

Stop the Destruction of Essex County's Last Open Space

Turtle Back Zoo Expansion: Issue Background

South Mountain Reservation, a 2,100 acre woodland replete with waterfalls, forests, picnic and recreation areas and a rich biome was designated at the end of the 19th century. It is a locale of many historically important sites dating back to the American Revolution.

The reservation was designed by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed Central Park and other famous preserved lands. South Mountain has been enjoyed by generations of residents and abuts on six different towns. A small zoo, the Turtle Back Zoo was designed as part of the Reservation on just 15.5 acres and intended as a children's petting zoo with a fairy tale theme for local children. The environmental impact of the original zoo was deliberately limited and included a small train that ran through a part of the reservation.

Since 2002, County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo has used questionable means to clearcut 10 acres of the reservation to dramatically expand the zoo, installing amusement-park style attractions such as a carousel, zip lines, mini-golf, a restaurant, paddle boats and a parking structure. He has also added exotic animals, including many for whom the climate of New Jersey is inappropriate and hazardous resulting in maltreatment and deaths. In 2017, a giraffe died of a toothache. This summer, a beloved lion died.

The county has claimed that the zoo plays an important role in conservation of animal species and the education of the public in the importance of conservation. The very fact that so much damage has been caused to preserved land with more to come belies this specious claim.

Since the expansion, human and vehicle traffic to the zoo has increased dramatically and profits have vanished into the coffers of the county rather than being used to increase conversation or benefit the local communities in any way.

Now, the County is set on more destruction paid for by **millions** of your tax dollars. An additional 135 trees are to be clear-cut to make way for a 500 seat "Conservation Pavillon". (Ironic title for such a destructive project...)

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The County argues that the pavilion is necessary to accommodate the supposed educational needs of school and private groups visiting the zoo. In reality, the proposed pavilion more closely resembles a circus with entertainment-oriented gigantic LED lighting, screens and sound system that will further damage and degrade the environment. Neighboring residents, whose lifestyle has already been negatively impact, are concerned about the effect of more noise, light, congestion and crowds.

In addition, the pavilion's proposed crate-style animal cages (fitted with slamming guillotine gates) highlight that the planned animal demonstrations are really entertainment-oriented performances with wild animals being subjected to stress and cruelty rather than cared for and nurtured. This is in violation of the newly enacted "Nosey Law," signed by the Governor to prohibit the use of exotic animals in traveling circus acts. According to the written description, there are plans in place to rent out the pavilion for private functions and performances at "premium prices," further damaging the natural environment.

Finally, the entire planning process has taken place without any regard to the master development plans of surrounding townships, and was created by planners who are unlicensed in New Jersey.

The "Conservation Pavillon" is anything but. If the County's plans are allowed to go through, then not only will irreparable damage have been done to one of Essex County's last natural spaces, but a path will have been paved for further encroachment and destruction. As a result of the clear-cutting that has already happened, local roads are repeatedly flooded. Further clear-cutting will cause even more damage. Educating children about conservation should not be done at the expense of animals and the environment. We know better, please help educate our elected and appointed officials to know better, too.

Please attend the Public Hearing on Tuesday, January 21, 2020

250 Grove Ave., Cedar Grove, Essex County Police Academy

Speak out against THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR HISTORIC SOUTH MOUNTAIN RESERVATION.

Our Green West Orange, the Sierra Club, Soma, the New Jersey Animal League, and the West Orange Young Democrats have opposed this environmental betrayal.



www.ogwo.org

info@OurGreenWestOrange.org

