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OPINION

A.C. Expressway is now where the wild things are | Opinion

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By [South Jersey Times Guest Columnist](#)

By Brittany Dobrzynski

With billboards and traffic capturing your attention, wildlife habitat is likely one of the last things you might be thinking about while driving down the Atlantic City Expressway. However, the colorful wildflowers that you see on interchanges and expressway dividers provide such habitat. Until recently, the use of native plants was not at the forefront of roadside planning and maintenance.

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The South Jersey Transportation Authority (SJTA) has been working closely with New Jersey Audubon to bring native flowering forbs, shrubs and grasses back to roadsides, expanding these travel corridors to include use by wildlife. The SJTA operates and maintains the 44-mile expressway. The authority began to incorporate native plants into the road's routine landscaping two years ago. Since then, the SJTA's mission to reinvigorate roadside open space has taken on a new life.

Native plants have evolved over time with our local soils, climate and wildlife. Having adapted together, our local wildlife depends on these plants for food, shelter and breeding habitat. Not only do native plants add beauty amidst miles of paved roads, they provide vital resources to important pollinators like bees, hummingbirds and butterflies. Sadly, many of our pollinators are imperiled and threatened with habitat loss. Increasing native plant diversity and maintaining roadside meadows utilizes existing open space, reduces maintenance costs and is aesthetically pleasing to travelers on the expressway.

Impressively, the SJTA was already ahead of the curve in 2017 when state legislation went into effect mandating that it, as well as the New Jersey Turnpike Authority and the state Department of Transportation, use only native plant material along the roads they operate. Groups like New Jersey Audubon and Save Barnegat Bay had lobbied for this legislation, in addition to another law that directs the DOT to develop an integrated roadside vegetation management program (IRVM) and coordinate it with the two toll-road authorities.

By 2016, SJTA had converted to more than 50 percent native plant use in day-to-day operations. They boosted this to 100 percent in 2017 and recently incorporated native plant use in the agency's Roadway Environmental Advancement Initiative (REAdI). REAdI will create wildlife habitat, reduce pesticide usage, take advantage of unused roadside space, reduce maintenance activities and provide a scenic quality to the Atlantic City Expressway - while providing essential resources to bees and other pollinators. REAdI also includes best practices for the long-term control of damaging insects, weeds and invasive plants, while preserving and creating valuable habitats.

This summer, native trees were planted along a stretch of the Atlantic City Expressway that was once bordered by nothing more than a snow fence. It is now filled with American holly, dogwood and red maple. New Jersey Audubon Stewardship staff advised the SJTA on a 15-species seed mix of native, perennial flowering plants to create additional pollinator habitat. In the coming growing season, a total of 35 acres of pollinator habitat will have been established along the expressway.

Artificial nesting structures have also been deployed along the expressway. More than 85 bird, butterfly and bat boxes that were built or decorated by students from local schools have been installed by the SJTA.

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Native plants and nesting structures are transforming the Atlantic City Expressway into habitat for pollinators and other wildlife as they make your drive a bit more scenic. With the SJTA setting the bar high, roadside management is taking a new direction in New Jersey.

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