



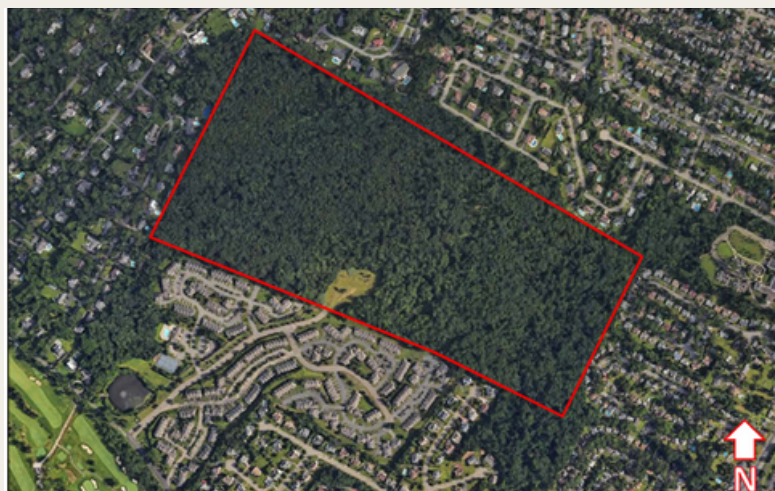
Serving the Township of Verona since 1992

FALL 2025 NEWSLETTER

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DEVELOPMENT OUT OF BOUNDS West Orange Development Plan Raises Environmental Alarm for Verona



Source: We Care NJ- Current undeveloped 120-acre core forest



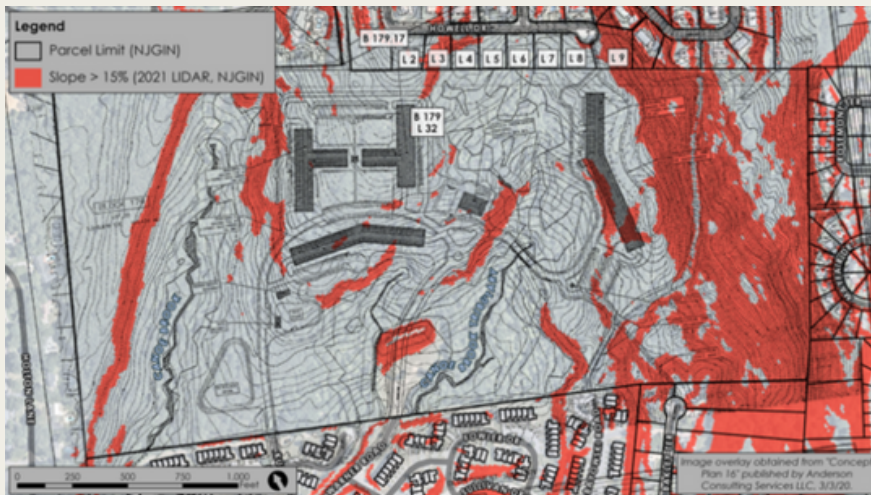
Source: We Care NJ- Proposed development overlay

Will a proposed West Orange housing development swamp Verona in stormwater?

Officials, residents and environmental engineers worry that West Essex Highlands, a multi-building complex planned in a 120-acre densely wooded Watchung Mountains property, would heighten flooding risk for Verona and other neighborhoods already vulnerable to flooding.

While the state Department of Environmental Protection granted the project a stormwater permit, opponents believe the permit was issued in error and that the actual plans do not comply with current state regulations.

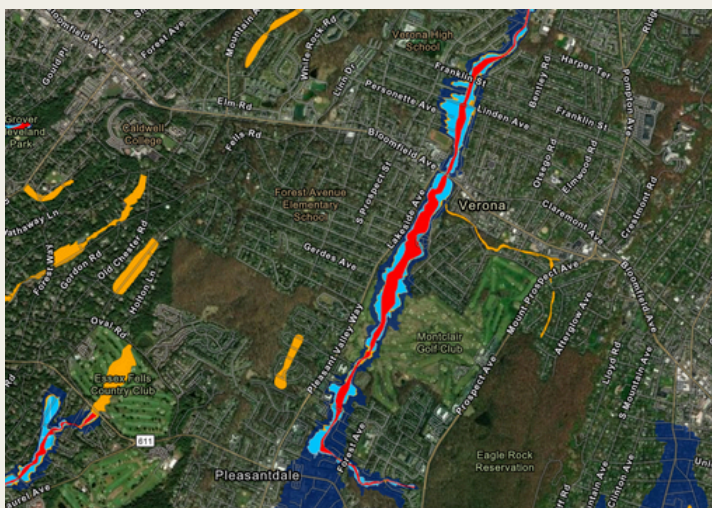
The Garden Homes Real Estate Company, owned by billionaire real estate developer and Minnesota Vikings owner Zygi Wilf's family, plans to build a 496-unit complex spanning 30 acres. When Garden Homes proposed a smaller project in the 2000s, West Orange denied the application on environmental grounds and insufficient egress. The new, larger plan was greenlit because it includes 100 affordable housing units that could help West Orange meet the state's affordable housing construction requirements.



Source: We Care NJ-Steep Slopes (Red areas exceed:15% Slopes)

Construction would cut down thousands of trees on the steeply sloped mountaintop, which could mean big trouble for Verona during heavy rains. Trees play a crucial role in absorbing rainwater, slowing rainfall and reducing soil erosion. Without them, stormwater and detritus could rush down the Watchung Mountains and flood Verona and surrounding areas.

A 2024 Boswell Engineering study found that the complex would discharge storm water towards Verona via the Peckman River. While the Peckman is usually an ankle-deep trickle, it can grow to destructive size during storms. A flood caused by a 2018 flash rainstorm resulted in approximately \$1 million in property damage. During Hurricane Ida in 2021, it swelled to 5-plus-feet for three hours, per a 2022 Rutgers University study of Verona's flood risks.



Source: NJFloodMapper: Verona FEMA and Rutgers+3 Ft. Zones

That Rutgers study found that 70 downtown Verona properties stand a 26% chance of severe flooding impact in the next 30 years and estimated that 17% of Verona homes, 18% of commercial properties and 25% of roads were at flood risk.

As climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, storms become greater threats for Verona. Without natural buffers for stormwater in the hills above our neighborhoods, our homes, businesses and community centers become vulnerable to flooding.

In a 2024 resolution, the Verona Township Council asked the West Orange Planning Board to deny the Garden Homes plan. Additionally, the Verona, Essex County, Caldwell, South Orange and other local Environmental Commissions passed resolutions urging West Orange to preserve this core forest. For information and resources, visit Wecare NJ, a grassroots coalition of residents opposed to the West Essex Highlands project.

VEC IN FOCUS: Sarah O'Farrell

Guided by passion for nature and a belief in the power of small acts, Sarah Farrell is one of Verona's strongest environmental advocates. In her 10 years on the Verona Environmental Commission, she's used her skills and knowledge to help Verona residents make a positive impact.

"I see people doing the right thing most of the time," Sarah says.

Sarah credits her parents and teachers for helping her see the importance of the natural world and the value of hard work early on. Her 70-year-old neighbor, Rosalie, was an key influence on Sarah's childhood for teaching her birdwatching and fly-tying. Spending summers fishing and exploring the Jersey shore further strengthened her connection her to nature.

After earning a natural resources degree from North Carolina State College and a master's from Montclair State University, Sarah shared her love of the environment through education, teaching middle school science and leading science and recycling clubs.



"The little things you do add up. And there's always room for hope."



A former student inspired her to become an advocate for the Homegrown National Park movement, which supports biodiversity through promoting native plants. She urges residents to help curb invasive species through thoughtful landscaping.

"Just take a three-by-three-foot square and put some native plants in it," she says. "Start small."

Sarah believes all Verona residents can help the environment through small acts, including recycling, flattening cardboard, or being aware of one's environmental footprint.

"Little things add up and make our community better, and then our world better," she says. "There's always room for hope."

She adds: "Most importantly, they should follow our social media page."

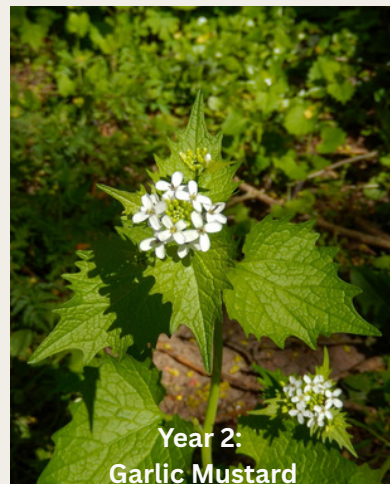
KNOW YOUR WEED: A weed is any plant growing where you don't want it to grow.

GARLIC MUSTARD

Garlic mustard is an invasive weed threatening thriving gardens. It forms dense clumps that compete for space with native species and alters soil composition, leaving behind toxic chemicals that hinder the growth of desirable native plants.

In its first year, garlic mustard sprouts as a low-growing rosette with heart-shaped leaves.

In its second year, it develops a hearty upright stem with sharply toothed triangular leaves. Additionally, it grows sneaky white flowers that hide long seed pods holding hundreds of tiny black seeds. Those seeds can survive for years in soil, coming back year after year to wreak more havoc.



Now, let's compare to a similar looking, but beneficial native species that also grows wild in many NJ gardens:

WHITE SNAKEROOT

Let's get this out of the way early: **White Snakeroot** is poisonous if ingested, so don't let it grow where children play or in places where dogs may sample the flowers. But on the plus side, it's completely deer resistant.



Like garlic mustard, it has toothed, triangular leaves and produces white foamy flowers. But their flowers invite pollinators, support birds, and can grow in shaded areas where they bloom late in the growing season. White snakeroot generally grows taller than garlic mustard (2-4 feet) getting upwards of 4-5 feet.

White snakeroot is a beneficial "weed" and one of the few native plants that can survive deer browsing. Keep it!



VEC CONNECTION

WILD VERONA

Laning Section 2025



Buck



Brown praying mantis



Rabbit



Ruby-throated hummingbird



Green praying mantis



Deer fawn



Female cardinal



Baby house wren

Forest Section 2025



Black bear

Thanks to every residents who sent us wildlife pictures!

Please continue to update us on the different wildlife visiting Verona yards by submitting pictures to VEC@VeronaNJ.org.

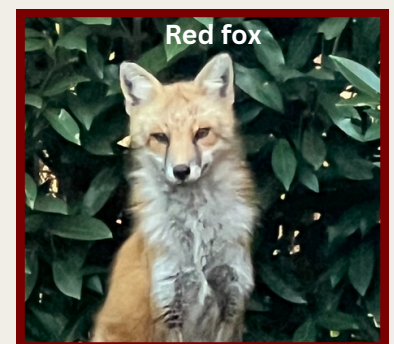
FN Brown Section 2025



American goldfinch

Verona Park Conservancy Clean-up

Join the VEC on Saturday, Oct. 18, 9 a.m.-11 a.m. to help the Verona Park Conservancy with their Fall Clean-up Event. Meet at the Verona Park Boathouse to check in!
(Rain date: Oct. 25)



Red fox