

Burlington County Times, Monday 1/6/2014

# Volunteerism marks new era for Rancocas Nature Center



**Pete Picknally/BCT Staff Photographer**

People enjoy the children's garden at the Rancocas Nature Center, in Westampton, during garden day on Sunday, Aug 4, 2013.

Posted: Sunday, January 5, 2014 8:00 pm | Updated: 6:40 am, Tue Jan 7, 2014.

By **JEANNIE O'SULLIVAN** Staff writer

WESTAMPTON — What a difference a year makes.

The group that convened at the Rancocas Nature Center on Jan. 6, 2013, was determined yet fraught with uncertainty about the organization's future on the heels of the New Jersey Audubon Society's decision to close it after 35 years.

Flash forward to Sunday. The same bunch of fierce advocates gathered at the Rancocas State Park respite once again, this time to celebrate the progress made from a grassroots effort to keep the center afloat through fundraising, volunteerism, organization and a public-private partnership.

But before he went into the details about mission statements and financial minutiae during the group's second annual community meeting, volunteer Rich Chichester emphasized maintaining the 210 acres of trails, wildlife and activities, from maple sugaring to bird-watching.

"It's not about computers, it's about getting outside," said Chichester, co-chairman of the Friends of the Nature Center at Rancocas State Park, the group's fundraising arm. Noting the all-ages appeal of the center, he recalled a recent program in which "10-year-olds were taking other kids on butterfly tours."

A guided nature hike preceded the meeting that took place in the education center, which houses the photographs, charts, relics, fossils and stuffed and live animals, including owls

and snakes, that serve as learning tools for various nature programs offered by the organization. The purpose was to update the dozen or so attendees on how the center has fared while operating independently of New Jersey Audubon.

The center's \$125,000 annual operating expenses are covered in part by gift shop proceeds and fees from programs and summer camp, said volunteer Dan Ruotolu, an accountant who recruited college students to help set up the group's financial software. The rest must come from fundraising, which Chichester said generated \$47,000 during the past year.

Aside from individual pledges, fundraisers were held by Whole Foods in Evesham and Iron Hill Brewery and PJ Whelihan's, both in Maple Shade.

"It's going to be a battle for the next couple of years until we generate enough surplus that we can begin to do the long-term developmental things that we need to," said Chichester. Among the year's other accomplishments were a tree planting, events focusing on gardens and history, an educational grant from Willingboro Rotary, and the continuation of the organization's summer camp, science-based programming, hikes and activities.

The Friends of the Nature Center at Rancocas State Park have formed a Long Range Planning Committee as well as an advisory panel of professionals who help design programs to highlight the Rancocas State Park's flora and fauna, the Rancocas Watershed, paleontological and climate histories, and a storied past of early Quaker and American Indian settlements and Timbuktu, a freed slave community, Chichester said.

One of the goals is to emphasize the range of natural attractions, a scope much broader than that of the bird-focused New Jersey Audubon.

The Friends also are hoping to partner with Stockton State College in Galloway, Atlantic County, Rowan University in Glassboro, Gloucester County, and other schools to create internship and research opportunities.

Toni Price, a beekeeper and lavender farmer who co-chairs the Friends group, noted the various areas of expertise represented by the stakeholders.

"It's been very eye-opening to see the dynamics of the connections here. It's not just a bird place anymore. We're unique, we're small and it's really a treasured place," Price said.

Following the Dec. 28, 2012, announcement about the pending closure, 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 — Division of Parks & 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 operational expenses and provides maintenance services for the site, said Mary Pat Robbie, director of the Burlington County Department of Resource Conservation.

"It's an invaluable asset to our park system. It compliments what we're trying to do, and it's a great opportunity to share resources," Robbie said.

Jeannie O'Sullivan: 609-871-8068; email: [josullivan@calkins.com](mailto:josullivan@calkins.com); Twitter: @jeannieosulliva