

Photos are available for use by the media: <http://bit.ly/sjta2018>

South Jersey Transportation Authority Dedicates Themselves to Pollinators

Transportation Authority and New Jersey Audubon Work Together to Create Habitat

An effort is underway to transform the Atlantic City Expressway into habitat for native plants and pollinators, with colorful flowers, trees, and other plants. Native plants are being added to New Jersey's highway system, after planning and research undertaken by the South Jersey Transportation Authority and through the assistance of New Jersey Audubon. These native plants will line areas of NJ highways, adding beauty and creating habitat for wildlife, including vital pollinators, such as bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies. Bees and other creatures pollinate one-third of the food we eat, like fruits and vegetables, but face threats from pesticides and habitat loss.

"When working on habitat enhancement projects such as this, it is important to note the secondary benefits which reach far beyond the intended purpose. Native wildflower plantings not only provide nectar sources for native bees and butterflies, but also serve as host plants for butterflies and moths to lay their eggs, then a food source for their young. Breeding birds feed on those larvae, and later in the season may return to feed on seeds. It's a circular system that starts with one small seed!" said **Brittany Dobrzynski, Stewardship Specialist for New Jersey Audubon**.

The South Jersey Transportation Authority began planting native wildflowers, trees, and shrubs along the expressway to improve pollinator habitat in 2016. Native pollinators have evolved to thrive with native plants, as opposed to non-native invasive plants which do not provide food for caterpillars and are poor sources of food for native wildlife. Native plants are also best adapted to the local growing season, climate, and soils, and once they are established need very little maintenance. Through the planting of native plants, pesticide application is reduced, less maintenance is required, flooding is reduced due to rain water being absorbed, and sediment is trapped, improving nearby water quality.

When South Jersey Transit Authority switched from planting cosmos and other annual flowers to managing a native, perennial pollinator habitat, New Jersey Audubon Stewardship Staff helped ensure a smooth transition. Staff met with SJTA to discuss important details like site preparation, planting methods, and maintenance schedules for successful perennial establishment. In partnership with the Xerces Society, seeding rates for each forb and grass that would be planted were carefully considered as well as the health of native insects that would be attracted to this roadside oasis.

"The New Jersey Legislature understood the importance of native plants when they passed legislation last year. These bills create an forward-thinking new initiative to create pollinator habitat in areas that would otherwise lack a diversity of native plants or, as is the case in many roadside areas, be overwhelmed with a few dominate species of non-native invasive plants that outcompete native species and don't provide the many benefits that native species do," stated **Kelly Mooij, Vice President of Government Relations for New Jersey Audubon**. "It's exciting that by the time the legislature passed these bills that the South Jersey Transportation Authority was already ahead of the curve planting native plants, which began in 2016."

In 2017, with support from New Jersey Audubon and Save Barnegat Bay, the New Jersey Legislature passed a bill S227, requiring the Department of Transportation, New Jersey Turnpike Authority, and the South Jersey Transit Authority to use only native vegetation for landscaping, land management, and reforestation. The South Jersey Transportation Authority had already planted fifty percent native plants in 2016 and planted almost one-hundred percent native plants in 2017, making 2018 the first growing season for many of the native plants. The South Jersey Transportation Authority is emphasizing native vegetation as part of their Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management program, which they are calling Roadway Environmental Advancement Initiative (READI). READI will create wildlife habitat, reduce pesticides, enhance land that is often overwhelmed with non-native invasive species, reduce maintenance such as mowing, aid in erosion control, and provides a scenic quality to the Atlantic City Expressway.

The New Jersey Legislature also passed bill S724, signed into law in 2017, which directs the Department of Transportation to develop an Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management program and coordinate implementation with the New Jersey Turnpike Authority and the South Jersey Transportation Authority. READI also includes best practices for the long-term control of damaging insects, invasive plants, and weeds, all while preserving valuable native vegetation and habitat. The project has taken a lot of research and planning, from testing the pH in the soil along the roads to working collaboratively with New Jersey Audubon, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the United States Department of Agriculture to determine best practices for installation and maintenance. Research along with trial and error has led the South Jersey Transportation Authority to develop their own proprietary seed mix that they use on interchanges and roads.

“The READI Project has far exceeded our expectations in this short period of time. Working with New Jersey Audubon and other organizations to create pollinator habitat while also reducing overhead costs has been extremely successful. In fact, just this summer the South Jersey Transportation Authority planted forty native trees along the expressway in an area that was once nothing more than a snow fence, but is now covered with American holly, dogwood, and red maple,” added **James Sullivan, Director of Operations at South Jersey Transportation Authority.**

The South Jersey Transportation Authority currently has fifty planting locations ranging in size from 0.2 acres to 4.5 acres along the shoulder or median of the Atlantic City Expressway, comprising thirty-five acres of land from Bellmawr to Brigantine. These planting locations have been supplemented with a 15 species mix of native wildflowers to create ideal pollinator habitat, providing resources throughout the growing season. South Jersey Transportation Authority has also supplemented wildlife habitat by adding a total of eighty-five bird, butterfly, and bat boxes including an osprey platform along the expressway.