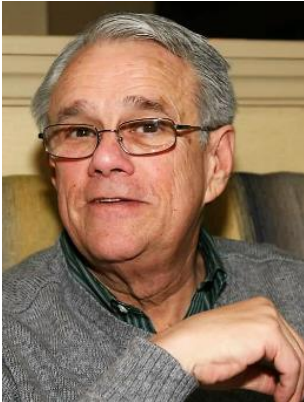


# MAY 2016 SUSTAINABILITY HERO



## JOHN RIGGS Director of Planning and Environmental Protection, Monroe Township

John Riggs is the Director of Planning and Environmental Protection for Monroe Township, in Middlesex County, New Jersey. John's commitment to sustainability is evident from his widespread community involvement. He serves as the Chair of the [Environmental Commission](#) and is a Planning Board member, Open Space coordinator, Conservation officer, [Cultural Arts Commissioner](#) and County Agricultural Board Member. He is also a former Monroe Councilman serving more than 17 years.

**From open space to water quality:** John has led the planning process for Monroe Township's acquisition of open space properties, which has been a significant and widely successful effort. As Chair of the Environmental Commission, John has worked tirelessly on stream clean-ups and an annual green fair. He was just awarded a 2016 Environmental Stewardship award from [Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association](#). John's work includes trail and roadway network development, an Environmental Resource Inventory, organizing Monroe's Community Garden, serving as the municipal representative to the Manalapan Brook Storm Water Study Commission and categorizing the 7,500 acres of Monroe Township public lands. He helped develop a unique Buffer Ordinance that requires berms and landscaped buffers around all development. John also finds time to share information regularly with the community through social media; check out his posts on the [Monroe Township Environmental Commission Facebook page](#).

**Monroe Township achieves Sustainable Jersey certification:** The Monroe Township Green Team Advisory Committee operates as a subcommittee of the Environmental Commission and works in association with the Township Council, Friends of the Library, Shade Tree Commission and school district. Under John's leadership, Monroe Township achieved Sustainable Jersey certification in 2014.

The Township earned points for its many community outreach programs, yearly green fair, the buildings' energy audit, farmland preservation, the school district's garden program, floodplain management, potable water conservation, the Manalapan Lake restoration and trout stocking program, a bicycle and pedestrian planning study, and more.

The Township's Shade Tree Commission played an important role in the certification process, since its annual tree planting and maintenance program for trees along municipal roadways, the Township's Community Forestry Plan, Tree Cover Goal and Tree Protection Ordinance were all instrumental actions in the Township's certification process. Review all of the actions that Monroe Township has accomplished; read the certification report: [Monroe Township \(Middlesex County\) Certification Report](#).



**Farmland and Open Space Preservation:** For more than 20 years, Monroe Township has been at the forefront of farmland and open space preservation. John has led the planning for the acquisition of open space properties, which he said has been rewarding but also a major undertaking. With 7,246 acres of Open Space, the Township has made good progress towards its goal of ensuring that 50 percent of the land remains undeveloped. A focus is to make sure that much of the preserved lands continue to be wooded areas.



More than 374 acres of the 7,246-acre total is Township parklands. To purchase land for preservation, the Township uses its Open Space Trust Fund, which was authorized by the voters and established through a local Open Space Tax. Using the Trust Fund, the Township has been able to purchase open space and preserve more than 1,300 acres of farmland. Monroe regularly works with Middlesex County and the State of New Jersey on open space purchases, sharing the cost and work that goes into the preservation of land. He anticipates adding 500 acres of open space this year.

Work has started on a 68.8-acre park at Rocky Brook Estates near the border with East Windsor and Millstone. The park will include 7,200 linear feet of walking trails and a temporary vernal pool of water that is often home to amphibians and insects. The land was donated from the developer of the Rocky Brook Estates. Along with the land, Pulte Homes will build more than one mile of natural trails and establish a vernal pool with signs that will inform visitors how the pool works and why it is important to the area. A 40-acre site that connects James Monroe Park to Federal Road was acquired and the Environmental Commission applied for a grant to construct the Town's first designated equestrian trails on the property. John is excited to get the equestrian trails added to the network.

**Monroe Township Community Garden:** John is proud of the [Monroe Township Community Garden](#) that was made possible by the work of the former Mayor Richard Pucci, the Township Council, the Monroe Township Environmental Commission and a group of dedicated residents. The 12-acre community garden is the biggest in Middlesex County.



The garden site was donated to the Township for open space by Todd Ochsner, a life-long Township resident. In addition to the community garden, John said there are long-range plans for the park that include a butterfly garden, children's park, environmental pavilion and a location for outdoor cultural events. While the Township owns the park, the garden is administered by the [Friends of the Monroe Township Community Garden](#). The first phase of the community garden, designed with the assistance of the [Land Conservancy of New Jersey](#), is comprised of 96 ten-foot by ten-foot garden plots, all of which were rented for \$30 a year by residents on a first come, first-serve basis. This year the garden is offering an additional 76 plots that have nearly sold out.

**Environmental Resources Inventory (ERI):** John led the final development of the 2006 ERI for Monroe Township. In April 2016, Monroe Township received a \$20,000 Sustainable Jersey Small Grant to create an updated ERI. John's goal is to clearly map out important environmental, historic, civic and cultural resources so it can be easily and effectively referred to by the Environmental Commission when conducting site plan reviews and for use by other boards and commissions. He plans to work with the high school to produce a short video highlighting the town's environmental footprint.

**Township and school district collaboration:** John began his public service in Monroe as a PTA executive board member, therefore it has been natural for him to work closely with the school district in his municipal role. An example of this collaboration is the green fair. For six years, the Monroe green fair was held at Oak Tree School which is designed to LEED standards. In 2016, the fair is being moved to Monroe High School, to accommodate the need for more exhibit space.

Each school in the Monroe Township School District currently has a garden program. These programs have received support (materials, labor, exposure and advice) from the Township Environmental Commission, Rutgers' Master Gardeners Program, and Gasko's Nursery. This support has helped to grow the individual programs into a larger framework for gardening in the district. The high school Environmental Action Club works closely with the Environmental Commission and the club's advisory group attends the monthly meetings and are active participants in the annual green fair.

**Monroe Township Green Fair and Green Tips Book:** The Monroe Green Fair is a popular event with over 2,000 people attending each year. John said, "From the public school groups to representatives from Monroe's expansive adult communities, the goal of the green fair is to engage and educate residents to go green, save money and increase the quality of life in Monroe." As part of the green fair, [Monroe Township's Green Tips Book](#) is published annually in cooperation with the Natural Resources Committee of the [League of Women Voters of Monroe Township](#). It includes information on recycling, hazardous waste removal, energy efficiency tips, anti-pollution initiatives, health and wellness activities, locally grown food and general web resources.

**Why is sustainability important:** "Sometimes environmentalists can be viewed as road blocks. I like sustainability because it recognizes that we all need a place to live, work and learn, but these places need to be developed in an environmentally sensitive manner so that they can be enjoyed in the future. Rather than being a roadblock, sustainable planning helps guide us to move forward by considering the big picture. That is why the Sustainable Jersey program works so well. You can choose from the three pillars of sustainability to find the certification actions that fit your community," John said.

**Education that led to his current position:** John attended Trenton Jr. College and was pursuing a degree in electrical engineering. But, thanks in part to a tough calculus professor that failed everyone in his class, John switched his major to marketing. He then went on to study Business Administration and Marketing at Rider University.

**What you may not know about John:** John grew up in Washington, Pennsylvania and he and his sister and brother were primarily raised by his grandparents and mother. John remembers when he got out of line, his grandfather had him walk a half-a-mile to the weeping willow tree down the block to bring back a branch that was used to administer his punishment. John said the anticipation walk to the tree and back was the worst part and he quickly learned to stay in line.

After John graduated from Washington High School, he was focused on leaving his small town. He jumped at the chance to move in with an aunt in Trenton where he found a job and was able to eventually attend college. John's first career was in toys; he was a manufacturing representative for a toy company and owned his own business as well. John eventually moved to Monroe and has lived there for the past 44 years.

John has two children and two grandchildren. His daughter, Marci Lyn Hood, and granddaughter, Alexandra, live in Scottsdale, Arizona and his son, Keith Ryan, and grandson, Isaiah, live in Santé Fe, New Mexico. In his free time John likes to collect antiques and he enjoys working with flowers and landscaping. His favorite flower is the New Guinea impatiens and his favorite tree is a magnolia tree.