



Verona Environmental Commission

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

December 16, 2020

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

2020 Verona Environmental Commission (VEC) Annual Report

2020 Roster: The VEC has seven members plus two alternates, Jessica Pearson (Chairperson and continuing as Planning Board Liaison), Sean DiBartolo (Vice-Chair and continuing on the Plan Review Committee), Martin Golan, Sarah Yauch O'Farrell, Frank Ceccacci (Liaison to Sustainable Verona), Michael Auteri (Webmaster), Kari Baureis, Fuad Dahan (Alternate 1), and Christen Dietz (Alternate 2). All members are Verona residents and serve without compensation. Councilwoman McGrath served as our Liaison through July 2020 and Councilman Ryan served as our liaison as of August 2020 through the rest of the year.

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

1) Cleanups and Events 2020: The VEC and its members remain committed to keeping Verona's open space and parks free from debris and garbage. However, the VEC was challenged to carry out some of their regularly scheduled cleanup events this year due to NJ State Covid-19 health and safety policies. The VEC ordinarily holds three annual cleanup events. This year, our Earth Day cleanup event at Grove Park was cancelled; however we were able to deliver tree seedlings to Verona residents. As schools remained closed and the shutdown continued, our National Trails Day clean up event scheduled for the Peckman Trail and River on June 6, 2020 was also cancelled, but fortunately rescheduled. Since schools remained closed in October, our annual "Walk to School Day" event and our Poster Contest were also cancelled this year.

- A) April 18, 2020: the VEC's Annual Earth Day celebration and cleanup at Grove Park was cancelled. Jessica and Sarah continued individually visiting the site, weeding the garden and monitoring the growth. The DPW has committed to watering this garden daily. They also installed a garden border, added new mulch to the garden and increased watering from every other day to every day to ensure that the perennials become well rooted.
- B) This year, the VEC delivered tree and shrub seedlings to those Verona residents who signed up to receive upwards of 800 seedlings. Steve Neale placed an on-line signup sheet link on the Verona Township Website, which the VEC shared on multiple municipal social media pages and the response was overwhelming. The VEC has participated in the NJDEP New Jersey Tree Recovery Campaign, for the past 5 years and at most, 300 seedlings had been handed out at our public park event. This year,

due to Covid-19, a small group of members, Sarah, Jess, Frank and Kari along with local volunteers, the entire Mathewson Family, and Councilman Ryan and Val Ryan helped to separate, tag, bag and deliver about 700 tree seedlings and 100 shrub seedlings (800 total), currently our township record. Jessica formulated delivery routes according to Verona's four quadrants and sent two informative emails to all 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.

- C) October 10, 2020: the VEC hosted its annual Peckman Trail / River Cleanup (usually held in June) on this alternate date. All VEC members, along with about 30 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 was our first "socially distanced" cleanup event where all volunteers complied by wearing masks and giving other volunteers the consideration of 6 feet of space. Verona Kids Rock members also donated Grow and Learn Seed Pods for all of the children participants. The event was very successful.
- D) October 17, 2020: VEC members participated in the Verona Park Conservancy's Annual Fall cleanup event held in Verona Park.
- E) The VEC had scheduled a tentative cleanup event for Sunday, November 22, 2020. Unfortunately, the cleanup event was cancelled due to a new surge in Covid-19 cases in town.

2) Policy Recommendations 2020: 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 support the inclusion 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. The VEC has maintained this position for the past 3 years.
- B) Single-Use Plastic Bag Ordinance: The VEC supported an ordinance that would ban single-use carry out plastic bags in the Township of Verona. Verona placed this proposed ordinance on hold during the Covid-19 crisis. In September, the NJ State Legislature passed a State Ban on single-use plastic bags and certain other items and in November 2020, Governor Murphy signed the legislation. Verona will have to adopt this ban within 18 months of the Governor's signature.
- C) Stormwater Ordinance: NJDEP adopted new Stormwater Management Rules on March 2, 2020, which become operational on March 3, 2021. All municipalities in NJ are 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.

This dovetails very well with Verona's Tree Preservation, Removal and Replacement Ordinance (No. 2019-34) as well as with Verona's Steep Slope Ordinance (No. 03-2016). Verona will be required to update their ordinance to remain in compliance with the new NJDEP Rules by March 3, 2021 as well. VEC members worked with the Township Manager and Verona's Engineer Manager to discuss conditions to be included in Verona's new ordinance.

- D) The VEC sent a letter to the Verona Township Council on December 29, 2019 providing recommendations related to redevelopment plans for the Spectrum 360, Cameco, and Poekel properties that would come before the Governing Body in 2020. The VEC was in support of the Council upholding and enforcing all environmental ordinances and best practices on the upcoming development sites that will accommodate the Township's affordable housing obligations. The recommendations for both the "Cameco" site as well as the "Spectrum 360" site pointed out the natural conditions of each property, including tree canopies and steep slopes and made recommendations to maintain those natural land features for use in the site plans for both stormwater management and buffers to any neighboring properties.
- 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 processed 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 support fully electronic application submissions for ease in sharing and reviewing land use applications. This is even more necessary due to the Covid-19 crisis where all land use meetings are being held via video conferencing. Electronic plans not only enable Board members, but also all members of the public to review all files for applications.
- F) 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.
- G) Supported the Township purchase of two properties for Open Space as well as the contract with The Land Conservancy for its consultancy on all Open Space.
- H) Supports the continued planning and construction of the Verona Community Garden behind H. B. Whitehorne Middle School.
- 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 2020:

- A) The VEC holds regular meetings generally on the 2nd Wednesday of each month, except for August. Special meetings are held when the VEC needs to convene during the intervening time between regular meetings to discuss special topics that may be time-sensitive that cannot wait until the next regular meeting. Members of the community are welcomed to attend and are offered public comment periods at the beginning of each meeting. This year, our April meeting was cancelled due to Covid-19. However, with Township support, the VEC was able to reconvene in May via video conferencing and has continued meeting virtually throughout the rest of the year.
- 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) January 7, 2020: Special guest: Java Compost: The VEC hosted Java's Compost, a West Orange-based company, for a special presentation at our January meeting. Java and Michelle Bradley offer a full composting service to many surrounding communities and support backyard composters with how-to education and supplies. Due to this

presentation, a public question was posted on Planet Civic and the necessary number of respondents was met for Java to begin curbside composting service in Verona.

- D) March 7, 2020: ANJEC Fundamentals for Environmental Commissions. VEC members Sarah O'Farrell and Christen Dietz attended this seminar, which introduces members to many of the duties of environmental commissioners. These include an introduction to Stormwater Management Rules, site plan review, recommendations for environmental ordinances and public meeting guidance. Sarah and Christen gave an overview of their experience and their takeaways from the seminar during our March 2020 meeting.
- E) June 3, 2020: Stormwater Utilities Webinar: VEC Vice Chairperson Sean DiBartolo attended this webinar, which suggested guidance on how municipalities can introduce a Green Infrastructure plan for integration with stormwater upgrades. These principles could allow for the introduction of a utility fee schedule, but overall, would act to alleviate dependence on structural resources for controlling and managing Stormwater runoff.
- F) September 9, 2020: Model Stormwater Ordinance Webinar: VEC members Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo attended this webinar hosted by The Watershed Institute and ANJEC. The webinar provided guidance and a model ordinance integral to redrafting a municipal Stormwater Ordinance.
- G) VEC members met, via video conferencing, at various times from September through November to discuss the development of Verona's new Stormwater Management Ordinance with Engineering Manager Mike DeCarlo.
- H) November 18, 2020: Essex County Environmental Commission Roundtable (ECEC): VEC members Jessica Pearson, Sean DiBartolo, and Martin Golan attended this webinar on Drinking Water. The ECEC usually hosts two roundtable events each year, but due to Covid-19, this was their only event. This year the discussions focused upon various infrastructural challenges and chemical contaminants in NJ's drinking water. After the presentation, each commission shared ideas and updates with the other Commissions present.
- I) November 19, 2020: NJ Composting Council Seminar. Steven Neale, Jessica Pearson, and Sustainable Verona member Ina Denburg attended this full-day seminar that focused upon ideas for municipal composting programs. The NJ Composting Council discussed a wide spectrum of programs that lend to a healthier township with lowered dependence on garbage contracts. Many of the ideas are under discussion for Verona.
- J) December 2, 2020: RSIS vs Stormwater Management Seminar. Jessica Pearson and Sean DiBartolo attended this seminar that addressed the perceived conflict between Residential Site Improvement Standards (RSIS) and municipal Stormwater ordinances that stipulate control measures on single- and two-family detached homes. The discussion provided information for townships on how to include single- and two-family detached homes in the municipal ordinance by including the Stormwater Ordinance in the Zoning Code. These expanded terms have become necessary due to increased rainfall amounts in our state, as well as the continued increase of impervious surface throughout the single-family community.
- K) 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.
- L) Throughout 2020, the VEC reviewed 12 Site Plans, one of which had multiple re-submissions, for land development 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 had met virtually on a few occasions this year to review more complex major site plans.

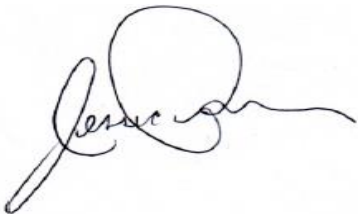
4) Installations 2020:

- A) Perennial Garden at Grove Park and Historic Nature Preserve had a garden border installed by members of DPW and a new layer of mulch added. The perennial Garden contains pollinator plants such as echinacea, bee balm, lobelia cardinalis, wild geraniums, salvia and penstemon husker. The watering schedule is maintained by the township and weeding and maintenance is fulfilled by members of the Commission.
- B) Verona Community Garden: The VEC with Sustainable Verona and a few key community volunteers are working on the installation of a community organic garden near H. B. Whitehorne Middle School's running track. The new fencing was installed in November 2020 and the VEC is hopeful that the garden will be completed for Spring 2021 planting. VEC members Frank Ceccacci and Kari Baureis keep the VEC updated on all Garden progress.
- C) Website Launch: The VEC launched a new website during the 2020 summer. VEC member and webmaster Mike Auteri redesigned the entire site and Sean DiBartolo assisted with data information upload. The site can be viewed at: VeronaEC.org and is a work in progress as we continue to add new features and populate it with new information.
- D) VEC member Sean DiBartolo reestablished access to 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 117 visitors to the park. The VEC is considering hiding another geocache in the vicinity of the planned Verona Community Garden in 2021.

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 of the name.

Chair of the Verona Environmental Commission
December 16, 2020