



## January 2015 Sustainability Hero Athena Sarafides, LEED AP Co-Chair, Sustainable Jersey Green Design and Local Economies Task Forces

Born under a water sign, Athena Sarafides has always felt a strong pull toward clean water and preserving the earth's natural resources. At Hackensack Middle School, Athena presented a science project on tertiary water treatment and her career path became clear. "I admit to being a true idealist," Athena said, "I want to change the world, but my approach is to keep it simple by focusing on one issue or person at a time. Over the years I have seen this approach have a big impact."

As a change agent for sustainability in New Jersey for over 30 years, Athena is a hero, diligently working behind the scenes, adding her expertise and smart ideas to help initiate and develop programs. Athena was part of the core group that launched Sustainable Jersey in 2009. She also helped start the US Green Building Council's (USGBC) NJ chapter in 2004. Athena served on the USGBC board for three years in leadership positions.



### **Greece, Albright College and the University of Maine**

Athena's parents came to the United States from Greece in the 1950s. Athena speaks Greek and says that her cultural upbringing has had a big impact on her life. Being an only child, Athena has worked hard to fulfill her parent's hopes and dreams. She is the first person in her family to go to college. Environmental science and sustainability programs were hard to find when Athena was looking at schools, so she got a B.S. in Psychobiology from Albright College.

After college, Athena worked as an environmental educator at the Essex County Center for Environmental Studies. Although she enjoyed this work, she said, "I realized that I would make a greater impact with a larger audience if I could relate sustainability to economics. So I went back to school and got a Masters in Resource Economics from the University of Maine."

### **New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection**

Athena has worked at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) for nearly 29 years where she has served under seven different DEP commissioners and five New Jersey Governors. At the DEP, she has focused on issues such as sustainability, green design, climate, energy efficiency, renewable energy, waste reduction and recycling.

"Sustainable Jersey provides tremendous benefits to agencies like DEP and organizations in New Jersey because it puts all of the programs and resources in one place that is easy for people to access and use," Athena said. "For a long time I was making the rounds talking to communities about sustainability and I think people got stuck on the term 'sustainability.' Sustainable Jersey breaks sustainability down into 'People, Planet and Profit,' which helps people find an entry point for getting involved."

### **Sustainable Jersey Beginnings**

In 2006, Athena began promoting sustainable communities. Athena researched and developed fact sheets about the towns that were leaders, these included: Belmar, Lawrence Township, Highland Park Borough and Montclair.

While working towards this effort she met Meryl Frank, the Mayor of Highland Park, who was a huge advocate for sustainability. Mayor Frank wanted to provide guidance for towns to help them become more sustainable. Building on this effort, Mayor Frank convened a group of municipal leaders and experts in Highland Park on July 18, 2006. As a result of this meeting, a group was formed that became known as the Mayors' Committee for a Green Future which was a formal sub-committee of the NJ League of Municipalities.

The College of New Jersey and the New Jersey Sustainable State Institute were funded by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation to create a Sustainable Communities Leadership Network. The network was tasked with supporting municipal progress toward sustainable development by identifying best practices, facilitating peer to peer learning, developing metrics to judge performance and providing direct technical support and training.

In 2007, a Sustainable Communities Working Group was formed that consisted of approximately 150 New Jersey leaders, experts and organizations including government agencies, non-profit organizations and businesses. Athena chaired two of the thirteen task forces that were established to identify specific aspects of each sustainability category of the certification program. After more than a year of intensive work, the Sustainable Jersey program took final form and was launched in February of 2009.



Athena and her Jackson Township Team at the [DEP's Barnegat Bay Blitz](#).

“Sustainable Jersey provides a package of information and resources; it enables all municipalities and now schools to take the first step, which is just what we needed in the very beginning of this process,” Athena said. “If you do one action, it leads to more and more, and before you know it a whole town is working together, achieving certification and looking for the next thing to accomplish.”

### **Sustainable Jersey Task Forces**

“I always tell Sustainable Jersey task force members and those in the environmental field that they need to have a long-term perspective,” said Athena. “It takes time for the public to understand and adopt new ways. But, it’s important to be ready. Human nature takes time, but when people are ready to change, you must jump on it and have everything ready to go.”

As the Co-Chair of the Green Design Sustainable Jersey Task Force, Athena led the development of the first slate of actions that included: [Green Building Policy/Resolution](#), [Create a Green Development Checklist](#) and more. Athena also chaired the Waste Management Task Force in the early days where she led the development of actions including: [Recycling Depot](#) and [Materials Reuse Program](#).

### **NJ Sustainable Business Registry**

Athena now Co-Chairs the Sustainable Jersey Local Economies Task Force and she has set businesses as her new target. This task force is working on a major revision to the existing Green Business Recognition Action. The action will incorporate the [NJ Sustainable Business Registry](#), a new program that Athena has helped to create. The Registry is a component of a larger initiative between Rutgers’ New Jersey Small Business Development Centers (NJSBDC) and the DEP, with financial support from the USEPA Region 2 and assistance from other business and environmentally concerned partners and stakeholders. The registry is an Internet site where businesses that have implemented pollution prevention and sustainable business practices can register their achievements. The registry will give small businesses the resources and tools they need to become sustainable. Athena has been meeting with various stakeholders and green teams to share how the Registry works.

### **Fine Arts, Film Festival and Friends**

For fun, Athena has served on the organizing committee for the Princeton Environmental Film Festival. She also excels in the arts and has just completed an Associate Degree in Fine Arts at Mercer County Community College. Athena loves ceramics and has spent time ‘working on the wheel’ to ‘throw pots.’ Athena’s ceramic creations have been spread around to her family and friends. She enjoys travel and goes often to visit family in Greece. She likes to swim and practice yoga. New Jersey has definitely benefited from Athena’s hard work and uncompromising vision for a better, more sustainable world!