

DECEMBER 2017 SUSTAINABILITY HERO



BONNIE AKEY **Chair, Borough of Little Silver Environmental Commission, Monmouth County**

Bonnie Akey is the chair of the Little Silver Environmental Commission and Green Team. She is dedicated to providing common sense environmental leadership to Little Silver Borough. Little Silver is a small community encompassing less than three and a half square miles with about 6,000 people. Located in Monmouth County, the town is about five miles from the Atlantic Ocean.

Bonnie is known for her tenacious pursuit of sustainability goals and her wit. Bonnie explained, “You can’t chair an environmental commission or green team unless you have a good sense of humor. Being able to laugh helps.” She added, “But the fact is there are more people living in Little Silver than ever before, so the need to preserve open space, reduce plastic use and focus on sustainability is critical to our community’s future health and well-being.”

Borough of Little Silver-Sustainable Jersey Certified

Little Silver achieved Sustainable Jersey certification in 2013, 2014 and 2017. The completed actions include: Sustainable Land Use Pledge, Green Purchasing Policy, Natural Resources Inventory, Open Space Plans, Green Building Policy, Green Building Checklist and Green Grounds and Maintenance Policy. The green team organizes an annual green fair, has done a Peace Pole Project and collaborates with the elementary school on environmental issues. Bonnie has goals for the green team, she said, “I know we can get Little Silver Borough to achieve the silver level of certification next year and get our schools certified with Sustainable Jersey for Schools.” To see all of the actions completed, review the [Borough of Little Silver 2017 Certification Report](#) and follow the Little Silver Environmental Commission [Facebook page](#). Bonnie is also active in the Sustainable Jersey Monmouth County Hub. Bonnie said, “The Monmouth Hub has been super helpful. I am able to network and share ideas with neighboring towns.”

Advice to New Green Teams

Five years ago, the former chair of the Environmental Commission moved to Utah and tapped Bonnie as her successor. Bonnie said, “When I first started, I felt out of my league reviewing blue prints, new developments and engineering plans. But, I was not shy about asking for advice and I learned as much as I could. When I look back, I’m proud of what we have accomplished. So, my advice is to jump in and trust your abilities and make sure to work with the existing departments and organizations already doing good work in the community.”

Outdoor Water Bottle Refilling Stations

The Little Silver Environmental Commission used grant money to purchase and install water bottle refill stations at Borough Field and Sickles Park to supply cooled



water to the community. Bonnie said, "The filtered, refrigerated water bottle filler fountains will avoid the use of thousands of disposable water bottles which helps lower the borough's carbon footprint and reduces litter and waste." In just the first few weeks in operation, 400 bottles were filled.

Reusable Bag Education

The green team and Environmental Commission worked with the elementary schools and local residents to implement a reusable bag education program. Bonnie partners with a local grassroots group called S.U.R.E. (Single Use Reduction Effort). Bonnie attends S.U.R.E. meetings and a member of the group attends the green team meetings. S.U.R.E. members are reaching out to local merchants to discourage the use of plastic bags.

Together, the groups are creating a "just say no" or "no thanks, I don't need a bag" outreach campaign. The Environmental Commission purchased 1,500 reusable/recycled heavy duty grocery bags as well as 750 bags that can be stuffed in a pouch and carried in a purse/handbag/pocket. Clean Ocean Action worked with the groups and implemented a program in the schools on single-use plastics. The bags were distributed at the library, Little Silver and Taste of Little Silver Days, National Night Out and to each K-4 student after the Clean Ocean Action presentation. Bonnie said, "We are lucky to have citizens helping that want to make the town greener. The plastic bag outreach is the perfect example of an initiative that came to the green team from a grass roots organization. Collaboration is definitely important in pushing forward successful sustainability efforts."

Little Silver Community Garden

Under Bonnie's leadership the Little Silver Environmental Commission has worked with Little Silver Borough to use Open Space funds to establish a community garden. The garden is on land that is adjacent to Parker Homestead, the oldest operating farm (1665) in the state of New Jersey. The farm land is organic and well protected from local wildlife by a state of the art fence that in addition to being 10 feet tall, is 18 inches underground. The garden has been very successful and is now entering its third year of production.



Plots are rented out to citizens on a yearly basis and four raised plots are provided for ADA participants. Bonnie works with growers to have them donate some of their extra produce to a food bank called [Lunch Break](#) and [St. Anthony's](#) in Red Bank. She said, "This year we donated over 400 pounds of produce from our community garden. Five beds were cultivated for that purpose and we had a "share chair" for excess produce from our gardeners."



Bonnie's husband Kevin is a Rutgers Master Gardener and she said he has been a huge help with the garden. Bonnie delivers produce to the Red Bank Food Bank. Girl Scout troops contribute by helping to mark and outline plots. Sickles Market allowed use of their wells for growers to use. The garden plots go on sale in February and are advertised in the Little Silver Newsletter as well as the borough website.

The Department of Public Works has been a useful resource; the agency helps to maintain the perimeter. The gardeners volunteer their time once per growing season to mow the aisle and rows within the garden. The municipality has supported and continues to support this effort by supplying hoses/nozzles, garden tools, a lawn mower repair financing and a fence that has required maintenance and repairs over the three-year tenure. Parker Homestead has provided a shed for storage of equipment and supplied the paint for the green team to paint it to match their adjacent barns. This garden has been on several Monmouth County tours as an example of excellence in community gardening.

Sustainable Land Use Pledge and Master Plan Sustainability Element

The Little Silver Green Team and the Environmental Commission developed a Sustainable Land Use Pledge. After review by the Planning Board and Council, the Borough Council passed the resolution. The pledge reflects the borough's intention to manage development and redevelopment in a way that is more protective of the environment and more livable for residents. The pledge is provided to the Planning and Zoning Board and the Shade Tree Commission to guide decisions about land use. The Master Plan includes a [Sustainability Element of the Little Silver Master Plan](#). Located on the coast, Little Silver is susceptible to flooding and is crossed by streams, estuaries and waterways. Bonnie explained, "The Environmental Commission takes a strong stance on impervious surfaces. I go to meetings and write letters requesting that impervious surfaces be added into redevelopment plans. Also, the borough has its own wetlands ordinance and flood hazard zone. I see this effort as critical to preventing future disasters." The Borough's Environmental Commission reviews applications in the flood zone.

Backyard Composting Program

At the annual Little Silver Environmental Day (Green Fair), the green team provided a composting workshop for those interested in starting a backyard composting program. Composters were sold to people interested in backyard composting and the cost of the composter was subsidized by the Monmouth County Grant Fund. The "Earth Machines" cost over \$100, but because of the subsidy Monmouth County residents paid \$35. Over a dozen composters were sold and more than 25 people consulted with the composting Master Gardener. An additional 25 composters were sold after the event.



Education and Work Experience

Bonnie received a BA in Social Sciences and a Masters in Education from the University of Toledo in Ohio. She has a Master in Special Education and Rehabilitation from Columbia University. Bonnie was a teacher at Point Road Elementary School in Little Silver for 33 years and is now retired.

What You May Not Know About Bonnie

Bonnie grew up in Fair Lawn, New Jersey (Bergen County) with her brother and parents. Her mother was a teacher and her father owned a business. Bonnie and her husband Kevin, have two daughters named Rebecca and Abigail and a son named Patrick. They enjoy spending time with their five grandchildren: Sam, Owen, Max, Sean and Maria. In her spare time, Bonnie likes to cook, upkeep her perennial gardens, hike and kayak. Family vacations are spent in Portland, Maine and at a lake in Sussex County. This year Bonnie and Kevin travelled to Ireland and Scotland; they made sure to visit the Botanical Gardens in Edenborough.