



June 2014 Sustainability Hero Robert Bzik, P.P., AICP, Director of Planning, Somerset County

Robert Bzik is a true New Jersey boy. He has lived in beautiful Somerset County nearly all of his life, spending time in the rural, suburban and urban areas of the County. As the only child of parents that worked in the defense industry, he is a proud member of the Woodstock generation and has always pursued work that allows him to influence positive community change.

Bob graduated from Seton Hall University, with a BA in Economics. He then took some planning classes at the progressive New School in New York City before graduating from Rutgers University with a Masters in City and Regional Planning in 1974.

Bob joined the [Somerset County Planning Board](#) in 1981, after working briefly outside of New Jersey, and has been with the County for nearly 34 years; with 24 years as the director. He quickly rose through the ranks from principal planner, supervising planner, chief of strategic planning and became director during the height of the County's building boom. He was instrumental in setting up many of the County Planning Board's cutting edge initiatives including the Economic Development Incentive Program and the Municipal Planning Partnership Program in the 1990's.



Bob's leadership has helped the Planning Board receive over two dozen national and state awards and it is now recognized as one of the most progressive and successful Board in New Jersey. Bob is a strong advocate and supporter of state and regional planning and helped guide the County through three rounds of cross acceptance, numerous municipal center designations and the first tri-municipal Regional Center Plan Endorsement.

Sustainable Jersey and the Somerset County Green Team Leadership Initiative

Bob said that the term "sustainability" was rather new in planning circles when he started his career. 'Performance zoning,' 'growth management,' 'smart growth' and 'new urbanism' are words that were more commonly used. Regardless of terminology, Bob has always valued sustainability and the concept that our environment, economy and social issues are interconnected.

Bob was an active board member of the former Municipal Land Use Center (now the Sustainability Institute at The College of New Jersey), and in this position he helped launch Sustainable Jersey in 2009. He is a strong supporter of municipalities in Somerset County that are pursuing Sustainable Jersey certification. He started the Sustainable Jersey Somerset County Green Team Leadership group which is bringing towns together to share successes and opportunities for collaboration with the County. He is hoping County staff can also bring the non-profit community together as yet another resource for Green Teams. Currently, 18 out of a total of 21 municipalities in Somerset County are participating in Sustainable Jersey.

In 2013, Hillsborough and Somerset County were awarded a Sustainable Jersey Small Grant that allowed the [Somerset County Energy Council](#), the first Freeholder Board-created energy council in the state, to continue its cutting-edge work, with a county energy audit program that is exploring the feasibility of a countywide Energy Saving Investment Program (ESIP) for municipalities and school boards. The grant allowed Somerset County to pilot an ESIP aggregation program that will serve as a model for other communities. The goal of the grant was to eliminate the tremendous amount of energy wasted in public buildings while reducing costs.

Bob has held many offices, including president and executive committee member of the NJ County Planners Association, chair of the NJTPA Regional Technical Advisory Committee, member of the NJ Scenic Byway Committee, participant in development of NJ Transit's Transit Oriented Handbook, member of the State of New Jersey Aviation Commission and others. He also strengthened the relationships and partnerships between the County Planning Board and the non-profit community, particularly the Regional Plan Association, NJ Future, PLANSMART, Urban Land Institute, NJ Conservation Foundation, Duke Farms and others by serving on many of their policy committees and supporting smart growth initiatives.

Somerset County Challenges and Opportunities

Flooding has always been a part of the County's history, but the severity and frequency of storms in 1999, 2007, 2011 and 2012 has placed more emphasis on steering development away from flood prone areas with riparian protection strategies, innovative stormwater management practices and resiliency with the County Planning Board taking on a larger role in hazard mitigation.



During the last 24 years under Bob's leadership, the County's aggressive open space and farmland preservation efforts, coupled with wastewater planning by the County Planning Board, has started to lock in the County's growth pattern and shifted the agenda to one of smart growth initiatives designed to limit sprawl by promoting targeted development and redevelopment, transit-oriented development and downtown revitalization.

Bob said, "For Somerset County, the past focused primarily around the fight against the altering of the suburban landscape. The issues ahead will deal with land stewardship, park and trail development, adaptive reuse, repositioning aging corporate facilities, downtown revitalization, resiliency and sustainable land practices and economic development." He added, "the 21 Somerset County towns, the business community and Somerset County must work together to address the challenge for future generations of maintaining the special qualities of the County while remaining economically competitive."

Advice for Green Teams

In addition to linking into countywide sustainability efforts like [Sustainable Somerset](#), Bob recommends that Sustainable Jersey Green Teams reach out to their municipal governing body to find out about current local planning actions that are already being done that qualify for points in the Sustainable Jersey certification program. Green teams should also connect with the locally appointed Boards and Commissions to work collaboratively on sustainability issues since the end goals of both groups are often the same. Bob stresses the importance of engaging with young people saying that it will be the next generation of leaders that will carry the sustainability agenda even further and be the agents of change.

Cycling, Field Spaniels, and CCR

Bob is an avid cyclist. He also enjoys sailing and traveling with his wife and two Field Spaniels named Murphy and Cooper. He has a passion for the arts, both visual and performance based, and is a big supporter of the Somerville Cultural Arts District. The Somerville Arts Initiative is a coalition of business leaders, local, regional and state government, arts organizations, and interested individuals that are working together to infuse the arts into life in downtown Somerville and using the arts as a tool to build economic growth, and cultural diversity. He speaks highly of the [Arts on Division](#) and the [Brook Arts Center](#) which is cultivating the arts in Somerset County by creating a performance arts center in Bound Brook. In his free time, Bob enjoys listening to music of the 1960s; favorite bands include Credence Clearwater Revival, Crosby Stills Nash and Young and The Turtles.

Some of the greatest challenges Bob has faced involve moving large infrastructure projects forward like reactivating passenger service on the West Trenton line, which would expand travel options for South County residents and improve regional connectivity. But he also celebrates the many planning successes which outweigh the disappointments. Bob

said, "My greatest pride is my staff and the team spirit embodied in the Planning Board's work and my day-to day interaction with them."

Bob is retiring from the Somerset County Planning Board at the end of this month. He has truly made a difference through his forward thinking, team building, fairness and staff encouragement and a never-ending dedication to improve the quality of life in Somerset County and the advancement of the planning profession. It will be interesting to see what he will do next; Bob says that traveling around the East Coast is first up on his new to-do list!