



Verona Environmental Commission

600 Bloomfield Avenue
Verona, New Jersey 07044

www.veronaec.org

December 15, 2023

Dear Mayor Tamburro, Verona Township Council Members, Town Manager D'Arco, and Deputy Manager O'Sullivan,

2023 Verona Environmental Commission Annual Report

2023 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. Michael Auteri (Webmaster)
5. Fuad Dahan
6. Walter Steinmann
7. Erdal Turnacioglu
8. Adam Bulger (Alternate 1)

All members are Verona residents and serve without compensation. Brooke Berardo served as a Commissioner through June of 2023. Kari Baureis served as a Commissioner through October 2023. Anthony Castillo served as an Alternate Commissioner through November 2023. Councilmember Holland served as our Liaison through July 2023 and Mayor Tamburro is serving as our liaison through July 2024.

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

1) Cleanups and Events 2023: The VEC and its members remain committed to keeping Verona's open space, parks, and waterways free from debris and garbage. Barring weather related cancellations, the VEC ordinarily holds or participates in three annual cleanup or other sorts of events.

- A) February 18, 2023: Hilltop Conservancy Garbage Collection: Members of the VEC, the Verona Green Team and the Hilltop Conservancy came together to collect old tires, large bulk waste, garbage, and debris left behind from the Sanitarium. We moved it down the trail to an accessible collection point for DPW to properly load and dispose of the items.
- B) March 18, 2023: VEC member Kari Baureis organized and helped to run a successful Sports Equipment Swap event at the VCC. The swap asked residents to donate gently used sports equipment and uniforms and raised over \$1,000 for the newly formed

Friends of Verona Parks 501(c)(3). Plans are being discussed for scheduling of other equipment swaps to include musical instruments and other items in the future.

- C) April 22, 2023: The VEC's Annual Earth Day Celebration and Cleanup event took place at Peckman Park (between Commerce Court and Brookside Terrace). This year the VEC focused upon the Peckman River and the 11 acres at Peckman Park. The event included our use of our booted chest waders to retrieve garbage and recyclable materials from the Peckman River. This well-attended event included participation by residents of all ages, as well as many volunteers from the local community. In celebration of Earth Day, we were proud to feature musician/singer/songwriter Paul J. Baccash and bandmate Adam Benitez who graced our cleanup with beautiful music, as well as Compound Coffee who kept our volunteers caffeinated and well fed.
- D) May 13, 2023: Fairy Tales at the Fairy Trail: This event, hosted by the Brownie and Daisy Scout organizations, was held to continue the installation of fairy houses at Grove Park. The event featured readings of fairy tales by VEC members and scout leadership as well as placing newly constructed fairy houses throughout the trail. The continued relationship between the VEC and the local scouting organizations is particularly important to the VEC.
- E) June 3, 2023: VEC's Annual Peckman River / Trail Cleanup: Many VEC members and resident volunteers annually attend our Peckman Cleanup event. At the cleanup, volunteers helped retrieve commingled recycling materials, plastic bags, wrappers, bulk garbage, 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.
- F) June 17, 2023: Special Ribbon Cutting Event for Eagle Scout Candidate Ayden Hanlon: This year we held a special ribbon cutting ceremony to honor Eagle Scout candidate Ayden Hanlon. Ayden's project involved the construction of a bridge over a stream that runs through the Peckman River Trails, as well as two new lengths of boardwalk for an area of the trails that continues to transition into wetlands. This piece of infrastructure added to our trails will make the entire trail more accessible from North to South, which has been split by an ever-widening stream.

The VEC was Ayden's project sponsor on behalf of the Township and provided guidance to Aeyden on getting his project permitted and approved. Commissioner Sean DiBartolo, an Eagle Scout himself, worked with Ayden to develop a plan drawing for submission to the Verona Building Department. Ayden's event was celebrated by VEC Commissioners, his family, fellow scouts, the Verona Town Council, and FN Brown Principal Dr. Lanzo.

- G) October 21, 2023: Park Place-Peckman Cleanup: This event was cancelled due to inclement weather. The VEC will likely reschedule this cleanup to occur during the coming winter. There are also plans to work on the kiosk at the entry of the Peckman Trail behind FN Brown Elementary School.
- H) 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 2023: The VEC recommended that the Town Council pass ordinances or resolutions or take actions on the following:

- A) Chapter 493 Article II Tree Protection, Removal and Replacement: The VEC was a strong proponent of our Tree Ordinance, which passed in October of 2019. After a few years of observation, it had become clear that the Ordinance required updates. After receiving the proposal for an updated ordinance, the VEC drafted a short memo that made further recommendations for the inclusion of certain detailed information including requiring the trees be inspected by an independent Township Forester to assess tree health.

The Ordinance was introduced at the January 23, 2023 Council Meeting and passed during 2nd reading at the February 6, 2023 meeting. The VEC continues to examine this document for improvements that will simplify the permitting process while closing loopholes that may allow for non-compliance. Additionally, a State-required Tree Ordinance was introduced in the Fall of 2023. The VEC is reviewing which requirements may need to be altered in Verona's current Tree Ordinance.

- B) The VEC sent the Verona Town Council a memo on the Recommended Planting List, in conjunction with Chapter 150, Article XI, Section 11.7: Plant Selection and placement. The VEC determined that no changes to the recommended planting list were warranted.
- C) Last year, the VEC sent a recommendation for the Council to adopt a general code Invasive Plant Species Ordinance, to prevent the spread of harmful species. In many cases, these invasive plants are non-native, outcompete our native species and cause property damage or financial burdens for our residents. 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. On June 12, 2023, the Council unanimously passed a comprehensive ordinance that limits or calls for removal of certain invasive species.

- 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 Issue: The DCA's SIAB (Site Improvement Advisory Board) continues to consider the passage of RSIS rules that would overrule Verona's more strict Stormwater rules, as they would apply to residential uses. In 2022, the VEC passed a model resolution against this proposed rule change and 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. With the recent passage of new State Stormwater regulations (Summer 2023), focusing upon inland flood protection, new rain data, and methodology for stormwater management, it is even more crucial that municipalities' local stormwater regulations maintain standing over and above the less strict State Stormwater regulations. The VEC continues to follow the SIAB meetings and remains in contact with other organizations that support the VEC's stance.

- F) Having received a recommendation from the VEC, the Verona Town Council passed Resolution 2023-171 entitled "In Support of the Adoption of a Strong Anti-Idling Policy In New Jersey", on October 16, 2023.
- G) The VEC drafted a letter of recommendation to the Verona Town Council in November regarding the planned renovation of Everett Field. The letter pointed out multiple code violations that were drafted into the proposed plans, including encroachment and disturbance in steep slopes, multiple tree removals in steep slope areas and other areas, and excessive retaining wall heights. The letter also discouraged the use of artificial turf, citing the harmful effect of chemicals in both the turf and the filler materials on athletes as well as the environment, the dangerous heat retention and heat island effect cause by turf, the increase in injuries and the advantages of using natural grass for both the health of the community and for stormwater management purposes.

The letter also suggested testing for the Season High Water Table (SHWT) to make sure that green infrastructural installations would be feasible and recommended additional installations to occur on the perimeters of a natural grass field for more effective drainage and increased field use by the Township.

- H) Supported 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) Jessica is currently working with Township Attorney Aloia, Deputy Manager O'Sullivan and Verona's Engineers from Boswell to update Verona's Stormwater Control Ordinance to reflect NJ mandatory updates along with strong enhancements that best protect Verona and its residents from flood events. The Ordinance is required to be updated by July 2024 and is expected to be discussed by late 2023 or early 2024.
- J) Supported the production of educational materials and videos related to a proper residential recycling practices, harm-free mosquito control, trees, local wildlife and so much more, mainly through our Social Media accounts.
- K) Supported a townwide effort for education and implementation of composting practices for all interested residents.

3) Presentations, Meetings, and Actions 2023:

- 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 welcome to attend and are offered

public comment periods at the beginning of each meeting. All meetings in 2023 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 served as the liaison to Sustainable Verona (SV) through November 2023. Kari gave monthly reports to the VEC to keep the channels of communication open and to coordinate some of our events and actions. Sustainable Verona's chairperson, Karry Bass and VEC chairperson, Jessica Pearson have met and discussed further ways that our two organizations can coordinate to actuate more sustainable and environmentally friendly programs in Verona. This will include creating reports for further certifications. At present, The VEC is working to select a new liaison to the Green Team.
- C) January 5, 2023: Jessica Pearson sent the Verona elementary school 4th grade teachers as well as the HBW and VHS Environmental Club teachers the requirements for participation in the 2023 Poster and Sustainability Contest. The contest is a digital poster contest for the 4th graders and allows for more types of media for the Middle and High School students. Participants were asked to submit all entries by March 24, 2023 so the Commission members could choose the winning submissions and plan for the Town Council awards ceremony in honor of Earth Day.
- D) January 24, 2023: Jessica Pearson attended an ANJEC webinar on EVs in NJ. This webinar discussed the benefits of investing in EV's for personal and municipal use as well as various funding options and available rebate resources and incentives for both the purchase of vehicles and the installation of chargers. The guest speakers included Eve Frank, of ChargEVC, and Ben Rich, of the Montclair EC.
- E) April 17, 2023: The VEC Award Ceremony for the Annual Sustainable Poster Contest took place at the Verona Town Council meeting. Mayor Roman presented six winning submissions and two honorable mention awards. The winning submissions also received a \$50 gift card. A short video showcasing all of the entries was shown and was accompanied by music by Paulie Z, the Founder of the David Z Foundation. The Foundation creates music with students to serve a number of purposes including aiding with learning disabilities, enhancing musical talent, and increasing confidence.
- F) April 21, 2023: VEC Recycling Assemblies at FN Brown. Sarah O'Farrell presented three assemblies to different age groups on recycling best practices. Wearing her lobster cap and interacting with the students, Sarah expertly ran the assemblies, which were accompanied by a visual slide show and enabled the students to raise multiple questions on a myriad of recycling issues. The VEC would like to approach the other elementary schools to present this information to all of the young students in the Verona School Systems in 2024.
- G) May 16, 2023: Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell attended an ANJEC sponsored the Essex County Environmental Commission Roundtable (ECEC) Event, which focused upon Sustainable Food Waste and Organics Management, at the Verona Park Boathouse. This event was led by Virginia Lamb, a composting expert, and Gray Russell, former Sustainability Official for Montclair who both stressed our need to utilize our food waste in a more economical and sustainable manner.
- H) Summer 2023: Michael Auteri began investigating the potential for a Junior Commissioner Program. The details of the program have been finalized and the Commission is awaiting candidate applications from Verona High School. The

candidates will be required to attend meetings and work with one or two VEC mentors to create a project and to present their projects at a future public event.

- I) Summer 2023: Sean DiBartolo and Walter Steinmann worked on plans to upgrade the information kiosk at the entry to the Peckman Trail, behind FN Brown Elementary School. Plans include replacement of the acrylic protective sheet, redesigning the map of the trail and adding new data flood and historical data into to informational kiosk.
- J) Summer Season 2023: Kari Baureis continued to raise 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.
- K) July 24, 2023: Jessica Pearson attended an Inland Flood Protection Webinar, led by NJDEP State Floodplain Administrator Vincent J Massai, Jr. and Stormwater Management Program Manager, Gabriel Mahon. The webinar explained the many updates to the Stormwater Management Rules and how they would be administered by municipalities.
- L) September 2023: Jessica Pearson sent the Council, the Schools, and the VPD information regarding Walk and Roll to School Day (Wednesday, October 4, 2023), so that planning for the event could begin. The event was a success, with a reported minimum of 400 Verona students walking to school on a sunny, warm October morning.
- M) Jessica and chair of Sustainable Verona, Kerry Bass, met multiple times to coordinate the completion of Actions for Sustainable Jersey. The goal is to succeed at a Silver Certification for Verona. The VEC was in charge of about eight actions on the list including: The Environmental Commission, Environmental Commission Plan Reviews, Anti-Idling Policy and Education, Verona's ERI, Enhanced Stormwater Ordinance submissions, Open Space and Recreation Plan, and Community Education and Outreach, which features Verona's PFAS webinar, our amazing social media reels and a Lanternfly educational walk led by Sarah O'Farrell.
- N) Jessica met via Zoom with a qualifying agent from Sustainable NJ in October to discuss the Stormwater requirements for certification points. The current ordinance is undergoing mandatory updates, but the enhancements included in the current version would earn us the maximum amount of available points (35).
- O) November 3, 2023: Jessica attended The Watershed Institute's (TWI) Enhanced Stormwater Management Ordinance webinar, led by Micheal Pisauro, Policy Director of TWI, hosted, along with Princeton Hydro's Clay Emerson. The discussion focused upon the new mandatory updates to all municipal stormwater ordinances as well as an array of ordinance enhancements available to municipalities for adoption. Verona has adopted an enhanced ordinance that includes a reduced trigger for major developments and a minor development section. Fully developed communities, like Verona, require these enhancements to ensure on-site retention of runoff on smaller properties, which comprise the majority of the plots where development occurs in their communities.
- P) November 13, 2023: Essex County Environmental Commission (ECEC) Roundtable: Jessica Pearson attended a webinar hosted by the ECEC entitled "Stormwater and You." The webinar was led by ECEC member and stormwater expert, Jennifer Duckworth, and Sandra Lavigne, Great Swamp Watershed Director of Water Quality Programs.

The focus of the roundtable was on Green vs Gray (pipes) infrastructure and Newark's

Adopt-a-Catch-Basin Program, which can be initiated in other communities. This program solicits volunteers and supplies them with care kits so that they can clear trash, debris, and leaves out of catch basins, reducing the incidence of localized flooding. After the presentations, the roundtable format followed with Essex County ECs discussing their current projects and activities. Idea sharing is a great asset during this portion of the meeting.

- Q) November 2023: The VEC rolled out the Junior Environmental Commissioner Program (JEC) and contacted the appropriate teachers and administrators at Verona High School. The program fits neatly into the Board of Education's Strategic Plan and seeks to engage High School Students to engage with the community to forge a more sustainable future. The students are expected to attend VEC meetings and to create a project that will be showcased later in the year. The students will not only learn more about the environment, Verona's issues, and best sustainable practices, but will also hone skills in public speaking and presentation, project management, and critical thinking. In December, the VEC received twelve applications for the program and has since chosen two Junior Environmental Commissioners to participate in the 2024 program.
- R) December 2023: 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. Planning is underway for a project due date in mid-March of 2023 so that the winners may be present at the April 8, 2023 meeting to honor Earth Day. Schedules are subject to change.
- S) Our social media influencer, 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.
- T) 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.
- U) Throughout 2023, the VEC reviewed more than 18 Site Plans for 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 will be replaced on the PRC in the near future. Sean and Tony are 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 2023 and ongoing maintenance:

- A) The Grove Park Perennial Garden: The garden is weeded and maintained by Sarah O'Farrell, Jessica Pearson, and Hilltop Conservancy Treasurer and VP of Restoration, Theresa Trapp. Theresa has added a new supply of soil and many native plantings to

the garden over the past year. Unfortunately, some of her plantings (approximately a \$200 to \$300 value) were stolen from the Grove Park woods, pending planting. DPW has mulched and continues to water the garden daily during growing season. This garden would fare better and thrive if it had a water source onsite.

- B) Treasured Tree Program: The Treasured Tree Program is alive and well. New placards have replaced the old ones and the VEC is actively looking for new candidate trees to be nominated into the program. Michael Auteri has also updated the VEC website to include a new page on the Treasured Trees which details how trees can be inducted into the program. Since the website was updated, we have received one new nomination: a 60- to 70-year-old *Cornus florida* (dogwood) tree received a placard this fall.
- C) Eastern Redbud Tree Planted at the VCC Garden: Verona Rocks, a local community group that delivers community service and acts of kindness, donated a beautiful Eastern redbud tree in honor of U.S. Navy Veteran Michael A. Coppola. Mr. Coppola, 97, who served as a Water Tender in both World War II and the Korean War, passed away on July 1, 2022. The VEC chose the tree and designated the garden at the Verona Community Center on behalf of Verona Rocks. We were joined by Hillcrest Farms, who supplied the tree and donated planting services, and Deputy Mayor McEvoy who helped to install the proper deer fencing to ensure the tree's survival. The Hillcrest Farm crew also helped week the entire garden on planting day.
- D) 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 175 visitors to the park. Collaborating 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 35 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



Chair, Verona Environmental Commission
December 15, 2023