

Using Environmental Resource Inventories

By Kerry Miller, ANJEC Assistant Director

An Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI) is like a town's environmental "owner's manual" and developing one for their town is among an environmental commission's most important undertakings. However, once they complete the document and present it for adoption by the planning board, commissions don't always utilize the ERI to its fullest extent in their work. More than a few ERIs are collecting dust on shelves in municipal buildings!

Today, when a digital version of the ERI can be easily posted on the municipal website, its narrative, maps, tables and illustrations are only a mouse click away for town boards and professionals. They offer a goldmine of information.

ANJEC recently sponsored an ERI Essay Contest for environmental commissions with the goal of drawing out real-life examples of ways commissions and municipalities make use of their ERIs. We wanted to share those examples with other commissions, to encourage them to utilize their own inventories to the fullest. We are grateful to the commissions who took the time to share their stories.

The first place winner was Highland Park Environmental Commission, whose essay was submitted by Commissioner Allan Williams. Highland Park received a framed wall map from its ERI, donated by Amy Greene Environmental Consultants. The three essays winning second place were from Bordentown Township, submitted by Commission Chair Roger Plew, Franklin Township (Hunterdon), submitted by

Commission Chair Diane Burgess, and Mountain Lakes, submitted by Commissioner Marnie Vyff. These winning commissions each received a free registration to ANJEC's 2014 Environmental Congress on Friday, Oct. 24.

Reviewing development applications

The essays heavily reflected the most common use of an ERI, which is to inform review of development applications. "Soils, riparian buffers, storm sewers, topography, archeological potential, and contaminated sites are parameters the Highland Park EC always looks at when developing comments on a site plan or subdivision," noted Allan Williams. The ERI depicts not only the subject site, but adjacent sites, where conditions such as steep slopes, contaminated soils or a stream can impact the site under review, or be impacted by it.

An ERI often highlights a site condition, or potential condition, that needs further investigation. For example, based on information in its ERI, the Highland Park Commission recently identified a redevelopment site as having high archeological (Revolutionary War) potential. As a result, the Zoning Board made a Phase I study a condition of approval for a proposed project on the site.

Chairman Diane Burgess' essay stressed wetlands and open space as resources the Commission checks for around development sites in rural Franklin Township. The presence of wetlands has significant



Mountain Lakes high school art students created quilts depicting plants and animals in the town's ERI.

regulatory implications, requiring a ground investigation and issuance of a Letter of Interpretation by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) describing the exact wetland boundaries and required transition (buffer) areas. Either unwittingly or intentionally, applicants sometimes omit critical information on their site plans, and the maps in an ERI help to red flag environmental issues like wetlands, signaling a need for further investigation.

In addition to maps, the descriptive narrative in their ERI has helped Franklin's Commission understand the implications of the resources on a site. Over time, having this background information has made commissioners more confident about providing recommendations on slopes and grading, buffers, vegetation, landscaping and stormwater. The Commission relies on the language in the ERI to help the community understand the rationale for its recommendations.

Planning and zoning

In his essay, Roger Plew discussed instances where the Bordentown Commission has used its ERI to inform the planning and zoning process. The ERI maps helped the Commission recommend the best route for a proposed connector road for heavy trucks, one that would have the least environmental impact. In another case, they referenced wetlands, soil and topography maps to designate appropriate buffer zones between the conservation and development portions of a designated redevelopment area.

Highland Park EC, while developing its ERI in 2010, reviewed the town's riparian/conservation zone ordinance, which applied only to streams shown on NJDEP's map layers. The new ERI maps included additional intermittent streams that the Commission had geo-referenced using hand-held GPS units. They successfully advocated for updating the ordinance to include locally-mapped streams.

Educational tool

An ERI is also an educational tool for the community. The Mountain Lakes Commission collaborated with their high school on a project to teach about stewardship of indigenous plants and wildlife. Using the town's online ERI as a reference, art students hand painted pictures of the town's flora and fauna onto quilt squares. The final products were ten assembled quilts featuring birds, mammals, reptiles, fish and insects. Says Commissioner Marnie Vyff, "We are pleased that Mountain Lakes' schools have incorporated local ecological information from the ERI into the curriculum with projects like this one."

An ERI can also provide historic reference. The Denville Environmental Commission is

excited to be initiating its brand new ERI, adopted this year, to inform updates to the town's master plan. But, says Chairman Kathy Clark, "We also value the town's original 1976 resource inventory, developed 'by hand' after two years of field surveys by the Environmental Commission, as a detailed environmental snapshot of the municipality as it existed 38 years ago."

For more information about developing and using an ERI, download ANJEC's Resource Paper "The Environmental Resource Inventory" from our website at www.anjec.org/pdfs/EnvironmentalResource04.pdf. 🌿

The environmental consultant's perspective

By **Harry Strano**, Planner, Amy Greene Environmental Consultants

The development process for ERIs is constantly changing. When we develop an ERI for a municipal environmental commission, we start with a basic framework of data and information. Then we spend time researching the most recent information on a wide variety of scientific subjects relevant to the municipality, like climate change reports, the ecology of newly imperiled species such as the Northern long-eared bat, and changes to NJDEP land use regulations. With each new ERI, new information, coupled with regular advances in GIS software and applications, results in an increasingly comprehensive and accurate document.

Preparers themselves are educated through the process of developing ERIs, becoming more well-rounded professionals as they interact with residents and boards at public presentations and meetings on the ERI. They apply what they learn to their work on other local environmental projects such as open space plans and wildlife management plans. Ultimately, it is quite rewarding for the consultant to engage residents from all backgrounds and age groups interested in the town's resources and their protection. 🌿

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