

06.14.2024 NEWS

Pine Barrens commission to develop nature center raise awareness and curb illegal dumping

By [Chris Francescani](#)



When the Brookhaven landfill stops accepting construction and demolition debris at year's end, officials are concerned those

The Suffolk Times.

state-of-the-art nature center to teach the public about the East End's pine barrens and the need to preserve the region and protect it from [illegal dumping](#) and pollution.

“It would be hard to overstate how excited we are over the potential possibilities of such a center and what it would mean to our efforts to get the public to fully appreciate the Central Pine Barrens region and all it has to offer,” CPBC executive director Judy Jakobsen said at an event Friday honoring dozens of area law enforcement agencies, including the Riverhead Police Department, who work together to patrol and protect the 105,000-acre pine barrens.

Last week, the commission issued a request for proposals for a feasibility study for the potential nature center project.

Ms. Jakobsen said in an interview that while no location has been chosen, the facility would serve as a welcome center, a hub for ecotourism, a central site for commission programs and a headquarters for the 31-year-old organization.

“We enjoy working with our partners, but it would be nice to host our own events and activities,” she said.

With the Brookhaven landfill scheduled to stop taking construction and demolition debris at the end of this year, officials are especially concerned about those materials ending up in the pine barrens, which is Long Island's last wilderness and sits atop the aquifer that provides drinking water to Long Island.

In March, new legislation raised the fines for [illegal dumping](#) on county land to \$15,000 for individuals and \$25,000 for corporations. Whistleblowers whose reporting of illegal dump leads to an arrest are entitled to one-third of the fine. The increased fines are part of a joint legislative and law enforcement agenda called the Evergreen Initiative, spearheaded last fall by [Suffolk County District Attorney Ray Tierney](#). The initiative also covered the cost of installing \$10,000 worth of new covert surveillance cameras and sensors throughout the pine barrens, aimed at catching illegal dumpers in the act. The pine barrens have also long been a magnet for illegal all-terrain vehicle riders.



In February, a Shirley man was arrested and charged with illegal dumping for allegedly abandoning his 24-foot 1980 Century boat in the pine barrens in Manorville. In 2018, a couple was caught on camera dumping eight barrels of antifreeze and windshield wiper fluids in Manorville. That same year, six men were arrested on charges ranging from illegal dumping to unlawful disposal of solid waste for allegedly discarding items including paint cans, a drum set and a boat.

Keynote speaker Jed Painter, general counsel to the Suffolk DA's office and chair of the New York State District Attorneys Association's environmental crimes committee, said the prosecution of environmental crimes is a vital part of protecting Long Island's pine barrens and the aquifers beneath them.

"When these lands are compromised by illegal activities, we lose more than just the land," he said. "We lose our natural heritage."

He said that Long Island's aquifers are "constantly under attack."

"They're being contaminated. They are being depleted by illegal dumping [and] over-extraction and the harm to these underground water reserves poses, in turn, severe risks to our agriculture."

Mr. Painter called the prosecution of environmental crime a "moral imperative."

The Suffolk Times.

overharvesting of shellfish ... detorestation ... destruction of protective habitats.

He said pollution and environmental crimes are a threat to more than just the pine barrens.

“Ninety percent of all marine aquatic life lives within 150 miles of coastline. Everything else in the world is a blue desert — the Pacific, the Atlantic. So our coastline and 150 miles from it, that’s where all the life and biodiversity thrives. And unfortunately, that’s the closest to us.”

The CPBC’s revised comprehensive land use plan, which was approved last year and goes into effect next month, gives the commission more say in some local land use projects, according to Ms. Jakobsen.

She said at the event that amendments to the plan include “a new requirement that requires commission review of significant projects that expose groundwater ... [a] 400,000-square-foot area threshold for projects that would be defined as a development of regional significance, and ... the addition of a mixed-use definition to address projects that evolve to a different land use.”

She said other new amendments include one that sets a new Dark Sky standard to protect fauna impacted by night lighting.

In the interview, Ms. Jakobsen said that the potential project has a long way to go, but “it’s a starting point.”

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