



Verona Environmental Commission

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

December 15, 2021

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

2021 Verona Environmental Commission (VEC) Annual Report

2021 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. VACANT as of November 2021
8. Anthony Castillo (Alternate 1 and Plan Review Committee)
9. Brooke Berardo (Alternate 2)

Christen Dietz served as Alternate 2 through April 2021. Martin Golan served as a full member for 5 years through November 2021 and Frank Ceccacci served as a full member for over 3 years through June 2021, also serving as the liaison to Sustainable Verona.

All members are Verona residents and serve without compensation. Councilmember Ryan served as our Liaison through July 2021 and Councilmember Holland currently serves as our liaison as of July 2021.

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

1) Cleanups and Events 2021: 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. COVID precautions were followed according to the State Department of Health requirements.

- A) January 23, 2021: the VEC hosted a cleanup event at the newly acquired Peckman Park at Commerce Court. Due to COVID-19 guidelines regarding gatherings, Sean DiBartolo established a signup sheet for residents that created hour slots, limiting the allowance for only 25 people onsite at any given time. The event included multiple

- scouting organizations and resulted in over 85 volunteers. The vast amounts of garbage were amassed at Commerce Court and at the end of Brookside Terrace. Over 350 pictures were taken and shared with Township Manager Cavallo. The pictures will be sent to the Land Conservancy and provide data to gain Green Acres funding for the site.
- B) April 17, 2021: Verona Park Conservancy Cleanup: Members of the VEC attended the Conservancy's annual Spring Cleanup event.
 - C) April 24, 2021: 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 6 years. This year we received 500 seedlings to distribute at our cleanup event. Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell separated, tagged, and bagged the tree seedlings to prepare for the public distribution at Grove Park where the cleanup event was scheduled. Michael Auteri and Sean DiBartolo invited Cub, Girl, and Daisy Scout groups to help with the cleanup and to collect organic materials to construct fairy houses for a display to occur later in the Spring. After the event, Jess 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. Extra trees were donated to the Hilltop Conservancy, whose President attended our event. The Verona Park Conservancy also had members in attendance who tended to the Grove Park perennial garden. Finally, DPW mulched the garden for the VEC following the event.
 - D) June 5, 2021: VEC's Annual Peckman River / Trail Cleanup: Many VEC members and about 20 volunteers, including many children, volunteered to help retrieve commingled recycling materials, plastic bags, wrappers, and the like. Noteworthy was the continued erosion of the Peckman banks and the loss of portions of the trails to waterlogged conditions. The southwest portion of the trail was completely 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) July 17, 2021: The VEC hosted the Green Ribbon Cutting event which officiated the opening of the Fairy Trail at Grove Park to the public. The project was spearheaded by Samantha Cunniff, a Cedar Grove Resident who proposed this undertaking as her Gold Award project. Michael Auteri served as liaison with Samantha and the Girl Scouts throughout this project. Community members were joined by the Mayor and Town Council at the Ribbon Cutting to tour the trail. The project was and continues to be a wide-reaching success and has since expanded to include Verona School children that want to participate in building and installing new, biodegradable houses along the Trail. After this event, the VEC Chair sent a letter commendation to the Girl Scout Heart of New Jersey Council in support of Samantha being a recipient of the coveted Gold Award. She has since received the award.
 - F) August 7, 2021: The VEC hosted a "Mend the Fairy Trail" cleanup event after three incidents of deliberate damage and vandalization rendered many of the fairy houses destroyed and strewn throughout the woods. Girl Scouts and VEC members searched through the woods for items that could be reused, and Samantha Cunniff replaced many of houses that she and her family rebuilt.
 - G) October 16, 2021: VEC members participated in the Verona Park Conservancy's Annual Fall cleanup event held in Verona Park.
 - H) October 17, 2021: VEC members participated in the Sustainable Verona Cleanup at the West Essex Trail.
 - I) October 24, 2020: the VEC hosted a special cleanup of the Peckman Trail / River in response to Tropical Storm Ida. VEC members, along with about 12 local volunteers and their children retrieved many items, both large and small from the banks and waters

of the Peckman River. This family-friendly event enabled us to further assess the rapid bank erosion and riverbed elevation changes that the Peckman River has been experiencing over the past 5 years. As the banks wash away and the elevation of the bed rises (due to sediment and rocks were deposited by heavy water flows) the incidence of local flooding has seen a marked increase.

- J) November 14, 2021: The VEC hosted a second cleanup at the recently acquired Peckman Park at Commerce Court. The VEC hosted a cleanup at this site last winter where substantial amounts of garbage and debris were retrieved. This cleanup enabled volunteers venture into the river to remove garbage and debris as well as to finish collecting the bulk garbage that existed in the woods. The VEC noted much less in the way of carelessly disposed cans and bottles. However, there was also a notable erosion of the Peckman River's banks at the western portion of this site. Also of note: a dry creek bed running from east to west towards the Peckman has become more pronounced and seems to be forming a regular small tributary.
- K) The VEC created a Service Certificate for all young volunteers that would like proof of 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) Stormwater Ordinance: NJDEP adopted new Stormwater Management Rules on March 2, 2020, which become operational 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. NJ DEP's new Stormwater Management Rules stipulate that green infrastructure must be relied upon as the main method for stormwater control throughout each development site. After a year of research, meetings with professionals and township officials, and attending various informative webinars, Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo sent a memo to the Township Council and Manager on February 17, 2021, recommending further items be included in the Township's Rules. These included important terminology to help with clarification of the new rules. The Ordinance was adopted at the March 8, 2021 Town Council meeting with most of the VEC recommendations.
- B) Supported the Township of Verona's renewal of Sustainable NJ Essex Alliance to collectively purchase electricity from a green energy source for its growing list of municipal members. The new contract became active in March 2021 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. This program was given full support by the Town Council and was negotiated with help from Director of Administration and Economic Development, Steven Neale and the Township Manager Cavallo.
- C) Supported and attended the official opening and ribbon cutting of the Verona Community Garden along with key founding members from the VEC, Kari Baureis and Frank Ceccacci.
- D) Commercially-Delivered Gas Leaf Blower Services Ordinance: The VEC has been discussing the negative attributes of gas-powered leaf blowers for many years. Martin Golan proposed that a memo be sent to the Town Council at the February 2021 meeting. After review and discussion at the March 2021 meeting, Jessica Pearson and

Sean DiBartolo drafted a memo which recommended that seasonal and hour restrictions be placed upon the commercial delivery of services that utilize gas-powered leaf blowers. The issue was posted on Planet Civic, a municipal tool that helps to measure the community's opinions on suggested issues of policy or projects. Unfortunately, Planet Civic has a low level of participation and drew only 300 or so votes on this specific issue. The opinions of over 11,000 registered voters remain unknown.

- E) VEC Support of the Essex Hudson Greenway Project. The VEC discussed the positive nature of the proposed Essex Hudson Greenway, a multi-faceted walking and biking path slated for installation in Montclair and continuing through multiple towns and cities to eventuate in Jersey City. For perspective, other than the Essex County Trail, there are no other nearby biking routes for residents to enjoy without a long drive away from the congestion of our heavily-trafficked area. The Greenway proposes to not only offer greenspace and outdoor recreational enjoyment to so many surrounding towns, and an alternative carbon-free travel route to NYC transit options in Jersey City, but also multiple job creations and green stormwater infrastructure in areas that are subjected to increased storm flooding issues. The VEC voted in the affirmative to send a letter of support to Governor Murphy at their regular June 9, 2021, meeting. The VEC was also added to the list of official supporters of the Greenway.
- F) Preservation of the whole of the newly acquired Peckman Park at Commerce Court. The VEC sent a short email to the Town Council on June 22, 2021, in support of preservation of the entire 11.5 acres of wooded areas south of Commerce Court. The Town Council has been discussing the potential for development of seven to nine single-family homes to be built at the eastern portion of the wooded area, where extremely steep slopes and established creek beds are limiting factors. The VEC supports the maintenance of the entire passive recreation space, and if necessary, the potential use of the cleared area that, at one time, served as the Township's leaf dump.
- G) Mini cell towers Ordinance: The VEC continues to support the inclusion of environmental impact study requirements for cell tower installations as well as the drafting of an ordinance that zones for their appropriate placement while prohibiting them in and around residential areas; especially prohibiting their location on residential homes or accessory structures like garages. The VEC has maintained this position for over 3 years, when an application for such an installation came before the Board of Adjustment.
- H) Over the summer of 2021, Jessica Pearson and Sarah O'Farrell collaborated with members of the Verona Shade Tree Commission and the Hilltop Conservancy to create a new Recommended Plantings List intended for incorporation in our Zoning Code, Chapter 150. The existing list in our current Zoning Code includes many non-native and invasive species and therefore requires updating. The extensive new list has been forwarded to Township Manager Cavallo. Additionally, a list of invasive species was also compiled and sent to the Township Manager in hopes that an invasive species ordinance will be created in the future.
- I) Recommendation for passage of the State's Anti-Idling Resolution and supported by educational programs and signage: In 2015, the Verona Town Council passed an abbreviated version of the State's No-Idling Resolution. The VEC has long supported a stronger resolution along with public awareness programming and enforcement. At the VEC September 2021 meeting, members favored sending the Town Council a letter of recommendation to pass the stronger State Model Resolution. Ironically, around that same time, the Verona Police sent out a town-wide alert reminding residents not to illegally park, stop, or block streets and driveways outside of the schools. The VEC felt that an Anti-Idle Resolution would not only assist the police department on this recurring

problem, but more importantly, would lend to a healthier atmosphere for children around schools and athletic fields and any other area of Verona where idling was prevalent. Upon passage of the Resolution by the Town Council, the VEC sent the Verona BOE and the interim Superintendent, Dr. Furnari, a brief notification letter and has also offered to help with public education. The VEC is currently awaiting a response from the BOE.

- J) Supports the production of educational materials and videos related to a new Township recycling tagging program to reinforce proper residential recycling practices.
- K) Supports a town-wide effort for education and implementation of composting practices for all interested residents.

3) Presentations, Meetings, and Actions 2021

- 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 2021 were held via internet video conference due to the health risks associated with COVID-19.
- B) Ongoing commitment to Sustainable Verona. VEC member Frank Ceccacci, was the liaison to Sustainable Verona (SV) until he stepped down from the VEC in June 2021. Kari Baureis took the liaison role and has been a regular attendee of SV meetings, and the weekly Community Garden meetings for over 2 years. Kari gives monthly reports to the VEC to keep the channels of communication open and to coordinate some of our events and actions.
- C) March 13, 2021: Jessica Pearson attended an ANJEC webinar on Ordinances and Master Plans. This webinar explained the important environmental considerations that must be included in the reexamination of all municipal master plans. 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.
- D) April 21, 2021: Sarah O'Farrell attended an ANJEC webinar, cosponsored by Duke Farms on Deer Management. The webinar focused upon the white tail deer population crisis and their impact on disappearance of native species undergrowth in our woodlands. Unfortunately, our woodlands are now being overcome by invasive species, which the deer do not browse on as frequently. Their program supports increasing deer population control measures.
- E) May 2021: Educational Video Production on Recycling: Christen Dietz and Sarah O'Farrell completed two educational videos focusing upon the most common mistakes made with commingled, plastic, and cardboard recycling in Verona. The videos were posted on the VEC website, the VEC YouTube Channel and were shared on social media.
- F) May 2021: Fuad Dahan began logging Township water usage by all types of property use. Fuad has committed to keep this going to show residents and business owners when our usage spikes occur and plans to draft a list of simple tips on how to conserve water during high usage months. His research is ongoing and will eventually be posted on our website with infographics created by Mike Auteri and as well as creative ways to conserve our water use compiled by Brooke Berardo.

- G) May 19 2021: Jessica Pearson attended a Sustainable NJ sponsored Climate Interpreter Webinar. The meeting focused upon strategic framing of climate change talking points to make them more easily communicated for municipal and everyday discussion. Cassie Klein, a representative from the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI) discussed how we need to bridge the gap between public understanding and science and gave attendees a list of simple actions that we can take as a community to spread the burden of slowing the effects of climate change.
- H) June 2021: Educational Video Production on Composting: Sarah O'Farrell, Mike Auteri, and Jessica Pearson made an educational video about backyard composting. The video was uploaded to the VEC website, the VEC YouTube channel and shared on social media.
- I) June 2, 2021: VEC members attended a virtual film airing of "The Sacrifice Zone", co-sponsored by Sustainable Verona and the Verona Library. The film focuses upon the Iron Bound Section of Newark where the proximity of chemical and waste dumping sites to residential homes has become untenable for those residents. The film focuses upon the uphill battle that residents have undertaken to see environmental justice be realized in that section of Newark as well as other urban developments in New Jersey and throughout the country. After the film aired, the public was given an opportunity to ask questions and have a brief discussion with the film's producer and director Julie Winokur.
- J) June 2021: Kari Baureis initiated a discussion regarding a lack of recycling compliance at the Verona Pool. The discussion was followed by a meeting of the Verona Pool Management, Recreation and Building and Grounds Officials, and Steven Neale to discuss how to make recycling a habit for our pool members throughout the season. Kari heads a subcommittee for the VEC for this purpose and will be working over the winter with officials to better this situation for the 2022 pool season.
- K) July 14, 2021: The VEC hosted NJ Composting Council member Matt Karmel for a presentation on municipal composting programs. Many members of the VEC are active composters and would like to see the Township introduce a pilot program where residents could bring their compost materials to one township site and later, pick up their compost for their own home gardens. The VEC also hopes that beyond a simple pilot program, that the Township will eventually consider a future site where static aerobic piles can be managed for town-wide food waste. The purposes of such programs are two-fold; 1) by reducing our overall waste tonnage we could reduce the Township's exorbitant costs associated with waste hauling, 2) by enriching and fortifying our gardens and properties with the compost, we can not only increase our food and natural growth output, but also reduce our use of chemical fertilizers. Mr. Karmel graciously offered to make himself available again to present information to and answer questions from the Verona Town Council.
- L) September 2021: Sean DiBartolo was contacted by an Eagle Scout candidate who proposes to extend the boardwalk at the Peckman Trail behind F. N. Brown School. Sean conferred with our engineering department and Township Manager Cavallo to confirm that this project could be explored and met with the candidate to evaluate where the boardwalk extension could be installed.
- M) September 21, 2021: Jessica Pearson attended the ANJEC webinar What's the 411 on MS4 Permits? This webinar focused discussion on mostly Tier A municipalities and reviewed both the current and potential new requirements and regulations for municipalities to stay in compliance with the State's MS4 Permitting Rules.
- N) September 27, 2021: Sarah O'Farrell attended ANJEC webinar: Neonicotinoid Pesticides in New Jersey. This webinar discussed the negative impacts that neonic

have on our ecosystem. Further, they recommend that each municipality push for a ban on the use of three specific chemical agents via ordinance in hopes that this will eventuate into a State-wide ban.

- O) October 7, 2021: Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo attended: A Community Member's Guide to Engaging in the Master Planning Process, a webinar hosted by the Watershed Institute and featured a Professional Planner, an Attorney who specializes in Land Use, and a former Mayor of Hopewell who continues to sit as a land use board member. Discussion focused upon the legal mandate for a Master Plan and its importance and enduring value on a municipality's future development. Other issues touched upon included variances, zoning, and planning for areas susceptible to flooding hazards.
- P) A discussion at our October meeting led to the start of a project that will both educate and engage the public while relying upon VHS science students' creativity. The project, still in its preliminary stages is being managed by Jessica Pearson and Brooke Berardo, who have compiled topics for the students to consider. This will proceed with a Google meeting with upwards of 70 VHS students who will be tasked with creating environmental PSAs that will be shared on the VEC's social media pages and the VEC YouTube Channel.
- Q) November 30, 2021: Essex County Environmental Commission Roundtable (ECEC): VEC member Sarah O'Farrell attended this webinar that focused upon the ever-popular topic of climate resiliency and hazard mitigation within Essex County. After the presentation, each Commission shared ideas and updates with the other Commissions present.
- R) 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 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.
- S) Throughout the year, the VEC has been supportive of Sustainable Verona. The VEC has submitted 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 and the Stormwater Ordinance.
- T) Throughout 2021, the VEC reviewed 26 Site Plans, including multiple major developments which had multiple re-submissions, 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 via telephone on a few occasions this year to review more complex major site plans.

4) Installations 2021 and ongoing maintenance:

- A) Verona Community Garden: The VEC with Sustainable Verona, key community volunteers, and DPW finished the installation of the Verona Community Garden near H. B. Whitehorne Middle School's running track at Park Place. The beds were installed in March 2021 and a Spring 2021 planting followed, after an overwhelming response

from residents interested in renting the beds. Kari Baureis kept the VEC updated on all Garden progress. The Garden had a very successful growing season.

- 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.
- C) After Tropical Storm Ida, Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo assessed widespread damages along the Peckman River. Sean took over 100 photos and a few videos, and in some cases, was able to match them to similar photos taken over the past few years. The bank erosion was notable, and in some areas, extreme. Since then, The Town Council has held several meetings with the DEP and hosted a visit from Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill to discuss Federal funding and permits to clear the debris and hopefully, rectify the destructive erosion.
- D) Rain Garden at the Community Center: Township Manager Cavallo, DPW, and the VEC collaborated on a proposed installation of a community garden in front of the playground at the Verona Community Center. Drainage pipes were installed under the ADA sidewalk rampways to ensure that the garden received enough water throughout the seasons.
- E) Jessica Pearson, Sarah O'Farrell, and Kari Baureis formed a subcommittee for planning the specific types of plantings and placement. However, installation will not occur until sometime in 2022.
- F) 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 **133** visitors to the park. The VEC is considering hiding another geocache in the vicinity of the planned Verona Community Garden and will be working with Cub Scout Pack 31 to hide another geocache in the Hilltop Reservation.

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 black ink, appearing to read 'Jessica Pearson', with a large loop at the end.

Chair of the Verona Environmental Commission
December 15, 2021