

Highland Park Environmental Commission
Meeting of July 19, 2006
Minutes

Present: Michael Rosenberg, Jonathan Abrahams, Joan Ehrenfeld, Arnold Henderson, Laurel Kornfeld, Anthony Puniello, Mary Ellen Tuccillo, Councilman Jon Erickson

Absent: Gabor Grunstein, Loren Muldowney

Guests: Helen Lyudmilov and Andrew Marinelli of AmeriCorps/New Jersey Community Water Watch, Allan Williams

1. The meeting was called to order at 8:17 PM.
2. The minutes of the June 21, 2006 meeting were approved.
3. Correspondence: None
4. Site Plans: None
5. Old Business
 - a) NJ Community Water Watch/Valley Place Ravine. Helen and Andrew, summer interns for Water Watch, said they are interested in doing summer cleanups in town and asked for suggestions about locations. Arnold mentioned that in the Meadows, bottles have been washed into areas we previously cleaned. Mike reported that there is still garbage along the river area down Valley Place Ravine in the direction opposite Red's Marina. Andrew reported that Water Watch is planning a cleanup in New Brunswick underneath the Route 27 bridge on July 29. They plan to clean the strip along the canal to prepare it for use as a bike path. If Water Watch decides to do a cleanup in Highland Park, Arnold recommended Helen and Andrew call the Department of Public Works or Anne Stevens, our Clean Communities Coordinator, either of whom can provide bags and gloves. Mary Ellen suggested asking Home Depot to donate these supplies. Helen also reported that she has observed people swimming and fishing in the Raritan River and questioned if they can put up signs saying it's a toxic river. Mike suggested she contact Middlesex County Parks Superintendent Ralph Albanir about this. The county's policy is an advisory, not a ban. Joan suggested contacting the county Health Department. Allan advised that if signs are put up, they be in both English and Spanish.
 - b) Environmental Education Center. The construction is continuing; the walls are going up, and the shape of the structure is taking place. The contractors are continuing to pour concrete. The same contractors are also working on Centennial Park, and they found that the soil contamination there is the same as at the Environmental Education Center site, so it will be remediated the same way. The plans for Centennial Park will include a rain garden. The main tree planned for the area is the ginko. Arnold reported he is updating the Environmental Commission's web site with new photos of the Environmental Education Center, Centennial Park, and the Meadows trail.
 - c) Donaldson Park Improvements. Mike reported that the work is still underway. A large metal gazebo frame has been placed near the boat dock. The roadway and boat dock area are closed, so they are not yet usable for boats.

- d) Raritan River Dredging. The dredging has resumed, and the equipment is back near the Rutgers boathouse. There is supposed to be a representative from DEP stationed at the dredging site full-time to monitor the remaining work.
- e) Rezoning of Y Property. No new date has been set for the next Planning Board meeting on this. Jon reported there is a lot of opposition to the high-rise plan. We submitted a page and a half of comments to the board. Mary Ellen questioned whether anyone has explored the legal ramifications of the rezoning; for example, if the property is rezoned, could developers ask that other, adjacent areas also be rezoned for high rises. Mike also questioned the safety issues involved in the Y's plans to abandon the building.
- f) Recreational Trail Grant. The Recreational Trails Grant is federal money provided through the state. Arnold reported that he and representatives of the Edison Wetlands Association walked the entire circuit of trails in the Meadows. The area is actually more diverse than most recovering landfills. We have momentum through the trails grant, and Edison Wetlands knows how to use previous grants to meet our required match. We wrote the original grant proposal for a dirt path with log steps on steep areas with no amenities such as signs or benches. Edison Wetlands will study possible restoration of the area and may arrange a small presentation for us. Tony noted that if we wanted to explore rezoning parts of the Meadows for conservation in conjunction with the trails project, we would have to hire a professional surveyor.
- g) Rutgers Ecological Preserve. We are concerned with Rutgers cutting off a piece of the Preserve to give to the football coach to build a new home. Arnold put photos of the property, which is less than one acre on the Commission's web site. Rutgers is arguing that nothing the university owned before 1956, when it became a public entity, is covered in state legislation requiring the legislature be informed of any sale of the Preserve. The university claims to be a private landowner in this case and has previously said that neither Highland Park nor Piscataway has jurisdiction because the university constitutes a higher level of governmental authority. Mike reported that Sue Kozel is again taking the lead in fighting this. She has written a letter to Rutgers and state officials and may initiate some type of legal action. Laurel will research the Hanes Law, which requires the state legislature be informed of any sale of Preserve property. Joan noted that the Preserve is managed by Ted Stiles of the Department of Ecology, Evolution and Natural Resources at Rutgers and said she would speak to him about this. She will also look into who at Rutgers is using the Preserve for research or teaching. We are concerned that if Rutgers does this, they will justify other ways to cut up the Preserve. Both Highland Park and Edison designate their portions of the Preserve for conservation; Piscataway allows some other uses. Piscataway's Zoning Board has approved the Rutgers proposal. The question is whether we have any legal grounds for an objection to it. Arnold noted that the DOT has played an instrumental role in this issue, as they are the ones who cut off a large swath of the Preserve for the Route 18 extension. Joan said she will ask Ted Stiles whether any of the original donors of the Preserve are still around and if so, will seek contact information for them. Mike will stay in touch with Sue Kozel on this issue.

6. New Business

- a) Sierra Club Cool Cities Campaign. Joan reported that the New Jersey Chapter of the Sierra Club is involved in a Cool Cities campaign, which involves getting municipalities to sign an agreement to strive to meet or beat the Kyoto

Protocol, which involves a seven percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from the 1990 levels by 2012. Cities who sign such agreements are recognized as “Cool Cities.” Fourteen municipalities in the state have signed on so far. This is different from the Cool Cities tree-planting program. Joan questioned whether we might want to pursue this for Highland Park. She will contact the Sierra Club to find out the types of actions these cities have taken. We have probably done a lot of these things already, so this might not be a major commitment. One possibility is to focus on outreach and provide information to the public through flyers. Mike noted that we can get grants for education and outreach. Laurel mentioned the new Highland Park newspaper as a good outreach medium. Joan also reported that a local Dark Skies group is interested in promoting downward facing lights so people can see the stars at night. Arnold added that a state-sponsored study recommended several ways of reducing emissions and that a group titled Green Faith is working with synagogues and churches on environmental issues. Joan will seek additional information about the possibility of our joining this program from Clint Andrews and Mike Ambrosio. She will also obtain information about training programs offered by the Sierra Club in this area and see if they would be willing to do a presentation in Highland Park.

b) Information for New Residents’ Handbook. Arnold reported that a new version of the Residents’ Handbook is being issued. He revised the statements in it about nature in Highland Park and about the Environmental Commission. He also noted that he submitted a brief article and photos of the Environmental Education Center, Centennial Park and the Meadows trail as well as an article on behalf of the Shade Tree Advisory Committee on caring for trees for publication in the next edition of the Quarterly.

7. The meeting adjourned at 9:48 PM. The next meeting of the Environmental Commission will take place on Wednesday, September 20 at 8 PM in Borough Hall.