Washington Township Environmental Commission

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

The Annual Report highlights significant activities and accomplishments of the Washington Township Environmental Commission during 2023.

2023 Membership

Appointed Members:
Vicky Binetti, Chair
Anne Hastings, Vice Chair
Ann Culkin, Treasurer
Eric Feerst
Leon Lakritz
Chet Nawoyski
Ryan Lee, Alternate
Jodie Smith, Alternate

Dorothy Hunter, Secretary

Associate Members:
Rick Eckert
Shannon Hornibrook
Harry Larzelere
Mark Phillips
Bob Starrantino

Council Liaison:
Rich Bennett

The purpose of the Environmental Commission is the protection, development and use of natural resources, including water resources, in Washington Township. (Washington Township Code §2-61)

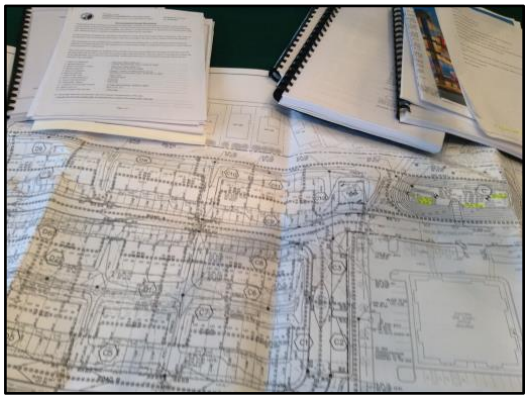
2023 Meetings

The Environmental Commission meets on the first Thursday of each month, with workshop meetings on third Thursdays, as needed. Meetings in 2018 were convened on the following dates:

January 5
January 19 (workshop)
February 2
March 2
April 6
May 4
June 1
July 6
August 3
September 7
October 5
November 2
December 7

Minutes of meetings are posted at https://www.twp.washington.nj.us/government (see Boards & Commissions > Environmental Commission).

Land Development Project Reviews



The Washington Township Environmental Commission (WTEC) reviews land development project plans submitted to our Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment. While all aspects of a project application are important, the WTEC pays particular attention to potential environmental concerns, such as the conservation of natural and landscape features and vegetation, particularly tree cover; the protection of surface and ground water resources, especially through appropriate stormwater management; and any potential land or water pollution from past contamination or from planned site activities. In 2023, we gave close attention to newly promulgated requirements that development projects with significant off-street parking include dedicated and appropriately equipped parking stalls for electric vehicle (EV) charging, or "make-ready" parking spaces pre-wired for EV charging equipment to be later activated. Written reports documenting these reviews are submitted to the Planning Board or Zoning Board of Adjustment, as appropriate.

The Environmental Commission prepared and submitted reviews for the following projects to the Planning Board in 2023:

- Holman Automotive, 3641 Route 42; Block 115, Lot 22 (Bulk Variance and Major Site Plan) – review letter dated 7/15/23
- Raising Cane's Restaurant, 5241 Route 42 (Major Site Plan); Block 111.09, Lot 7.01 – review letter dated 7/17/23

Reviews for the following projects were prepared and submitted to the Zoning Board of Adjustment:

- Citgo, LLC, 5321 Route 42; Block 111.09, Lot 6.01 (Use Variance & Major Site Plan) – review letter dated 3/8/23
- Progood Sewell (Sprouts), 288 Egg Harbor Road; Block 199, Lot 12 (Use and Bulk Variances, Minor Subdivision, Major Site Plan) – Review letters dated 8/7/23 and 9/9/23
- Scafisi, 110 Ganttown Road; Block 157, Lot 7.01 (Use Variance & Major Site Plan) - review letter dated 12/10/23

Earth Day and Arbor Day Celebrations

The WTEC celebrated Earth Day and Arbor Day with a full slate of events throughout the month of April and in early May. In partnership with municipal employees, community and environmental organizations and civic groups, our activities encouraged appreciation of the natural environment and an understanding of ways to improve environmental stewardship at the local level and in our individual actions.



The WTEC collaborated with the Margaret E. Heggan Free Public Library on several events. An informational display throughout the month of April focused on climate change. The exhibit including descriptions of some of the observed and potential impacts of climate change, including effects on temperature, sea level rise, precipitation and public health. The display alsp presented information on measures that can help us mitigate or adapt to some of these effects.



Two events for residents were sponsored by WTEC and hosted by the Library. A special children's class (K - 5) on *Magnificent Monarchs* was led by Shannon Hornibrook, and included activities, pictures and videos on these charismatic butterflies. A presentation by naturalist Erik Mollenhauer of the Gloucester County Nature Club (GCNC), *The Timeless Connection of People and Trees—Tales from the Wood-Wide Web*, focused on the natural and cultural history of some tree species found in Gloucester County. The Library and the WTEC also partnered to bring the Woodford Cedar Run Wildlife Refuge on Wheels to the Township Municipal Building, to delight children of all ages with *Fur, Feathers and Scales*, featuring body coverings of several different animal groups.

Emily Reed from New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Nature Center presented *Shorebird Extravaganza*, an instructive program on the many species of migrating shore birds visiting our beaches and environs each year. We also learned about the fascinating interdependence of ancient-looking horseshoe crabs that spawn in the Delaware Bay, where red knots makes a critical stop on the journey from their winter home in Brazil to their summer home in the Arctic. The horseshoe crabs' eggs provide desperately needed nutrition at precisely the right time and place along the birds' long annual migration. A reduction in the horseshoe crab population and thus, their egg production, is a cause of the red knot's declining population.

Outdoor activities included a *Bird Walk in the Park* on May 7th, in which expert birders from the GCNC (including the Township's own Marie Hageman) helped residents spy, hear and identify numerous bird species living in and/or migrating through Washington Lake Park.



WTEC partnered with the Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC) on several activities, as well. On April 23rd, Naturalist Michael Hogan from the South Jersey Land and Water Trust led a walk along our Park's nature trails to help residents identify and remove invasive plants. Such plants are not native to our area or to specific woodland habitat, and they can damage our natural vegetation and overtake resident plants in our forested areas. In the course of the walk, participants were also introduced to some of the native flora and fauna of our woodlands.

On Arbor Day (April 28th), volunteers from WTEC and OSAC planted 30 Atlantic white cedar seedlings in Washington Lake Park, in our local effort to bolster the tree species. Populations of Atlantic white cedars have diminished greatly over the last 100 years, threatened by habitat loss and rising sea levels in areas where ground water quality has been affected by salt water intrusion. And on May 7th, as part of the statewide Tree Recovery program sponsored by the New Jersey Forest Service, volunteers from both WTEC and OSAC distributed approximately 350 tree seedlings to residents, with planting and care instructions.

On April 29th, our members and friends distributed marigold plants to residents for planting in home gardens, where they would supply nectar for pollinators. The plants were grown from seed in our greenhouse under the careful eye of Jim McCann. We typically give away many hundreds of milkweed plants at the same time, but were unable to do so last spring, because the milkweed suffered poor germination. (See Monarch Rescue, below.)

The opening of the Washington Township Community Garden for the 2023 season was held on April 15th. New gardeners and those returning for another year met to hear what was new for 2023, and to see the improvements underway in our greenhouse.





Clean-Up Day: Broadening Our Scope to Reduce/ReUse/Recycle





The WTEC has held an Annual Community-Wide Clean-Up Day for more than 15 years. However, over the course of the last several years, we have recognized that the Township's litter problems have declined considerably, owing in large part to the efforts of the Litter Patrol, and lessening the impact of a focused one-day litter-removal effort. We have begun to modify our annual event, transitioning to one in which volunteers participate in trail clean-up in our parks, and in which the importance of waste reduction is emphasized. On October 21st, Shannon Hornibrook and Councilman Rich Bennett led a learning session for scouts and friends on waste reduction and recycling, including facts and figures about the amount of trash and recycling generated in our Township. The event included the do's and don't's of recycling, and challenges to determine what goes into recycling bins and what belongs in trash cans.

Environmental Outreach

Super Saturday, our Township community fair, is typically a WTEC focal event for outreach and environmental education. Unfortunately, Super Saturday was rained out twice in May and once in October in 2023. Our outreach was achieved, instead, through our various Earth Day, Arbor Day, and other educational events, as described elsewhere in this report.

Other Activities

Bluebird Buddies: Building Washington Township's Bluebird Population





In the spring of 2018, WTEC worked with the New Jersey Bluebird Society (NJBBS) to install seven new bluebird nesting boxes on Washington Township open space properties. There are now a total of 16 nesting boxes on Township-owned open space lands under our *Bluebird Buddies* project. The construction of the boxes is such that only several species of small birds can gain access through the entrance hole; in addition to bluebirds, these might include native

tree swallows and chickadees, and non-native sparrows. The boxes are monitored for nesting activity throughout the spring and summer by volunteers. In all, 48 birds hatched from our nesting boxes in 2023. Unfortunately, other nestlings were lost to predation or to competing bird species taking over their nests. Some of the hatchlings were tagged by the NJBBS; the tags will allow researchers to identify the specific birthplace of those birds as Washington Township.

Monarch Rescue



Photo: National Geographic

Monarch butterflies are a remarkable symbol of the careful balance achieved in the natural world, and their declining population is a lesson in how man's activity can disrupt that balance. Monarchs that have hatched east of the Rockies travel one to three thousand miles to gather through the winter at very specific mountain locations in Mexico. In the spring, the adults mate; the males die and the females begin their migration north. They deposit eggs in the southern US. The caterpillars that hatch from those eggs morph into the pupa (chrysalis) stage, then emerge as adult butterflies. Those adults migrate farther north, lay eggs, and the cycle repeats. Butterflies that emerge in the late summer and early fall migrate to Mexico. Along their migration routes, both northward and southward, the adult Monarchs rely on nectar plants for food.



Monarch butterflies will only deposit eggs on milkweed plants, and the caterpillar larvae that hatch from the eggs will only eat milkweed leaves. Hence, as milkweed populations decline throughout the US because of diminished farmland and fields and the use of herbicides, the survival of Monarch butterflies is threatened. To improve the Monarchs' perilous situation, WTEC has initiated the *Monarch Rescue* project in 2018. We encourage our residents to plant milkweed in their gardens and backyards to provide food for the butterflies and their caterpillars and habitat for them to deposit eggs. In 2018, we began distributing milkweed plants (and information on the Monarch's incredible life cycle) to residents, and have continued the milkweed distribution each spring, even through the pandemic. The milkweed is grown in the Township's greenhouse. Unfortunately, seed germination was quite poor in 2023, and we were not able to supply residents with milkweed plants, to their great disappointment. However, in 2022, we also began to distribute greenhouse-grown marigold plants—another source of nectar, and a natural pest deterrent for home gardeners. Fortunately, the marigold plants were robust in 2023, and made up, in part, for the absence of milkweed.

According to *Monarch Watch*, the forest area occupied by Monarch colonies at their overwintering location in the mountains of central Mexico showed a sharp decline last year (nearly 60% lower than in 2022). The principal cause of the declining population is believed to be extreme drought conditions last fall stretching from Oklahoma to central Mexico, resulting in reduced flowering and nectar production, needed for the monarchs to fuel their migration and create energy stores to carry them through the winter. Washington Township is offering critical help to this threatened species by providing food and reproduction habitat for the butterflies.

Pollinator Garden

A pollinator garden was established in the fall of 2022 in Washington Lake Park through collaboration of the Washington Township Rotary Club, the Sustainable Washington Township Green Team and the Environmental Commission. The garden is located near the Dog Park in the Cedar Lake section of the Park. It is planted with native plants selected to attract butterflies, bees and other pollinators that also occur naturally in our area. (See Monarch caterpillar on milkweed in the garden, right.)





Maintenance of the garden has proven to be a small challenge, but fortunately volunteers Debbie and Ed McGuigan, who are Certified Gloucester County Gardeners, have stepped up to oversee garden care. The Rotary Club and Green Team plan to enroll the project in *Operation Pollination*, an international cooperative effort to restore and maintain pollinator habitat on public and private lands, to help reverse trends in dwindling populations of insects. Butterflies and bees are suffering from decreasing habitat, broad use of pesticides, and the effects of climate change. The pollinator garden also complements the Environmental Commission's *Monarch Rescue* project.

Washington Lake Park and Nature Trail Enhancement

WTEC and the Open Space Advisory Committee have initiated a project to improve the educational experience of visitors to the nature trails in Washington Lake Park. Conceptual plans have been developed for signage that will highlight features such as wetlands and woodland vegetation, invasive species and wildlife. Plant identification markers for selected

tree and shrub species have been purchased. The Poplar Trail was selected as the pilot for this effort; the project will continue in 2024.



The Poplar Trail has been a favored venue for our periodically sponsored nature walks. The trail features diverse vegetation, from stately namesake tulip poplar trees to magnificent ferns and the clandestine cranefly orchid. One such event was held on November 11th; about 20 attendees joined guide Michael Hogan of the South Jersey Land and Water Trust for a morning outdoors, learning about natural assets of the Park.

Additionally, the WTEC has initiated an effort to update its Nature Trail Guide, published in 2014. A first step is to develop an updated map of Washington Lake Park. We have engaged a professional photographer to conduct drone flights above the Park, generate the equivalent of an aerial photograph, and then a map of the Park as the centerpiece illustration of the prospective Trail Guide. We hope to complete the project in 2024.

Sustainable Jersey

Sustainable Jersey is a collaboration of the New Jersey League of Municipalities, The College of New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the Board of Public Utilities. The Sustainable Jersey program recognizes municipalities that want to go green, save money and take steps to sustain their quality of life over the long term. The program focus is to reduce waste generation, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve the quality of life in our communities.

Washington Township was certified (bronze level) as a sustainable community by the Sustainable Jersey Program in 2017, 2018 and 2019. In 2020, the Township was certified at the silver level. The certification was awarded on the basis of a portfolio that included Township activities and accomplishments in the following categories:

- Arts & creative culture
- Community outreach and partnership
- Energy
- Food
- Health & wellness

- Innovative community projects
- Local economies
- Natural resource protection
- Operations & maintenance
- Public information & engagement
- Waste management

Many of the individual activities and programs that supported our certification are carried out by the Environmental Commission.

The Green Team Advisory Committee is a cross-community coalition that guides, promotes and implements actions that contribute to sustainability in the Township. Members include representatives of:

- Township Administration
- Township Council
- Public Works Department
- Environmental Commission
- Public
- Planning Board
- Municipal Utilities Authority
- Board of Education
- Greater Washington Township Chamber of Commerce

Sustainable Washington Township
people • planet • prosperity

The Green Team is currently led by the Environmental Commission. The Green Team is seeking to grow the Township's sustainability profile, and we intend to seek re-certification at the silver level in 2024.

(https://www.twp.washington.nj.us/government , see Boards & Commissions, Sustainable Washington Township)

Training and Workshops

Environmental Commissioners attended bi-monthly member meetings sponsored by Tri-County Sustainability (TCS) and numerous webinars hosted by the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissioners (ANJEC) and by Sustainable Jersey. Environmental Commission Chair Vicky Binetti sits on the TCS Leadership Team, and organized a series of expert lectures on the impacts of climate change in New Jersey.

Acknowledgments

The Washington Township Environmental Commission appreciates the support it received from Mayor Joann Gattinelli, managers and staff of the Township, and Township Council Members, especially Councilman Rich Bennett, who served as Council Liaison to the Commission in 2023.

We also gratefully acknowledge our "environmental family"-- the members of the Environmental Commission, Open Space Advisory Committee, their friends and families, Township managers and staff, organizational partners and other community members and volunteers who help to carry out the Commission's mission. We are fortunate to be able to stand together to safeguard our resources.



In Memoriam

Ann E. Culkin

The Washington Township Environmental Commission lost a treasured colleague and friend in October 2023. Ann Culkin was a fervent advocate for environmental protection, a devoted member of the Environmental Commission for two decades, and a former Commission Chair.

While her contributions were many, she was particularly committed to our Earth Day/Earth Month celebration, and to Clean-Up Day.

We are grateful for Ann. We miss her. And we especially miss her smile.