

Acting Locally



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NJ towns ban balloon releases

Balloon releases are a popular way to celebrate a wedding, graduation or honor a loved one. It can be a pretty sight to see hundreds of helium-filled balloons rise into the air, to be carried up and away, but they will eventually fall to the ground. In many cases they end up in the ocean or other water bodies, endangering sea life. It's not only the balloon that poses a danger but the string attached. You see them tangled in trees and around utility poles and wires. They end up in forests and in farm fields. There is no telling where they will come down, but they will land somewhere.

Several New Jersey towns have taken steps to help stop this environmentally damaging practice. Ventnor City, Atlantic City, Longport and Margate have all passed ordinances banning "uncontrolled mass balloon releases." In Atlantic City, if a person intentionally releases a balloon filled with any gas lighter than air, he or she will be subject to a \$500 fine. This does not pertain to a child that accidentally lets go of a helium balloon, only intentional mass balloon releases.

Ventnor residents also understand the importance of keeping balloons out of the environment and municipal leaders consider balloon releases a form of littering. The groups that advocated and eventually got this ordinance passed included Ventnor's Green Team, the Surf Rider Foundation and Sustainable Downbeach. Ventnor also imposes a \$500 fine for this noncriminal infraction.

Brigantine is now considering a balloon ban, including a restriction on helium

balloons placed on real estate signs. These balloons often escape with wind gusts and float off with strings attached.

Monica Coffey, chair of the Margate Green Team and Sustainable Margate, aims to bring this issue to the attention of NJ Senator Jim Whalen (D-2) and ask him to sponsor statewide legislation.

Other states are also involved with balloon bans. Some US beaches, where people like to pose for wedding and birthday photos, have posted signs warning that balloons on the beach are banned and explaining why balloons pose a threat to sea life.

Eco friendly ideas for celebrating life's important occasions without adding to the ocean of plastic waste can be found at <https://balloonsblow.org/environmentally-friendly-alternatives>. – Michele Gaynor

Glen Rock is rocking the environment Energy smart homes

The New Jersey Home Performance with Energy Star program has been successfully used by communities throughout NJ to help residents conserve energy and reduce costs. The Glen Rock Environmental Commission (GREC) recommended the program to the local Council in 2013 and the town selected Ciel Power as its contractor after a bidding process.

Thorough Home Energy Audits were offered to Glen Rock homeowners for the sharply discounted rate of \$49 under the program during 2014 and 2015. During the first year, 117 homeowners took advantage of the program and received detailed written reports with findings and recommendations for energy conservation measures. The report specified all rebates and incentives the homeowners could qualify for, comprising up to \$5000 in state grants and up to \$10,000 in no-interest loans. After reviewing their reports, homeowners were free to decide if they wanted to move ahead with any of the energy upgrade recommendations and whether they wished to use the auditing firm or another qualified contractor.

The GREC led the public information and education program with presentations at Borough Hall and before various community organizations. All homeowners received a brochure and a letter from the Mayor explaining the program. Stories about the program appeared in local print and electronic media. The GREC plans a survey to sample the views of participating homeowners.

GREC and Glen Rock schools

In the last few years, the Glen Rock Environmental Commission has set up a mutually beneficial relationship with the school district where they meet regularly with the superintendent and administration. The GREC assisted them with the registration of the school district and the high school in the recently instituted Sustainable Jersey for School (SJFS) program soon after its launching.

The Commission offers mentorship for the students working on environmental projects and provides them with opportunities to develop leadership and organizational skills. Sometimes GREC mentors sign

off on students' volunteer hours spent working on their projects. Students applying for college can point to their project accomplishments as a testament to their environmental consciousness, motivation, and organizational/presentation skills. Successful projects have led to special recognition being awarded by the Board of Education, the Mayor, and on social media or in the local newspaper.

Over the last few years the GREC has mentored high school students in writing and submitting three successful grant proposals to SJFS. The GREC recruits students by advertising through the National Honor Society advisor and/or the high school communication platform.

The elementary school environmental clubs invite high school students to run some of their meetings and update the children on environmental concepts and practices.

Among the student-led projects mentored by GREC were:

- Reducing use of plastic bottles through an education campaign and the installation of three water bottle filling stations at schools. The stations feature a counter that tells how many plastic bottles were saved from landfills;
- Eliminating Styrofoam trays in favor of compostable trays;
- Surveying town businesses with the aim of reducing single-use plastic bags;
- Reducing idling community-wide through education at all schools, train stations, and the recycling center.

The GREC is currently working with a group of eight high school students to calculate the carbon footprint of the community, which will be used as baseline for a larger, more comprehensive project focused on reducing the town's greenhouse gas emissions.

In addition to mentoring, the GREC hosts presentations by middle and high



school students at their monthly meetings. Students report on their activities and benefit from a brainstorming session that can guide them into the best ways to implement their projects. For example, a group of students associated with First Lego League Research Project presented their research and proposed solutions to reduce e-waste last year, and then more recently reported on their investigation on ways to reduce nitrogen in stormwater runoff by using denitrifying bacteria.

The Glen Rock EC has developed a very effective model for collaboration between the Commission, students and the school administration. – Sylvia Rabacchi

The East Brunswick salamander migration

Over the last 12 years the spotted salamanders in the Beekman Road vernal pools in East Brunswick have gotten more than a little help to get to the other side of the road. In order to save these and other amphibians from almost certain vehicle death, the East Brunswick Environmental Commission (EBEC), together with the local police department, have closed the road on carefully chosen nights in early spring.

The salamanders leave their winter shelter and migrate across the road to the Beekman vernal pools to breed. Some species like the spotted salamander and wood frog depend entirely on these vernal pools for breeding.

There are many factors that contribute to when the salamanders migrate. The amount and timing of rainfall, the air and ground temperature, and availability of open water in the vernal pools are just some of the factors that prompt the salamanders to leave their shelter for the pools.

Once the EBEC has determined that the weather conditions are right, the road is closed for one or more nights to allow migration to occur so that a multitude of amphibians safely make it to the vernal pools.

According to the EBEC, the road closure has made a positive impact on the numbers of spotted salamanders, eastern newts and wood frogs that return to the pools. A recent visit showed the Beekman pools teeming with these amphibians.

The Commission suggests that if you know of vernal pools in your town, it's important to maintain a safe distance from them. Never step into them, but it's okay to use a strong flashlight to see the living world beneath the water. Do not pick up or handle the amphibians because they breathe through their skin, which is very sensitive to the oils and soaps we may use.

Thanks to the Commission and the Beekman Road Vernal Pool Protection Plan, there is a safe and thriving environment for amphibians in East Brunswick.

For more information see www.friendsebec.com/salamander-crossing.

– Michele Gaynor



An East Brunswick volunteer snapped a picture of this spotted salamander headed to a vernal pond.