



April 2015 Sustainability Hero John Hughes, Founder and Chair, Rutherford Borough Green Team

John Hughes is the energetic founder and chair of the [Rutherford Borough Green Team](#). He has a knack for dreaming big and putting in the hard work to rally volunteers, get funding and make important community-enhancing projects happen.

John's ability to make dreams come true is reflected in his own life; he's a gifted musical performer and director who has toured the world with acclaimed bands such as The Mamas and the Papas and the Shirelles. Working both in the fields of pop/rock and in jazz and swing, John is an accomplished player of both the electric and the stand-up bass.

John's entry into environmental activism started in much the same way as Dr. Seuss's Lorax; he had to step up and 'speak for the trees.' In 2001, a neighbor moved into a home behind John's house and proceeded to clear-cut a thriving forest on the property, taking down 24 old-growth oak trees. Shocked that there was no recourse to this type of action, John joined the Shade Tree Commission at the former Mayor Bernadette McPherson's urging and made it his personal goal to protect the trees.

With John on the Shade Tree Commission, Rutherford Borough adopted a five year Community Forestry Plan in 2007 and again in 2013 to protect the borough's existing community forest resource.

"Our tree cover is important and the nickname of Rutherford is The Borough of Trees," said John. "Our community garden has expanded to include a Shade Tree Nursery that is now adding 75 trees a year to our tree canopy; it's not enough to solve all the tree problems but it helps and it's a sustainable solution." In 2013, the borough harvested the first home-grown trees that were planted on borough streets.

John grew up in Paterson. Son of a construction worker and a homemaker, he realized early on that his path in life would be less traditional than his parents. He attended William Patterson University where he majored in music performance, while playing in bands, at nightclubs and wherever he could get the chance. He began playing in a back-up band for Cissy and Whitney Houston, and did studio work in a back-up band for the well-known radio DJ, Wolfman Jack. Working with the Wolfman, he got the opportunity to play with big names like Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley and Frankie Avalon.

In 2000, John moved to Rutherford, a peaceful bedroom community in Bergen County filled with history, trees and beautiful old homes located right next to the New Jersey Meadowlands. Surrounded by busy highways, Giants Stadium, the Racetrack and huge construction projects such as American Dream, the Rutherford green team is poised and ready to play an important role in the region.



Rutherford Borough Green Team

When the Sustainable Jersey program was launched in 2009, John was asked to be the chair of the green team. Under John's leadership, the Rutherford Green Team was one of first towns certified in 2009 and then was re-certified in 2014. Read the [Rutherford Borough Certification Report](#). The volunteer green team is actively engaged in community building and environmental conservation. John noted that, "None of the progress we have made in Rutherford could have been done without the assistance of the Sustainable Jersey program; it has energized and focused us."

John's leadership style is to motivate people by example, which can be verified by taking a drive by the community garden, where you will most likely find John weeding, planting or sharing his wisdom about drip-irrigation.

He says, "Motivation comes from rolling up my sleeves and getting to work. Volunteers come in all stripes and colors. I've learned to embrace everyone at their level. I also take advantage of "volun-tells" which are the students that are told to work in the community garden as part of a school project. When you give someone something that they can accomplish and it makes a difference in the community, they usually get a lot of out it." John explained that the green team started small by doing tabling events in town and sponsoring eco-movie nights. But he realized that he needed a long-term, big impact project that the community could rally behind.



Rutherford Community Teaching Garden

In 2009, John proposed a plan to create a community garden in an overgrown, littered vacant lot along the railroad tracks. Most people thought he was crazy and the surrounding neighbors feared the garden would attract loiterers and thieves. After over two years of hard work, that's exactly what happened. Almost every day, people are loitering in the garden. Members of the Scouts, the Garden Club, the Woman's Club, the Green Team, the Shade Tree Committee and several sports teams are taking care of the garden. And as for thieves, the dahlia garden is too tempting, and a flower will sometimes go missing.

Rutherford was awarded a 2010 Sustainable Jersey Small Grant in the amount of \$25,000 that allowed the borough to complete Phase Two of its Community Teaching Garden Project, which provides the Rutherford Green Team with an impressive and functional example of sustainable living as well as sustainable growth and education opportunities for older adults, those with special needs and all of its residents.

John added, "The green team began the Erie Street garden project as a way to make a difference in the lives of our residents. We wanted to demonstrate how volunteers, working together, can create a lovely new space that adds value to the community and enriches our lives."



Rutherford-Meadowlands Bike and Pedestrian Ring

With the community garden thriving, John had another project on his to-do list. He felt it was ridiculous to have to get in the car and drive his kids to the Rutherford Athletic Fields. But in order to walk or bike to the fields, they had to cross dangerous intersections. Being surrounded by highways meant that the streets were subject to waves of 'cut through traffic' every time a highway backed up.

In 2010, with John in the lead, the Rutherford Green Team set out to create a Rutherford Bike and Pedestrian Ring. John secured the necessary funding to get the project off the ground. The project was awarded a Technical Assistance Grant from the National Park Service, and safety and planning assistance from New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) in the form of a yearlong bike/pedestrian safety study which resulted in a NJDOT approved set of recommendations for safety and active transportation improvements. Read the [Rutherford Borough Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan](#).



The on and off road bicycle and pedestrian trail encircles the Borough of Rutherford and will encourage biking and walking while reducing car trips and greenhouse gas emissions. In March 2015, Rutherford Borough was the recipient of a \$20,000 Sustainable Jersey Small Grant funded by the PSEG Foundation that will Support Phase One (Orient Way) of the project. The green team is also working with the NJ Bike and Walk Coalition to create and host a yearly educational program for young riders beginning at the third grade.

John said, "We've learned that bike lanes and safety signs and redesigning our roadways for slower speed traffic are the sustainable solutions to this traffic overflow. We already see results with the striping of Orient Way – slower traffic and more commuters taking their bikes to our train station. One of our goals is for our children to again be able to walk or bicycle safely to school." The Rutherford local government has been supportive of the project and John said that when he sees the Rutherford Mayor Joseph DeSalvo, he now asks John, "What street are we going after next?"

Launching a Meadowlands Hub

John's new goal is to create a Meadowlands Hub to foster collaboration between the southern Bergen and Hudson County green teams. John explains, "A huge part of sustainability for my neighbors and me is insuring that our town retains its identity in the midst of the mega development that is rampant in our South Bergen and Meadowlands area. We want our children to be able to enjoy our 'small town next to the big city' atmosphere and we want to keep our trees and parks, our great schools and our quaint downtown."

He says that the area, which includes the Meadowlands Region and American Dream development areas, as well as Liberty State Park, has many issues in need of coordination. Recent legislation calls for a new Master Plan to be developed for the Meadowlands Region. John wants to make sure that the green teams have a chance to be heard and are involved with regional decisions concerning matters of sustainability.



Two Sons and 49 States

In his free time, John likes to spend time with his two sons: Jonathan, an 18 year old high school student who plans to go to college to get an environmental engineering degree, and Patrick a 25 year old who works with the Hackensack Riverkeeper.

John still plays music regularly. In addition to playing with and managing the Shirelles, he also plays with local bands such as The [Dalton Gang](#), a 10 -piece jazz band that performs intricate, original Latin-jazz music. You can check out John playing his signature 'green' bass with the Dalton Gang [here](#) or catch them live in shows around New Jersey. As far as future travel plans, playing music has taken him to 49 states and

five continents. "I'm missing South Dakota, Africa and Antarctica," he said, laughing. We hope that John will continue to stay put in New Jersey as he is making an important and lasting contribution to sustainability in Rutherford and throughout the state with his actions.