

# Burlington County Times

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By Steven Hart Staff Writer

## Rancocas Nature Center will show off for the public

WESTAMPTON — Two years after area residents and environmentalists rallied to keep it open, the Rancocas Nature Center wants the public to know what it plans to do with that new lease on life.

The past year's accomplishments and the coming year's goal will be laid out Feb. 8, at a community meeting set for 2:30 p.m. at the center at 794 Rancocas Road.

Toni Price, who co-chairs the Friends of the Rancocas Nature Center, said the community meeting will show "we are still functional and we have plans for the future."

"What I really hope will happen is that the people will come out and tell us what they want," Price said. "We want to get their feedback and input about what they'd like to see."

The past year saw educational events such as Garden Day, at which area youngsters were told about gardening and herbs, and an Arbor Day celebration. The community meeting also will give the Friends a chance to thank the approximately 40 volunteers who keep the center running, and help spread the word about one of the best-kept secrets in Burlington County.

"When the Audubon Society owned this place, they did nothing to promote it," communications director Lavonne Johnson said. "I was mayor of Willingboro, so I know something about this area. But I never heard of this place until I visited it. It was just this little gem of nature that nobody knows about."

Located on 210 acres in Rancocas State Park, the nature center boasts 3 miles of hiking trails through meadows, forests and wetlands, and abuts the Rancocas Creek. Its building includes a nature gift shop and natural history displays. The grounds include a picnic area, dragonfly pond, frog pond, and display gardens for tours.

The center previously was run by the New Jersey Audubon Society, which announced in December 2012 that it would close the site after 35 years.

After the Dec. 28 closure announcement, the center shuttered for four months and reopened under a state, local and county partnership.

The land and buildings are owned by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Parks and Forestry, which recently renewed its agreement to allow the county to manage the facility. The municipality pays the salaries of the center's two employees and gets reimbursed by the Friends. The county pays the operational expenses and provides maintenance services.

The coming year will show the center moving ahead with its newly formed photography club, as well as its new status as a chapter of the Native Plants Society.

"We also hope to bring in a fresh crop of volunteers," Johnson said. "There's a lot to be done, and we can always use some extra hands."

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