tree strangulation. These species are also known to cause damage to water, waste, and storm drainpipes, as well as to home foundations and siding.
- H) Supports continued efforts to educate the public on the Spotted Lanternfly along with methods to check trees, kill the nymphs, adults and removed egg deposits.
- I) Supports the production of educational materials and videos related to a new Township recycling tagging program to reinforce proper residential recycling practices.
- J) Supports a townwide effort for education and implementation of composting practices for all interested residents.

3) Presentations, Meetings, and Actions 2022:

- A) The VEC holds regular meetings generally on the 2nd Wednesday of each month, except for August. The VEC may hold Special meetings; these can be held when the VEC needs to convene during the intervening time between regular meetings to discuss specific topics that may be time-sensitive that cannot wait until the next regular meeting. They also may be held when members are not available to meet on a regularly scheduled date. Members of the community are welcomed to attend and are offered public comment periods at the beginning of each meeting. All meetings in 2022 were held via internet video conference and all approved meeting minutes were posted on the VEC's website.
- B) Ongoing commitment to Sustainable Verona. VEC member Kari Baureis is the liaison to Sustainable Verona (SV). Kari gives monthly reports to the VEC to keep the channels of communication open and to coordinate some of our events and actions. Sustainable Verona's new chairperson, Danielle Zink and VEC chairperson, Jessica Pearson met and discussed further ways that our two organizations can coordinate to actuate more sustainable and environmentally friendly programs in Verona.

- C) January 20, 2022: Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo attended a NJ Spotlight hosted webinar on Storm Flooding in NJ. This webinar discussed the worsening storm system due to, among other things, climate change and NJ's urgent need to build resiliency into our long-term stormwater planning. Keynote speaker Daniel J Van Abs was joined by NJDEP Commissioner Sean LaTourette, ANJEC's Executive Director, Jennifer Coffey, and Senator Bob Smith. Among items discussed were the new, mandatory, climate change and hazard vulnerability report, the restrictions that should be placed in certain flood prone areas, and other future-looking and thoughtful considerations that will create a sustainable zoning code ordinance. A recurring topic throughout the webinar was the introduction of Stormwater Utilities by municipalities to help offset the rising costs of infrastructural upgrades.
- D) January 27, 2022: Jessica Pearson attended and ANJEC sponsored webinar on Local Planning for Climate Change Toolkit. This webinar focused upon the need for all municipalities to incorporate a climate change hazard vulnerability assessment into their master plan land use element. Presenters introduced a State Toolkit with multiple areas of focus and stressed the need to perform a full buildout assessment to predict future problem areas in a town. Presenters included Nicholas Angarone, NJDEP's Chief Resilience Officer and Matthew Blake, Senior Planner, Office of Planning Advocacy, NJ Business Action Center.
- E) February 2, 2022: The VEC produced its first ever webinar. Commission Member Dr. Fuad Dahan, an environmental engineer and expert on environmental mitigation, presented on PFAS, Forever Chemicals. He discussed the history of their use, explained that these chemicals are found in everything from food wrappers to fire-fighting foam to dental floss to common detergents. He also discussed the slow evolution of regulations and how they impact our drinking water. A Question and Answer session followed, and the video was posted to both the Township's and the VEC's YouTube Channels.
- F) February 4, 2022: Jessica Pearson attended a Stormwater Mitigation Plan Webinar, hosted by the Watershed Institute of NJ. Stormwater Mitigation Plans are not mandatory in any Municipality. However, without a Stormwater Mitigation Plan, no variances from the Municipal or State Stormwater Rules may be granted by any of the Township's Land Use Boards or Council. A Mitigation Plan must include specific sites where specific types of mitigation (Water Quality, Water Quantity, Green Infrastructure and or Water Recharge) within the Township could occur. This presents a challenge in municipalities where privately owned land flanks areas that need stormwater management and where a high degree of development already exists. The experts who presented included Rutgers Professor Dan Van Abs, Gabriel Mahon of the NJDEP, and Professional Engineer Brian Friedlich.
- G) February 8, 2022: With the passage of a strong No-Idle Resolution in November 2021, the VEC appealed to the Verona Board of Education to help with a general education and awareness campaign. Chair Jessica Pearson led a scheduled presentation at the BOE's February 8, 2022 meeting where she explained the reasons for the VEC's recommendation for a No-Idle Resolution and the health implications of car emissions, especially on young children. The VEC recommended that the Board and Administration add signage at key drop off and pick up areas around schools and sports fields, send emails to all families, explaining this resolution and its benefits, as well as send a "No-Idle" pledge forms. Additionally, the VEC recommended that the district explain the benefits to students in a classroom or gym class setting and that walking programs were given more attention.

- H) February 15, 2022: Jessica Pearson attended ANJEC's Roundtable event which focused upon native plants and the benefits of native species to our overall environment. Native species generally require less water, thrive in our area, and feed our pollinators and local fauna. During the roundtable portion of the meeting, Jessica shared that Verona is in the process of updating their suggested plantings section of the Zoning Code to focus mainly upon native species.
- I) February 17, 2022: Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo met with our new Township Manager, Joe D'Arco, to discuss current projects and goals of the VEC. This included updates to current ordinances, like Verona's Tree Preservation, Protection and Replacement and Verona's Stormwater Ordinances. Other goals discussed included finding a site for a public raingarden and adding a water source to Grove Park's Garden.
- J) March 17, 2022: Jessica Pearson attended the NJ Site Improvement Advisory Board meeting via internet conference, where a proposed rule regarding Stormwater Rules for residential use was under consideration. This rule would rely solely upon NJAC 7:8's definition of a major development and would therefore supersede more strict determinations made by individual municipalities for proposed residential uses. Many professionals spoke against this proposed rule and the matter was adjourned to the Board's June meeting.
- K) March 23, 2022: Jessica Pearson and Brooke Berardo met virtually with the Verona High School AP Science Teacher, Mrs. Reisinger and her AP students and Environmental Club members. At that meeting, we assigned the students a project to create public service announcements on environmental issues in Verona and NJ to help educate the greater public. The VEC shared these projects on social media and gained great following through the students.
- L) April 4, 2022: Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell attended the Essex County Environmental Commission Roundtable. The speakers: Lois Kraus and Peter Holm of (ATL-NJ) Advocates for Transforming Landscaping in NJ and Maplewood Committee Woman Nancy Adams discussed the implementation of restrictions and bans on gas-powered landscaping equipment, most specifically, leaf blowers. Later that week, Maplewood unanimously passed a complete ban on gas powered leaf blowers, that will take effect as of January 1, 2023.
- M) June 16, 2022: Jessica Pearson attended the second Site Improvement Advisory Board meeting (SIAB) to follow the continued discussion of proposed RSIS stormwater rule revisions by the DCA. No determination was made at this meeting, however a meeting between SIAB members and the NJDEP was scheduled for further discussion of this issue. A third public SIAB meeting was also confirmed for September of 2022 for continued public discussion.
- N) June 2022: VEC members Brooke Berardo and Jessica Pearson received nine public service announcement projects from Verona High School Environmental Club members. These included electronic posters educating us on anti-idling practices, recycling, and eradicating the Spotted Lanternfly, and videos on no-idling and how to repurpose clothing rather than throw it out. Brooke shared the media to Facebook and the VEC's website and made plans to continue working with Mrs. Reisinger on more projects for the 2022-23 School year.
- O) June 2022: An educational social media campaign was started on the Spotted Lanternfly. As calls from residents began to heighten the extent of this insects' harmful effects, Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell began creating useful posts on safely killing them without harming your plants or trees. A test was undertaken using Dawn Soap and water versus white vinegar; Dawn soap and water appears more effective. We

- also posted information on invasive plant species that the Lanternfly is most attracted to, with recommendations to remove those plantings and the Tree of Heaven from all yards.
- P) August 2022: Mike Auteri began to reorganize and simplify some design issues on the VEC website, allowing for easier uploads of new information to occur and for visitors to navigate more easily. Additionally, water conservation information, compiled by Mike, Fuad Dahan, and Brooke Berardo will be uploaded early next year and shared to our social media. Fuad began logging Township water usage by all types of property use last year. Mike and Brooke have created infographics and compiled tips and creative ways to conserve water.
- Q) Summer Season 2022: Kari Baureis continued to work on raising the rate of recycling at the Verona Pool. Kari conducted discussions with the administration, the Pool, and the concessions vendor as well as adding well marked receptacles for recycled materials in convenient locations around the pool.
- R) October 18, 2022: Essex County Environmental Commission (ECEC) Roundtable: Jessica Pearson attended a webinar hosted by the ECEC and ANJEC on the importance of planting native species and how they support much needed pollinators. Experts Deb Ellis, of the Essex County Native Plant Society, and Amy Rowe, the Agriculture and Natural Resources County Agent led discussion. During the Roundtable, the Maplewood EC announced the construction of a new green library that will be fully electric, Montclair announced a severe Lanternfly problem at Alonzo F Bonsal Wildlife Preserve and are working with the NJDEP to salvage the trees. The next Roundtable will focus upon Essex County's deer population or the prospect of Essex County developing a Countywide program to enable a more proactive stance on composting.
- S) October 19, 2022: Jessica Pearson attended an NJDEP webinar on the proposed "Inland Flood Protection Rule". Assistant Commissioner for Watershed and Land Management, Vincent Mazzei, led the presentation which presented conditions that precipitated the need for the new inland flooding rule. The current data which informs stormwater management in the state is based upon rainfall and flood data is from 1999. Additionally, FEMA flood maps, also vastly outdated, do not include many areas that have had repetitive flooding incidents from fluvial flooding. The basis of the rule change is twofold. One aspect is to secure reliance upon more accurate and current rainfall data from as late as 2019 and to also base all stormwater management practices on rainfall totals projected for the year 2100. The other part of the rule raises flood elevations in inland flood plain areas (based upon recent NJ mapping) by 2 feet, to protect future build out projects and residents from finding themselves in a flood zone. The likelihood of flooding continues to increase with climate change, the continual removal of trees and the addition of new impervious surface.
- T) November 2022: The VEC began to plan for a reintroduction of the Annual Poster Contest. The Contest will be fully digital and will include all 4th grade elementary classes and Middle and High School Environmental Club members. Planning is underway for a project due date in late March of 2023 so that the winners may be present at the April 17, 2023 meeting to honor Earth Day.
- U) Through social media, Sarah O'Farrell led VEC efforts to educate the public on upcoming meetings, forums, and lectures as well as important health and environmental issues. These issues included information on local issues like anti-Idling, local flooding, tree diseases and insects, specifically the spotted lanternfly, 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.
- V) Throughout the year, the VEC has been supportive of Sustainable Verona. The VEC will continue to submit multiple reports to Verona's application on the Sustainable New

Jersey portal to help gain points towards Verona's certification profile. These include reports on the VEC, the VEC's plan review, Stormwater Ordinance issues and Native/Invasive Planting Ordinances.

- W) Throughout 2022, the VEC reviewed 13 Site Plans, including major developments, for their proposals in Verona. Each plan review requires our Plan Review Committee (PRC) to research the plans and draft comments and recommendations for the land review boards that hear the applications. The PRC members are Jessica Pearson, Sean DiBartolo, and Tony Castillo, who recently replaced Fuad Dahan as the third VEC member on the PRC. Sean, Tony, and Fuad are all licensed engineers, who have proven to be extremely beneficial in our review process. The PRC also cross references the properties to check for flood and riparian zones that correspond to the property in question. The PRC had met virtually or in-person on a few occasions this year to review more complex major site plans.

4) Installations 2022 and ongoing maintenance:

- A) Verona Community Center Pollinator Garden: VEC members Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell with Sustainable Verona members Jonathan, Tom and community residents Frank Ceccacci and Tom's father Bill installed about 600 plants to a prepared planting bed at the Verona Community Center. DPW prepared the bed and installed sprinkler heads to sustain the plantings. The garden was planted in the middle of a heat wave but thanks to DPW's installation of sprinkler heads, they should survive. Three areas were left for installation of small ornamental trees, i.e.: Pee Gee Hydrangeas or Dogwoods, which will also provide for pollinators.
- B) The Grove Park Perennial Garden: The garden is weeded and maintained by Sarah O'Farrell and Jessica Pearson. DPW has mulched and continues to water the garden daily during growing season. Some of the plantings in the rear of the garden have died. This garden would fare better and thrive if it had a water source onsite. In July 2021, the Park became home to an ongoing, community-based installation of fairy houses. This installation is expected to be updated on a continual basis according to the participation. Hilltop Conservancy member Theresa Trapp has also visited the site to plant further native perennials to enhance the garden.
- C) Treasured Tree Program: Jessica Pearson began a review of the registered trees in the program over the summer months. The Program's aim is to have residents nominate extraordinary trees on their property for inclusion in the program. Qualifying features include trees that are native, in good health, have Diameter at Point of Measure (DPM) in excess of 24 inches or have some other extraordinary feature. Some of the previously registered trees were removed or lost in storms and many of the remaining trees need new tags. The VEC is in the process of contacting the property owners to ensure that they are aware that their tree is registered and to get consent to replace the tags. Michael Auteri, the VEC's Webmaster will be forming a new web page for the program. The VEC is also looking into adding a UV Sticker to the tags with a QR code that will bring residents to our new Treasured Tree Website page. Once done, the VEC plans to roll out a social media presentation to invite more residents to nominate their trees to the program.
- D) After Tropical Storm Ida, Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo assessed widespread damages along the Peckman River. The bank erosion is severe. Since then, The Town Council has held several meetings with the DEP, were granted clearance rights to move accumulated debris and blockage from the riverbed. The Town continues to pursue bank stabilization funding and in 2022 hosted visits from Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill and have invited Congressman Donald Payne, Jr. to discuss Federal funding to rectify

the destructive erosion. The VEC continues to monitor the conditions that challenge areas along the Peckman River.

- E) Sean DiBartolo maintains the VEC's Geocaching on-line account that was created in 2015. Maintenance was performed on VEC's geocache titled, "[The Grove](#)" located in Grove Park. Since its hiding in 2016, this geocache has been logged by 150 visitors to the park. Working with Cub Scout Pack 31, Sean has added a new Geocache at the Hilltop Reservation titled, "[Scouting About with Verona Pack 31](#)", which was logged by 15 visitors since it was placed in late December 2021. Finally, there is consideration to hide a third geocache at the Verona Community Garden.

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

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jessica Pearson", with a large, stylized loop at the end.

Chair of the Verona Environmental Commission
December 15, 2022