

# South Jersey Highlights: Environmental stewardship efforts along the Atlantic City Expressway

Trinity Eobbi & Katie Thorn, Staff Writers

Every single day residents across New Jersey use the state's transportation services to arrive at their destination, whether it is hopping on a shuttle or driving on the expressway. While the South Jersey Transportation Authority, also known as the SJTA, provides shuttle services, snow removal, grass maintenance and trash pick-up, its responsibilities go beyond these typical services.

The SJTA created the Roadway Environmental Advancement Initiative, also known as READI, in 2017 to promote environmental stewardship along the 28-mile-long Atlantic City Expressway.

Nick Marchese is a Project Manager at READI, alongside John McDonnell. Their efforts began small, with planting native flowers to help pollinators, but the program has grown immensely since then.

"We've been traveling around the country, doing conferences and letting other people know what we're doing, learning from them what we can do better," Marchese said. "Now become an internationally recognized program, after only eight years."



Wildflowers grow along the Atlantic City Expressway. (Nick Marchese)



An osprey platform sits along the Atlantic City Expressway. (Nick Marchese)

One of their earliest projects was creating wildlife crossings underneath the road.

"We eventually put video cameras out there...At one point, we had a great horned owl at night waiting for his prey on the other side, knowing that they crossed there...Incredible what wildlife can do," said Marchese.

The READI program has also helped advance local environmental education by leading environmental stewardship events at elementary schools across the state during Earth Day Week. Following a short informational presentation presented at these events, the students are eager to get their vests and hard hats on to help plant trees outside.

READI's programs go beyond elementary school students as they also have a partnership with Stockton University to provide environmental science students with environmental research internships. This began after they installed osprey platforms right outside of Atlantic City, which caught the attention of the University.

In alliance with New Jersey Audubon, a conservation advocacy organization, they have built over 100 bird boxes along the expressway. They monitor these bird habitats and share the information that they record with New Jersey Fish and Wildlife.

Another project READI has been starting up is restoring salt marshes in Atlantic City in partnership with The Nature Conservancy. Salt marshes play a big role in the protection of marine wildlife, but New Jersey has been losing them at an alarming rate due to erosion and sea level rise. Fortunately, the 400 acres of salt marsh along the expressway are now being overseen by READI and The Nature Conservancy.

The READI has seen extreme growth in its 8 years of service, but project managers hope to expand and continue to grow the South Jersey initiative, finding a perfect union of transportation and the environment.

“What needs to happen in the future is that transportation has to go together with the environment and wildlife,” said Marchese.



Coordinators of the READI Program, SJTA John McDonnell and Nicholas Marchese. (Darleen Adamo)