

Highland Park Environmental Commission
Meeting of April 26, 2006
Minutes

Present: Michael Rosenberg, Jonathan Abrahams, Joan Ehrenfeld, Gabor Grunstein,
Arnold Henderson, Laurel Kornfeld, Anthony Puniello
Absent: Loren Muldowney, Mary Ellen Tuccillo
Guest: Jennifer Van Skiver of the Edison Wetlands Association

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:15 PM.
2. The minutes of the March 15, 2006 meeting were approved.
3. We welcomed Joan Ehrenfeld as a new member of the Environmental Commission. Joan is a Rutgers University Ecology Professor and also is Director of the Water Resources Research Institute.
4. Correspondence
 - a) We received a letter from the Middlesex County Improvement Authority (MCIA) informing us that they have been awarded \$200,000 in US EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant funds for its PETROL program. The funds are for conducting environmental assessments on abandoned petroleum sites towns would like to redevelop.
 - b) The Municipal Land Use Center at the College of New Jersey sent us a copy of their quarterly newsletter. The center will hold a forum on May 2 on Creating Sustainable Communities.
5. Site Plans: None
6. Old Business
 - a) Environmental Education Center. Construction has finally started at the Center. The contractors began pouring the concrete foundation today. Mike noted that there are invasive species growing right up to the fence. Arnold called the Middlesex County Parks Department about that, and they will come and spray. Joan will look into whether the spray used by the county could be potentially hazardous to people. She reported that many new generation pesticides are now becoming available.
 - b) New Jersey Community Water Watch/Valley Place Ravine Restoration. Mike attended the April 2 cleanup and reported that about 12 students showed up. The group went down to the river and found a lot of garbage they cleaned up. Mike noted that many people are now using the path. Laurel suggested we put a picture of Valley Place Ravine in the Highland Park Quarterly. Arnold recommended we create a series of pictures in conjunction with completion of the Environmental Education Center. On April 22, Water Watch held several Raritan River cleanups. Volunteers in Highland Park went into the Meadows and hauled out immense amounts of trash in the rain.
 - c) Rezoning of the Y Property. The Planning Board held a special meeting to discuss the Y's request to rezone part of its property as riverfront residential on

Thursday, March 30. A very large crowd attended the meeting. Representatives of the Y and the developer presented what they hope to build at the site. Y officials said they are closing the doors of their current facility on August 31, 2006. They will either sell off the land if their rezoning request is denied or will enact a deal to sell the back area for a high rise and keep the front for a new Y. The next hearing date will be announced at the Planning Board's regular meeting on April 27. Mike recommended the Environmental Commission submit a list of comments, and he put together a draft memo to the Planning Board. Tony suggested we list our concerns regarding the creation of the new riverfront residential zone. If we want to make traffic an issue, now is the time to address that, before the zoning is changed. Joan will research information on green buildings and the possibility of making the high rise a green building. Under the current zoning, the maximum lot coverage permitted for the Y site is 25% while the under the new riverfront residential zoning it would increase to 45%. The maximum impervious coverage for the Y site is now 50% while under the new zoning it would increase to 60%.

- d) Recreational Trail Grant. The Edison Wetlands Association is interested in providing assistance with this project. The trail would be in the area downstream of Donaldson Park within the Meadows, in the bottom part of the area zoned for conservation. The county has designated this strip of land as part of the Raritan River Greenway. We have a \$10,000 DEP Recreational Trails Grant for a trail within this conservation zone. There is municipally owned land and a stream at both ends of the conservation area that is zoned residential. We might want to recommend a proposal to rezone these areas as conservation so the trail can go across them. Another idea is to put the area in the middle of the residential zone in the Meadows into a new zone for construction staging. The bikeway currently runs through the area zoned residential. The open meadow is full of mugwort, and we have to deal with the issue of how to maintain a trail through a mugwort field. Joan noted that there is a native species that counters mugwort and said she will research this further. Arnold reported that he already placed blue flags in the trail area. The trail will go through the wetland area that is dry throughout most of the year. It funnels into a narrow strip that discharges into the river. One consultant suggested building a "poor man's boardwalk" on top of the water. Another idea is to create a series of steps in the wet area. The Edison Wetlands Association has been doing that with trails for years. One of the first steps we need to take in planning the trail is have the head of the Public Works Department, Frank Troy, look at the area. Public Works can provide our match to the grant. We would like to buy a piece of equipment that would cut through a field of mugwort. Frank suggested a gas powered portable weed wacker. Jennifer noted that the Edison Wetlands Association is working on similar sites in various sections of a former Edison landfill. Bob Spiegel can refer us to two or three people who build trails. We would need a permit to do this type of work but not for maintaining existing trails. We have a letter from DEP saying we can maintain the whole area as wetlands and that includes trail maintenance. Arnold suggested Commission members walk the area again to determine exactly where the path will go.
- e) Forum with Board of Health. Laurel reported that the forum we are co-sponsoring with the Board of Health on "Keeping an Environmentally Healthy Home for Your Children" is scheduled for Thursday, May 4 in Borough Hall at

7:30 PM. As a related item, Arnold noted that the Lawrence Brook Watershed Partnership sells environmentally friendly cleaning supplies and said he placed a link to the Partnership on the Environmental Commission's web site.

- f) Raritan River Dredging. The dredging has been postponed until after fish spawning season, which ends June 30 and will resume in July. The dredging has been described by Freeholder David Crabel as being part of the county's larger Raritan Landing Project.
- g) Donaldson Park Improvements. The county has begun work at the boat basin. There is a crane there digging up mud, and rock and gravel have been brought in. We are uncertain as to whether the plans have been revised since they were first introduced several years ago. Laurel will contact county Parks Superintendent Ralph Albanir to find out the schedule of work phases and whether there are any revised plans we could see. We would also like to know if there is an electronic version of plans for the park to which we could link our web site.

7. New Business

- a) Improvements to the Schools. Work has begun on improvements to the schools. Arnold contacted representatives of the Native Plant Society and asked them to get in touch with Superintendent of Schools Dr. David Ottaviano to suggest native species for plantings. Joan said she has a student in landscape architecture, Alex Filsen, who is working on better ways of constructing detention basins so they have better ecological functions. She will speak to him about providing suggestions to the Board of Education for the detention basin planned on the high school grounds.
- b) The borough's annual Volunteer Appreciation Night will be held on Tuesday, May 9 at 7:30 PM in the Senior/Youth Center. All Commission members are encouraged to attend.

- 8. The meeting adjourned at 10:15 PM. The next meeting of the Environmental Commission will be on Wednesday, May 17 at 8 PM in Borough Hall.