



April 2014 Sustainability Hero Gary Sondermeyer, Chair, Sustainable Jersey Waste Management Task Force

Growing up in a tenement building in Paterson, New Jersey, Gary Sondermeyer had to walk two blocks to the front of the county jail if he wanted to see a patch of grass. His passion to live in a greener, more sustainable New Jersey started here.

During his sophomore year in high school in 1972, Gary's free spirited biology teacher provided inspiration and guidance to his future career. The teacher spoke passionately about the environment and praised the creation of a fledgling new agency, formed in 1970, called the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Gary set his sights on working at DEP, applied himself in school, and was the first person in his family to go to college. He got a BS in Environmental Planning and a Masters in City and Regional Planning at Rutgers University.



After graduating from college, Gary achieved his high school goal by getting a job at NJ DEP. As it turned out, he worked at DEP for 30 years where he served as chief of staff for 10 years under five different DEP commissioners and six New Jersey Governors with a staff of 3,500 employees. Prior to this, he served as assistant commissioner for the Department's core permitting programs for three years and spent 17 years within the Solid Waste and Recycling Program where he also served as director. Gary said, "I truly loved working at DEP because it was more than a job, it was a vocation where people that care deeply about the environment work together with a passion that transcends paychecks. You are working to better the lives of current and future generations."

Following his retirement from DEP in 2010, Gary joined [Bayshore Recycling Corp](#) and now serves as vice president of operations. Bayshore is one of New Jersey's largest recyclers, managing seven separate, but related recycling operations on its 55 acre Eco-Complex and Energy Campus. As vice president, he assists in the management of facility-wide operations and in the full build-out of the Eco-Complex and Energy Campus toward the corporate vision of running 100 percent green businesses powered 100 percent by renewable energy.

Sustainable Jersey Waste Management Task Force

Gary is the chair of the Sustainable Jersey Waste Management Task Force. Over 300 leaders in New Jersey, like Gary, volunteer to serve on [Sustainable Jersey Task Forces](#) from academia, the non-profit sector, the business community, and state, local, federal, and county government. The task forces review the certification actions in order to create and update the program actions annually.

The Waste Management Task Force has about 20 participants that meet two to three times a year. Gary first joined the Waste Management Task Force almost exactly two years ago on March 29, 2012. In July 2012, he was asked to serve as the chair of the Waste Management Task Force when the former chair stepped down. Gary led the task force through updates of 13 waste management actions that included seven recycling actions and six source reduction actions. In 2013, the Waste Management Task Force successfully developed five new actions that are currently in the program

including: [Prescription Drug Safety and Disposal](#), [Commercial and Institutional Recycling](#), [Non-Mandated Materials Recycling](#), [Recycling Education and Enforcement](#) and [Reusable Bag Demonstration Program](#).

The Waste Management Task Force added the more general “catch-all” category that lands in the “Non-Mandated Materials Recycling” action. It provides more options for innovative towns that have programs that don’t fit in the traditional categories, for example Fair Lawn did an innovative collection of bulky rigid plastic toys that fits in this category.

For 2014, the task force is focusing on the development of the initial set of certification actions for the Sustainable Jersey for Schools program. The actions that the group are considering for this program include: Waste Auditing, Waste or Source Reduction, Materials Reuse, Food Waste Management, EPA WasteWi\$e Partner, Non-Mandated Materials, Science Laboratory Materials Management, Documented Recycling Rate and Outreach and Education. Sustainable Jersey is lucky to have someone of Gary’s caliber and expertise leading the Waste Management Task Force.

Nittany Lions, the Villanova Wildcats and the Black Keys

Gary married his college sweet heart Roseanne and they have been together for 34 years. He is very proud of his four children: Karl, age 29, went to Penn State; Gail, age 26, went to Villanova University and Cal-Berkeley for a Masters; Lynn, age 23, is attending Drexel University and graduates this June and Mary, age 21, is attending Villanova University.

Gary is an avid college football fan rooting for Penn State and Rutgers University in addition to following the Villanova University basketball team. Gary played Division 1 baseball at Rutgers and coached his children’s sports teams for 14 years including softball, baseball, basketball and soccer. He is also a lover of history— particularly U.S. Presidents. Gary is also a fan of all kinds of music from the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan to the Clash, the Black Keys, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Veruca Salt.

Insights into Sustainable Jersey

Gary said he is a big cheerleader for the Sustainable Jersey program. He describes his experience at Sustainable Jersey as “advocacy planning” in the sense that Sustainable Jersey is “voluntary” and driven by a cross-section of many different interests and organizations that are more focused and inspired by the end goal of working toward a more sustainable New Jersey, rather than each group focusing on their individual interests. He said that environmental management has traditionally been driven by command and control through permits and fines. His best example to explain advocacy planning is his work on homeland security issues. On September 12, 2001, the day after 9-11, Gary stepped into a new role--the DEP lead for homeland security. His first day on the job was spent in the Governor’s emergency cabinet meeting. He describes the work he participated in after 9-11 as the most productive public policy planning effort in his career. Through cooperative voluntary efforts between state government and 20 defined private sectors, “best security practices” were developed and implemented across thousands of public and private agencies and businesses cooperating toward a common goal.

Gary takes time to lead others and mentors young environmental students and professionals on a continuous basis, an act he calls a total privilege. He said that sustainability professions are a fabulous career and he recommends the field to all who are interested in doing work that will truly make a difference. He said that the environmental field has matured a lot from the ‘wild west’ he entered in the early 1980s, but said that there is still an enormous amount of important work to be done in the pursuit of a more sustainable society.