

Environmental Commission 2023 Year-end Analysis

Per Mayor Jubin's request, the EC has put together this analysis of what worked well and what could use improvement in the Commission's 2023 activities.

Successes:

1. Styrofoam bin – The bin was acquired after many years of discussion, using grant money from the Clean Communities Council (CCC). With DPW's help, the program has been overwhelmingly successful, keeping countless pounds of Styrofoam out of landfills. The bin works much better than the sporadic collections that were held previously.
2. Free seedling giveaway – Distribution of free seedlings at Operation Pride is always a big success and very popular with residents. The EC gave away about 300 seedlings in 2023. The annual free seedling giveaways over the years have resulted in thousands of young trees being planted in the Borough, at a time when we are losing many trees to disease, storms, development, and old age.
3. Stream restoration project – This was our biggest accomplishment in 2023, as it was in 2022, when the project was started. A large area near the Stony Brook, just east of Best Lake, is thriving with dozens of native trees, shrubs, and flowering plants that the EC planted, with a lot of cooperation and support from the Borough government. A large interpretive (educational) sign has been ordered so that visitors to the area can learn the details and goals of the project. Again, sign was paid for with grant money from CCC.
4. Installation of bird boxes – The EC advised and funded an Eagle Scout candidate on his project to build and install 6 bluebird boxes around the Borough. This will help attract and support local wildlife and draw them to our waterways and fields. Boxes have been installed and EC will take over their cleaning and maintenance.
5. Commenting on BOA applications – The EC continues to review and submit comments to the Bd of Adj on their pending applications, as is required by Ordinance. This ensures that projects coming before the Borough are assessed from an environmental perspective.

Room for Improvement:

1. Tree Inspection process – The EC Tree Inspectors spend a lot of time and energy inspecting trees of residents who have applied for tree removal permits. The EC's main assessment is that the Tree Ordinance needs better enforcement (regarding issues like hazardous trees, replanting, topping trees, and more). In addition, the Inspectors need more support from the Engineer (increase his hours?), and need easier and more frequent access to a licensed Arborist (like we used to have). Many issues come up that are never resolved. The EC has little authority to enforce the Ordinance.
2. Tree Replanting – The EC has spent a lot of time discussing tree replanting for people who have removed live trees from their properties. This is an integral part of the Tree Ordinance and is vitally important to replacing some of the many trees being lost in the Borough. This process needs to be improved to ensure that the required trees are being planted.
3. Volunteer help from residents – The EC could use more involvement from residents to help with our initiatives. There are many other things we would like to do that are difficult without the help of additional volunteers.

We look forward to working with the Borough for the EC's continued success and to make better some of the processes that need improvement.

Thank you very much.

Watchung Environmental Commission

Rachel Funcheon, Chair

1-5-24