

Highland Park Environmental Commission
Meeting of February 20, 2002
Minutes

Present: Michael Rosenberg, Jonathan Abrahams, Arnold Henderson, Laurel Kornfeld, Loren Muldowney,
Anthony Puniello, Wendy Rosen

Guests: ShayMaria Silvestri, Leora Wenger, Eugene Young

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:25 PM.
2. The minutes of the January 16, 2002 meeting were approved.
3. Correspondence
 - a) We received our annual 2002 membership dues notice from ANJEC. Annual membership for the Commission is \$250. We unanimously agreed to renew our ANJEC membership.
 - b) We received notice that Highland Park's annual downtown Street Fair will be held on Sunday, April 28 from 12 noon-5 PM (rain date Sunday, May 5). The Commission will have a table at the fair at which we will promote our new website.
4. Membership. Mike photocopied the Environmental Commissioner's Handbook section on membership. The borough has passed an ordinance providing us with two alternate members. ShayMaria is interested in serving as one of the alternates. Arnold knows two other people who also are interested. Mike added that some Environmental Commissions have student members and suggested that we pursue this as well.
5. Site Plans. There were no site plans to review.
6. Old Business
 - a) Biosurvey. The biosurvey is complete. Mike reported that he submitted a letter indicating this along with two copies of the study to DEP. He and Arnold have the other two copies. We need to make more copies. Arnold suggested we put an executive summary and parts of the study on our website. There could also be a section keeping readers up to date on the trail grant to show that volunteers are working on it. The next step regarding the biosurvey is to schedule Thonet for a presentation to Council. Councilwoman Elsie Foster Dublin is interested in doing this on March 19. Arnold will contact Blaine Rothausen about this. Gene asked if we have scheduled a date for the tour Thonet wants to take us on of their restoration site in Harding Township. No date has yet been scheduled, but Arnold recommended that early April might be a good time because that is when the leaves begin to come out. Gene reminded us that the biosurvey has not yet been submitted to Council and suggested we submit it and request they pass a resolution officially approving it and then submit it to the Planning Board.
 - b) Master Plan Public Meeting. Gene reminded us that the Master Plan Subcommittee of the Planning Board will hold a meeting at the Senior/Youth Center on Sunday, March 10, from 4-6:30 PM, during which public comment will be accepted. He suggested we use this opportunity to provide the Committee with information including the biosurvey. Loren serves on this Committee and said she thinks the attendees will break into groups and take down people's suggestions. She recommended we submit the biosurvey and specify what we would like the Committee to do with it. Gene will review the biosurvey and see if he can find a summary and map to submit instead of the whole document. Laurel questioned whether we should submit recommendations as a Commission, and Gene said we should submit something. Arnold suggested we submit an executive summary of our draft open space plan in the form of a letter along with a list of items on which we are working. He recommended we form a small group to work on wording for this letter. He will start the letter and send it to Mike and Gene for recommendations and then to all of us. Gene added that we should have enough environmentally oriented people attend the meeting so that there is at least one in each working group. He also added that the Borough Planner has reported a list of items in the Master Plan Re-examination Report that will need attention. Some had to do with open space and these items should be our focus. Loren informed us that there will be one other public input session on the Master Plan.
 - c) Greenway Environmental Education Center. Mike reported that the county has bought into the greenway concept. Freeholder James Polos did a presentation to Council on February 5 regarding the Environmental

Education Centers and the Donaldson Park improvements. Gene questioned why the Environmental Commission and Shade Tree Advisory Committee were not informed of the presentation. The Commission expressed disappointment at not being informed about it. Laurel will check the agenda for the February 5 Council meeting to see if Polos' presentation was listed. She will also write up and email a summary of his presentation to all in attendance at tonight's meeting. Those who missed the presentation can watch it tomorrow on HPTV at 7 AM, 7 PM, 10 AM, and 10 PM.

The Freeholders have approved \$3 million for improvements to Donaldson Park including rebuilding fields, redesigning the boat ramp, building an ice rink, and creating walking trails along the park's perimeter. These trails will be handicapped accessible. These renovations will begin in the fall; the county will spend \$1.5 million on them in 2002 and another \$1.5 million in 2003. Arnold pointed out that the improvements planned contain some changes from the original ones presented several years ago by Ralph Albanir, including rerouting certain roads and paths. He recommended we advocate moving the gazebo and restrooms closer to the Meadows. He also suggested we look at the latest plans to see if more lights are being put in.

The county has assessed Red's Marina property value at \$371,000 and authorized MCIA to purchase or condemn the property. The owner is asking for \$1 million. The adjacent Barwood property is also under negotiation.

Gene emphasized that the next step in the process is to go from the schematic to detailed drawings and added that if we do not get our input in soon, it will be too late. The Mayor should have advice from us on the final project. Elsie will take the lead on the next step by inviting architectural firms for specs and bids. Gene, Arnold, Mike, Councilman Steve Buzbee, and Borough Attorney Alan Safrin met several weeks ago to explore how to bid this project and agreed to put together a list of consultants to contact. Four or five companies were selected. These landscape architectural firms will put together presentations on their prior work on environmentally sensitive lands. Arnold will also meet with the people who did the pro bono work at the site. Tony questioned whether the county has to go before our Planning Board for approval. Laurel asked whether there is a copy of the Donaldson Park map (with the planned improvements) in the library.

- d) Communication with the Borough. We need proactive measures to obtain information on time and have a chance to provide input. Wendy suggested we brainstorm on ways we can each individually tap into information and bring it to our meetings. She questioned whether it would be appropriate for us to touch base with Elsie once a week, and Arnold suggested we do this as part of the creation of our meeting agendas. Laurel agreed to bring her notes on recent Council meetings to our meetings as well as to find out the dates and times of Freeholder meetings and report this information.
- e) Draft Open Space Plan. Arnold drafted a third version of this plan, which is only slightly different from the second one, which is the one most of us have. Loren created a two-page executive summary of Arnold's plan. Her summary includes the state's required categories and lists the studies whose findings are included. Gene praised the summary as excellent for informing the Mayor, Council, and Master Plan Review Subcommittee. Loren will distribute the summary electronically. Eventually, she will add maps to it. She recommended that our base map be an electronic map done by GIS to which things can be added and moved around. She also recommended we ask the Borough Planner to let us in on the base map when it is created. ShayMaria said there are maps on the DEP website she can get. Loren did provide an aerial map of Highland Park. We will review the summary and submit comments to Loren. Comments on the entire draft will be sent to both Arnold and Loren.

The summary includes our proposals to preserve Kilmer Woods, the natural portions of the Midland Ross site, Red's Marina, and the Barwood property and to protect stream corridors and bicycle-pedestrian paths and connect our open spaces. Actions proposed include rezoning the Meadows as conservation, applying for greenway and bicycle/pedestrian trail grants, adopting a Stream Corridor Protection Ordinance, rezoning small parcels in neighborhoods for pocket parks, identifying at-risk sites in open areas, and strengthening ordinances to protect environmentally sensitive areas. The goal is to have pedestrian access to open space within one quarter of a mile from any residential location. The summary describes the process by which an Open Space Plan would be approved, including public meetings, reviewing survey results, looking at past borough planning documents, all for the purpose of protecting, restoring, and enhancing the natural environment of Highland Park. The summary also includes the state's required categories for an Open Space Plan. Arnold said the state visualizes the executive summary as a stand-alone document. The state sets guidelines, not requirements for Open Space Plans, and then lists the items required for participation in the Green Acres Trust Program.

Arnold said he suggested creating a Greenway Overlay Zone in the draft plan but is considering taking this portion out. An overlay zone exists alongside the regular zoning but serves as an extra filter when people

want to do anything with the land it encompasses. ANJEC recommends this overlay zone to inform property owners of the possibility of donating an easement and thereby getting a tax break. The problem with this is that in the past, people living between Route 27 and the Valley Place Ravine expressed opposition to a walkway along the river, and we do not want to trigger that opposition. Arnold emphasized that there are other mechanisms for creating greenways, including citing the county greenway plan. Loren questioned whether the Greenway Feasibility Study refers to the areas it covers as a greenway. She added that the state Watershed Plan also relates to this. Laurel will bring copies of a Critical Areas Protection ordinance she submitted to Council to our next meeting.

Arnold said there might be something in ANJEC's book Keeping Our Garden State Green that we can quote succinctly regarding the benefits of steep slopes and aquifer recharge areas. He added that the state is currently drafting watershed rules. Laurel will review the ANJEC book for open space justifications and paragraphs we can cite, such as a statement that lawn areas provide virtually no filtering action. We will also contact ANJEC to find out who must hold the public hearings for adoption of an Open Space Plan (Borough Council, Planning Board, Zoning Board, or Environmental Commission).

- f) Environmental Commission Website. Loren added maps, photos, and text to the website. Mike has a disk containing the minutes of our 2001 meetings, which Jon will add. Jon also has information on recycling, lawns, etc., and he will put this information, which is currently in the library's Environmental Folder, on the website. He will also put a list of the resources in our library folder on the site. We need to add a schedule of our meeting times and dates and Frequently Asked Questions. Arnold recommended we add a feature to keep count of visitors to the site. Laurel suggested we distribute flyers promoting the site at the Street Fair. Arnold added that the next big thing to put on the site is discussion of the Thonet study and potential trails in the Meadows. Blaine Rothausen has advised us to use the site as a recruiting and outreach tool and recommended we link to the Harding site. Leora suggested we add a mechanism with specific questions to obtain public feedback on the site.

7. New Business

- a) Arnold informed us that a new seating area has been placed next to the Southside bikeway.
- b) Arnold also informed us that Linda at DPW is interested in doing potted plantings at the bikeway.
- c) Wendy reminded us that the Environmental Commissioners' Handbook has a section on communicating with the public. She will work on specifics of how we can better communicate with the public through means such as a newsletter or environmental tours of the town. She will also contact ANJEC for additional suggestions on public outreach. We need to educate the public about what we are doing and build enthusiasm and awareness for our projects. Arnold has written an article on nature in Highland Park for the borough newsletter, and Laurel will contact editor Harry Glazer to find out if we can put our web address at the end of his article. Mike suggested we contact Cable TV Advisory Committee Chair Gary Leslie about doing a story on Highland Park's environment including a tour of the Meadows and interviews with Commission members.
- d) Trail Grants. We need to reactivate our \$15,000 trail grant, as we need to complete it by the end of August. Part of the Meadows area for which the trails are planned includes the upper area recently rezoned as residential. We may need to put our loops of trails solely in the lower area. The grant money cannot be used on land not dedicated by the borough as open space. This is why we eventually would like to see the entire Meadows area zoned for conservation. Arnold said Borough Administrator Richard Kunze has written a letter to DEP about our reviving the trail grant. He added that we currently face two barriers to constructing the trails—the need to cross the stream, which may require a permit, and the fact that some of the areas are high plateaus with steep rocks and broken concrete. We would need log steps as stepping stones over the creek. We would also need to hire someone to haul out the trash, to fill the steep rocks area with dirt, to remove the concrete, and to dig out weeds that currently block the trail. There might be an advantage in doing this last task during the winter. Arnold also reported that we might be able to create an entrance to the proposed seating area for wheelchairs, adding that he has an idea for where to put the spur for this. He reminded us that if we need a wetlands delineation to construct the trail, we will have to hire someone to do this. Thonet has already said they would do it for \$5000.

8. The meeting adjourned at 11:15 PM. The next meeting will be on Wednesday, March 20, 2002, at 8 PM.