



# **Environmental Commission**

November 15, 2011

*(Minutes)*

Prepared by:

**Paul Demarest**

Chairwoman Ravit called to order, at 8:12pm, the Regular Monthly Meeting of the Environmental Commission for the Borough of Closter, New Jersey, convening Tuesday, November 15, 2011 at Borough Hall.



**Attendance**

*Present*

- Beth Ravit, PhD- Chairwoman
- Steven Isaacson
- Brenda Cummings
- Bobbie Bouton-Goldberg- Associate Member/Historic Preservation Commission Liaison
- Keith Scholz- Associate Member

*Absent*

- Mary Mayer
- Arthur Goldberg, MD
- Robert Di Dio- Planning Board Liaison
- John Kashwick- Council Liaison
- Philip Gotthelf- Alternate #1
- VACANT- Alternate #2
- Jayanthi Ramaswamy- Associate Member



**New Business**

The Commission approved, by acclamation, the minutes for the October 18, 2011 meeting.



**Old Business**

Mr. Isaacson stated he read in correspondence from the Mayor’s office that the New Jersey Departments of Transportation (NJDOT) and Environmental Protection (NJDEP) are offering a grant for trails. He noted that he is still awaiting updates from the parties contemplating an inter-borough trail system.

Mr. Isaacson thanked the volunteers involved in making Mac Bain Farm’s 4<sup>th</sup> annual Farm Festival a successful event, which had a turn-out of approximately 40 to 50 people; he stated he was pleased it was merely postponed, not cancelled due to the recent winter storm, because the celebration is centered around the Farm’s harvest rather than Halloween.

Chairwoman Ravit noted that, in light of Ms. Ramaswamy’s absence, the Commission would delay a discussion on her proposal to have the Borough require its residents to place plastic bags into plastic bottles as part of their recycling regimen.

With respect to coordinating the purchase and installation of concrete-based bicycle racks, Mr. Scholz informed he has not been contacted by William Dahle, Superintendent of the Department of Public Works (DPW); Chairwoman Ravit explained Mr. Dahle was most likely overwhelmed by the recent winter storm combined with the upcoming leaf clean-up. Mr. Isaacson inquired if the co-sponsored NJDOT and NJDEP grant could be used towards purchasing a chainsaw to allow the Commission to assist in maintaining the Borough's trail system; she believed it could be; Mr. Isaacson did not recall when the submission deadline is for the grant application.

Ultimately, Chairwoman Ravit believed, barring an extreme onset to the winter season that would overwhelm the DPW, progress could be made on both the trails and bicycle racks in December.

Mr. Isaacson said he has been informed that rehabilitation is needed on the trail system's boardwalks and bridges that are not in place. Chairwoman Ravit suggested that he, she and Mr. Dahle walk the trail system in 1 or 2 weeks to make an assessment. Mr. Isaacson stated that Mr. Dahle was attempting to acquire cement blocks to use as stepping stones in lieu of boardwalks. Ms. Bouton-Goldberg questioned if such stepping stones could be utilized to cross Dwars Kill being the Borough of Norwood does not wish to disturb its 125-acre forest, Central Woods, for the construction of a bridge; Mr. Isaacson replied such would not be possible since the stream is wide and has deep banks. He continued to say that the recent storm(s) have lifted/moved every bridge in the trail system except the crossing located at 54 Brook Street. He explained concrete piles were not used in constructing the bridges.

Mr. Isaacson informed he enjoyed *Queen of the Sun: What Are the Bees Telling Us?* at the Nature Center as part of an film event sponsored by the "Green Team" on November 6<sup>th</sup>; he said, as a result, he became more aware of how the balance of the environment/nature is in quite a precarious situation. He said by humans not being proactive in addressing the problems, disastrous results can occur like the vanishing of our food resources. Ms. Bouton-Goldberg said the Mayor's office recommended a group be gathered to petition the Board of Health to revisit Chapter 250-30 of the Borough Code, an ordinance regulating beekeeping. Ms. Cummings stated that a letter, compromised of ideas by Ron Breland, a beekeeper featured in the film, could be co-signed by the "Green Team" and the Commission; she stated that while most residents would not partake in apiculture, the ordinance should, nonetheless, be made less severe in terms restrictions and penalties. Mr. Isaacson agreed, saying the Borough's history includes it being a large farming community; he reminded that the Board's amendment to the ordinance originated from a complaint filed by 1 to 2 residents, which resulted in a policy affecting the Borough as a whole. Mr. Isaacson informed that following the film presentation, Mr. Breland lectured about how the public tends to confuse honey bees (which are vital to humans' existence) with wasps/yellow jackets and that it is afraid of what they do not understand, especially if it is capable of flying. Mr. Isaacson felt the Commission should work with the Board of Education to enlighten the student body; he explained that monoculture farmers are importing bees from abroad, such as Argentina, because they are finding it the only sure way to pollinate their crops; he said such is needed because their crops are not generating enough food to support bee colonies, of which there is a shortage in the United States of America. Ms. Bouton-Goldberg felt it important to stress to residents the need for growing in their private gardens those types of vegetation that attract bees as well as other pollinators. Ms. Cummings noted Mr. Breland is willing to speak before the Board of Health.

Mr. Isaacson stated he spoke with a representative for The Belskie Museum of Art and Science about installing a sculpture garden at Buzzoni Farm Park, which was deemed too expensive a

task due to the need to insure artists' works; as an alternative, Mr. Isaacson suggested bee hives be established on-site complete with gardens consisting of flowers, clover, etc. Ms. Cummings concurred, saying Mr. Breland uses sculptures as a basis for his hive form, which is a sort of artistry. Ms. Bouton-Goldberg said there is a garden in Montreal whereby bee nests are situated behind glass for public viewing; Mr. Isaacson added that the Liberty Science Center has a similar layout. Ms. Bouton-Goldberg asked if volunteers from the Master Gardener program, of which Mayor Sophie Heymann is a member, could assist in such a project; she pointed out Flat Rock Brook Nature Center is using grant monies to update its gardens with native plants. Chairwoman Ravit believed the ordinance should be amended by the Board of Health prior to any bee projects commencing. Mr. Isaacson stated the current ordinance regulates the number of hives that could be put in Buzzoni Farm Park; he believed there would be little objection to their presence since there are so few residences in the area. He informed that honey bees have an approximate 3-mile flying range in which they forage; he stated rooftop hives are set up in urban areas. Mr. Isaacson explained if a person consumes honey from a particular area, it will help relieve allergy symptoms because the bees are using local pollen.

Ms. Cummings informed that the "Green Team" is planning the next installment in its film series following the success of the inaugural showing; she said a possibility is *The Synthetic Sea Story*, a documentary about marine debris studies, mainly plastics. She cautioned, however, that said film is quite technical and portrays a grim outlook on Earth's condition, which may not sit well with viewers.

Chairwoman Ravit stated she hoped to finish updating the Borough's 1994 "Environmental Resource Inventory" by the end of 2011 so it can be used by the "Green Team" for certification from the *Sustainable Jersey* program.

Ms. Cummings said she is considering requesting Harriet Shugarman, who is known as "Climate Mama" and is part of The Climate Project (a non-profit organization founded by former Vice President Al Gore), to speak to the Borough; she expressed concern, though, that residents' mindsets are not ready for such an issue. She stated that if such an event is organized, a donation would be expected. Chairwoman Ravit revealed Rutgers University has a speakers' bureau in which participants are knowledgeable in a wide range of topics; she said she did not know if the program charges a fee since it is partly a cooperative extension.

Mr. Isaacson asked what the "Green Team" is doing in terms of outreach to children; he noted the November 6<sup>th</sup> film presentation had been attended mostly by the elderly. Ms. Cummings stated that, on February 7, 2012, the "Green Team" would be conversing with the Borough's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO); she expressed frustration that school bureaucracy has hindered its ability to communicate directly with the student body. Mr. Isaacson suggested that a meeting be scheduled with the Board of Education, if not Superintendent of Schools Joanne Newberry; Ms. Cummings said such efforts have also proven fruitless.

Ms. Boston-Goldberg informed that the Mac Bain Farm Subcommittee (Mayer/Di Dio/Bouton-Goldberg) has yet to finalize a mission statement; she said the goal is to have it complete in time for the Commission's 1<sup>st</sup> meeting in 2012 when the Farm's caretaker and resident, John Mc

Caffrey, presents his farm management plan. Chairwoman Ravit stated she will draft a formal invitation to Mr. Mc Caffrey, which will include issues to be addressed in his presentation.

Mr. Isaacson stated he envisioned Buzzoni Farm Park having its rear section being updated to have a patio, benches, fountain, etc. and, thus, making the site a destination; he mentioned that there could, however, be contamination issues as is the case for the nearby Closter Swim Club.



## Plans

Being no land use board applications were forwarded to the Commission for its consideration, plan review was not conducted.



## Other

Ms. Bouton-Goldberg informed that, on November 28<sup>th</sup>, the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) would be voting on the nomination of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church (7 Campbell Avenue) as a historic landmark; she believed there would be no opposition. She said future nominations being considered by the HPC are: 1.) former Northern Branch train station (1 Station Court); 2.) Borough Hall (295 Closter Dock Road); 3.) former Village Middle School (511 Durie Avenue). She explained that a local designation provides more protection to a historic site than county, state or national status. Ms. Bouton-Goldberg said the Ver Valen House (151 West Street) nomination is in progress; she revealed that much research goes into preparing a nomination. Regarding the Harold Hess Lustron House (421 Durie Avenue) and other prefabricated enameled steel houses, she explained there is little information available on their histories.

Mr. Isaacson revealed the Chamber of Commerce reported that the next bankruptcy hearing for the owner-in-fee of “Closter Plaza” (19 Ver Valen Street) occurs on November 17<sup>th</sup>, with the final taking on December 1<sup>st</sup>. He thought a re-filing of an application to the Planning Board for the redevelopment of said site could happen as soon as January 2012. Mr. Isaacson believed the Commission should let its concerns about the proposal be known, specifically drainage. Chairwoman Ravit agreed, saying the prior proposal, defeated in court on appeal, had permeable pavement being used for its parking lot; she explained said material would not be conducive for such a use because the area’s water table is too high.

Mr. Isaacson stated Coach USA, LLC/Rockland Coaches, Inc. is receptive to the idea of altering its #’s 20 and 84 bus routes so there are stops on Ver Valen Street by “Closter Plaza”; he said such would accommodate the anticipated increase in traffic flow as a result of the renovated shopping center; he said such a re-route would further the need for commuter parking and bicycle racks in the downtown area.

Chairwoman Ravit reminded that the Commission would not be convening in December, as is custom.

Ms. Cumming said some of the “Green Team” would be attending a short film/lecture on November 17<sup>th</sup> regarding Bergen County’s water supply that originates from the New York-New Jersey Highlands. Chairwoman Ravit interjected, saying United Water Co.’s supply is the

Hackensack River (which begins in Rockland County and flows down through Lake Tappan and the Oradell Reservoir) and not the geological formation. Ms. Cummings clarified that the film dealt with the New York-New Jersey Highlands and the lecture would cover Bergen County’s water supply. Ms. Cummings imagined that the vicinity around the Borough of Ringwood is contaminated being the former site of a Ford Motor Co. assembly plant has been declared a Superfund site by the United States Environmental Protection Agency; Chairwoman Ravit believed said municipality’s woes stem from mines affecting groundwater, wells, etc.

Mr. Isaacson believed the Commission should address the how the unexpected winter storm recently impacted the Borough along with both officials and residents’ reactions. He stated the fact that some were without power for 6 days resulted in property owners/utilities wanting to remove trees rooted in the Borough’s right-of-way so to prevent future outages; Chairwoman Ravit agreed, saying there needs to be a plan to address replacing older trees with something hardy and substantial. Mr. Isaacson informed that all of the recently-planted pear trees at Ruckman Park were snapped along with several ornamental trees in the downtown area. He continued saying that mature/tall trees will always have the potential of downing power lines, regardless of what is removed below the lines, due to the large radius in which they can fall. Mr. Isaacson explained that the original purpose of the shade trees abutting thoroughfares within the Borough’s right-of-way was to prevent direct sunlight onto the asphalt, thereby postponing its replacement. Chairwoman Ravit stated the Earth is experiencing more unusual weather patterns and explained that El Nino-Southern Oscillation (warming of the Pacific Ocean’s surface) last occurred in 1998, however, temperatures since have remained high resulting in normal oscillations being more extreme; she explained that warmer air temperatures equates to more evaporation from large water bodies, which eventually leads to heavier precipitation in shorter periods of time. Chairwoman Ravit stated that insurance companies are recruiting meteorology graduates from Rutgers University to predict weather events as part of risk analysis on how to set policies; Mr. Isaacson said the same practice is followed commodity markets. He believed residents should be storing water and canned goods to prepare for future calamities; he believed the Borough’s existing contingency plan should be updated to include utilizing the school buildings and Borough Hall as shelters, noting the latter is equipped with a state-of-the-art generator. Ms. Cummings questioned if the Borough had access to cots; she also reported that several of the elderly died in Bergen County during the recent winter storm and its aftermath. Mr. Isaacson said that the telephone line of the Borough’s Police Department (201-768-5000) was temporarily out of commission and both the local and regional 9-1-1 telephone lines were overwhelmed; he expressed concern that the weather event revealed serious deficiencies in emergency planning.

There being no further items to discuss, the Commission adjourned the meeting, by acclamation, at 9:07pm.