

# Sustainability Hero



January 2023

## Michele Lee

Mayor, Borough of High Bridge (Hunterdon County)

Green team chair is not a traditional committee position that leads to mayor, but [High Bridge Borough](#) Mayor Michele Lee served on the [High Bridge Green Team](#) and [Environmental Commission](#) before she was elected to mayor in 2019. Now re-elected for a second term, Mayor Lee is demonstrating that sustainability is good government.

As chair of the High Bridge Green Team, Lee led her team to achieve Sustainable Jersey certification. The High Bridge Green Team is fortunate to have several active and talented members including Mia Baldwin, Jeanie Baker, Linda DeMarzo, Pia Kristjansen and Councilwoman Lynn Hughes, the Borough Council Liaison to the Green Team. The High Bridge Green Team works in partnership with its schools and both the High Bridge Elementary School and High Bridge Middle School are certified with [Sustainable Jersey for Schools](#). Coleen Conroy, the middle school secretary, leads this work with the school district.

Mayor Lee begins her second term in office in January 2023. She stepped into the leadership role in a difficult time as the COVID-19 pandemic became the focus in 2020. Mayor Lee distinguished herself as a strong and caring leader when she made decisions about how to keep her residents safe while boosting public morale and dealing with everyone's inevitable frustrations.

Mayor Lee explained, "It's hard to know where to begin to make an impact. The 2.4 square miles of High Bridge Borough is perfect for me as a mayor and someone who cares about the environment. I can take action and see results. I might not be able to solve the world's problems, but I am working hard to make positive improvements in my town."

She praises the hard work of High Bridge Borough employees and volunteers, acknowledging that the progress being made in the borough would not be possible without them. She said, "Between the grant funds, the municipal staff, the council and volunteers, High Bridge has people who truly care about our community and work hard to make it great."



**High Bridge Borough - Sustainable Jersey Certified:** In 2010, the High Bridge Borough Council passed the resolution that led to the formation of the High Bridge Green Team. Since then, under the umbrella of the High Bridge Environmental Commission, the team has developed initiatives to promote environmental awareness, sustainability and education among residents of all ages. The High Bridge Green Team has gained and maintained Sustainable Jersey bronze

certification since 2018. For more information on the sustainability program read the [2021 Sustainable Jersey Certification Report of High Bridge Borough](#). Mayor Lee said, “Sustainable Jersey is a valuable organization. As a green team volunteer, I used the hundreds of [sustainability actions](#) to give us ideas as to what we could do to become greener and now as an elected official, I see the big picture benefits from the policy guidance and funding that makes sustainability at the local level possible.” The High Bridge Environmental Commission updates the community through its [Facebook page](#) and in a comprehensive newsletter called [The Bridge](#).



**The High Bridge Borough Commons Connector:** In December 2022, Mayor Lee cut a red ribbon to welcome the community to the High Bridge Borough Commons Connector—a new pathway connecting Commons Park with Main Street. This project was supported with a \$20,000 [Sustainable Jersey grant](#)

funded by the PSEG Foundation. In addition to encouraging residents and visitors to support local businesses, the project promotes walkability and will control erosion and stormwater with its permeable stairway. The High Bridge Borough Department of Public Works and local business Golden Wolf Landscape & Design LLC built the project. At the event, information on the importance of native plants was provided, highlighting the Borough’s efforts to support pollinators.

“I am beyond thrilled about the Commons Connector project,” said Mayor Lee. “This is the second grant our green team has received through Sustainable Jersey to beautify our Commons Park, which serves as the trailhead to the Columbia Trail and is enjoyed by many residents and visitors throughout the year. With this project we are taking another step forward in improving the direct access to Main Street from the Commons by further clearing the area, creating a stairway and including effective signage to direct people to our wonderful shops and restaurants.” The idea for this project was included in the [2020 High Bridge Borough Open Space & Recreation Plan](#) that articulates the municipality’s vision for open space and recreation.

**High Bridge Borough's South Branch of the Raritan River Reforestation Project:** In January 2019, the High Bridge Green Team was awarded a Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grant. High Bridge Borough volunteers planted and protected 128 native trees and shrubs including American Sycamore, Serviceberry, Arrowwood and Chokeberry. The grant funding was used to purchase the tree saplings and protective tubes installed by the volunteers. The planting was done at the South Branch Reservation on Arch Street because many of the area’s maturing trees had succumb to beaver damage. Replacing shade trees on the riverbank not only helped to stabilize the soil but also keeps water temperatures at levels safe for aquatic life. The [Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grant and Technical Assistance Program](#) is a partnership between [The Nature Conservancy](#), [The Watershed Institute](#) and Sustainable Jersey.



**School Partnership for Educational Sustainability:** The High Bridge Borough Environmental Commission sponsors annual sustainability-focused learning opportunities with the High Bridge School District. Earth Day assemblies are presented at Borough’s Elementary and Middle Schools. A “day of caring” brings students from the school environmental clubs and members of the environmental commission to work side by side to beautify the Commons Park. Volunteers weed, pick up litter and plant flowers. The environmental commission and the school environmental clubs also participate in an annual Raritan River [Stream Monitoring Program](#) run by [Raritan Headwaters](#). Students conduct water tests, classify macro-invertebrates and record data.

**Safe Routes to School Grant and Award:** High Bridge Borough received a federal grant through the Safe Routes to School program to construct pedestrian safety improvements. The goal of the project is to create a safe pedestrian corridor to the Borough's Elementary and Middle Schools and to help create pedestrian connectivity. [goHunterdon](#) facilitates [Safe Routes to School](#) programming in Hunterdon County, offering a comprehensive program of education and encouragement.



In 2022, High Bridge Middle School, Elementary School and the Borough were recognized for their Safe Routes to School projects. The High Bridge Green Team works with the High Bridge School District Green Team on the Safe Routes to School program with support from the Borough Police. The group sponsored 14 Walk to School Events. The first event was on International Walk to School Day, in addition to one walk held every month and five walk days held during Earth Week. High Bridge Borough received 10 Sustainable Jersey certification points for this work by completing the action: [Safe Routes to School](#).

**High Bridge Clean Ups:** The High Bridge Environmental Commission has a long-standing relationship with Raritan Headwaters particularly with the annual Stream Clean-up. The Borough has participated in a Spring clean-up for the past 32 years. In 2021, 52 participants collected over 500 plastic bottles, glass bottles and aluminum cans. In 2019, 14 tons of trash, 10,000 plastic bottles and 3,000 plastic bags were cleaned up. Mayor Lee said, "Although there is plenty to clean up, each year we are seeing less trash in our stream." In 2021, residents helped restore the borough's historical mid-18th century farm, Springside Farm. Over three educational community workdays, volunteers were educated on invasive plant species and cleared over 4,000 square feet of overgrown vegetation. High Bridge Borough achieved 15 Sustainable Jersey certification points with this work by completing the action: [Community Education and Outreach](#).



**Mayors' Monarch Pledge:** In 2020, 2021 and 2022, Mayor Lee has signed the [National Wildlife Federation's Mayors' Monarch Pledge](#). As part of this pledge, the borough works to preserve milkweed in High Bridge to provide habitat for Monarchs and Monarch caterpillars. Public Works staff learn to properly identify and locate milkweed colonies and make sure these areas are not mowed. Each year the milkweed seed pods are collected and made into informational seed packets. Over 100 packets were distributed to attendees at the Annual September Community Day. In Spring 2019, areas adjacent to three of the largest colonies were tarped in the spring to rid them of invasive species and seeded in fall 2020 with a pollinator seed mix to add nectar producing plants to the sites and to increase biodiversity. Clinton Township Councilwoman Amy Brighton Switlyk and High Bridge residents Kim Farrier, Erica Betty McCarthy and Angela Jade created Monarch Way signs that were hung along the Monarch Habitat Conservation site on Nassau Road.



**Education & Experience:** After high school, Lee was determined to work in New York City and began her career as a network engineer at American Express. She later moved on to become a stockbroker and Vice President for Sands Brothers in New York for eight years. For the last 18 years, Lee has worked at Avantax Planning Partners. Lee studied business administration and management at Farleigh Dickinson University and Manhattan College.

**More About Mayor Lee:** Born and raised in Berkeley Heights, Mayor Lee has lived most of her life in New Jersey with a brief time in Arizona. She is newly married to husband Rick who she met when he served as the High Bridge Director of Public Works. In her free time, Mayor Lee enjoys vacations in Ocean City, Maryland, playing guitar and listening to the Black Crowes, Spoon or any new music her 20-year-old son Gabriel plays for her.