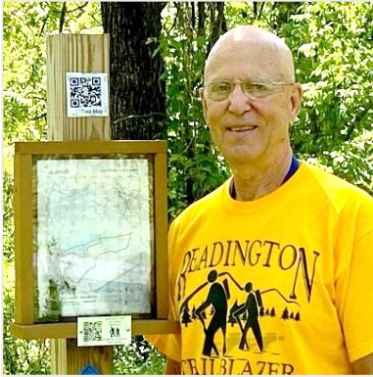


SUSTAINABILITY HERO

September 2020



Robert Becker

Readington Township Environmental
Commission (Hunterdon County)

For the past 13 years, Robert Becker has been actively engaged in sustainability efforts in Hunterdon County. As a member of the [Readington Township Environmental Commission](#), Robert has led the township's application and successful achievement of Sustainable Jersey silver-level certification, while serving as a steward of the community's natural environment. Readington is one of only two municipalities to achieve silver-level certification in Hunterdon County. Robert also serves on the [Hunterdon County Shade Tree Commission](#), the [Hunterdon County Solid Waste Advisory Board](#), the [Hunterdon Land Trust](#) Land Steward and Acquisition Committee and the [Raritan Headwaters Association](#) Land Stewardship Committee.

Growing up in Duluth, Minnesota, Robert developed a connection to the lakes, streams and woods around him; it is a passion he has not outgrown. When he retired in 2007, he hoped to repurpose his systems management skills and contribute to environmental efforts. As a first step, Robert completed certification with the [Rutgers Environment Stewards Program](#). For his project, he prepared trail condition reports for ten trails in Hunterdon County. In 2009, he was appointed to the Readington Township Open Space Advisory Board and secured a \$10,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation for a project that upgraded an old woodland property to a "Learning Woods" in the township's Three Bridges section. He also obtained a \$5,000 grant for the Lazy Brook Trail which was used for trail development, maps, information kiosks and benches. In 2020, Robert received another \$10,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation for a meadow inventory and management plan.

What's his motivation? Robert said, "I hope to leave my corner of the world a better place for future generations to enjoy. I want to protect and sustain the woods that I love, just as Mother Earth intended them to be."

Sustainable Jersey Certification: Setting his expectations high, Robert said he uses a large spreadsheet to keep track of the action items assigned to the Township's Committees and Boards. "Sustainable Jersey presents a blueprint and benchmarking to help New Jersey municipalities succeed. Any town that is not participating is missing an important opportunity," he emphasized. Robert is quick to promote his partners, he said, "The sustainability work in Readington is a community effort. The certification actions are done by many. I am fortunate to be the scribe, to listen and interpret the good work of my fellow residents in completing the Sustainable Jersey actions. The community deserves the credit."

In Readington Township, the Environmental Commission serves as the Sustainable Jersey green team. In February, 2019, the Township Committee expanded the Environmental Commission to include



three new subcommittees: 1) Tree Advisory, 2) Wildlife Advisory and 3) Water/Streams Advisory. Robert credits the Township Committee for elevating the importance of these programs, he said, “The addition of these three subcommittees added focus to our approach to the certification actions and enabled us to expand the number of actions we completed for certification.” Members of the environmental committee include representatives of the Township Committee, Open Space Advisory Board and Planning Board.

To read about the completed certification actions, review the [2019 Readington Township Sustainable Jersey Certification Report](#). Progress has continued since this application; this year, the township passed an ordinance that prohibits restaurants and businesses from providing single-use plastic bags, foam containers or plastic straws to customers. The ordinance will be in effect in 2021. The Environmental Committee is also partnering with the Readington Township School District, as all four of the schools have achieved [Sustainable Jersey for Schools](#) certification.

Tree Recovery Program: Under the direction of the Environmental Committee’s Tree Advisory Subcommittee, a number of Sustainable Jersey’s actions in the Natural Resources category were achieved including: [Natural Resources Inventory](#); [Open Space Plans](#); [Community Forestry Management Plan and New Jersey Urban and Community Forestry Program Accreditation](#); [Tree Hazard Inventory](#); [Tree Planting Programs](#) and more. Readington Township participates in the New Jersey Tree Recovery Campaign and has distributed nearly 9,000 trees to township residents since 2015. Each year 300 trees are also provided to third grade elementary school students.



For the past five years, Robert has secured five [Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grants](#); the township collaborates with the Raritan Headwaters Association to apply. The Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grant and Technical Assistance Program is a partnership between The Nature Conservancy, The Watershed Institute and Sustainable Jersey. Working with Raritan Headwaters Association and AmeriCorp, 300 trees were planted on Pleasant Run flood plain and 500 trees were planted the Holland Brook riparian zone. Both Pleasant Run and Holland Brook are tributaries of the South Branch of the Raritan River.

Farmland Preservation: Readington Township has approximately 4,000 acres of preserved open space and close to 5,000 acres of preserved farmland. “Our community has long recognized that the preservation of open spaces provides essential benefits to residents,” said Robert. “The land contributes to our rural character and provides important wildlife habitat and vital groundwater recharge areas,” he added. Readington presently has approximately 72 preserved farms and received an award in 2013 from the [New Jersey State Agriculture Development Committee](#) for preserving the most farms under the State’s Planning Incentive Program. For an overview of this work, review the [Readington Township Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan](#) and the [Open Space Element Readington Township Master Plan](#).

Monthly Trail Hikes: Readington Township has 15 trailheads and over 70 miles of trails, an impressive system that is detailed on the [Hiking and Equestrian Trails Map](#). The Township Open Space Advisory Board offers a monthly hike on the trails. Robert noted that participation has increased to about 30 people per hike, he said, “In addition to good exercise, the hikes help make the public aware of the trail network and they better understand the Township’s purpose in farmland and open space preservation.”



Ash Tree Survey and Mitigation: In 2016, members of the Open Space Board became aware of the threat of the emerald ash borer on the ash tree population in Readington Township. Robert trained with the [New Jersey Woodland Stewards Program](#), an educational program of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, and initiated a project to assess the impact of the emerald ash borer on Readington Township street trees. In 2018, he obtained funding for the treatment of 120 ash trees and managed a street tree inventory of 14,000 trees on 155 miles of streets. He ran the treatment program from contract preparation to program review.

Before Robert's work, the township had programs for tree removal and other defensive programs, but never budgeted for proactive tree management programs. With guidance from the New Jersey Community Forestry Department, a presentation was made to the Township Committee for funding. The Township Committee now has a formal budget for tree activity. Students from Raritan Valley Community College's Environmental Studies program were hired to do an all species street tree inventory, procure tree management software and begin injection treatment of 100 ash trees that were selected to be saved based on size and value to the neighborhood. In 2019, 50 additional trees were treated. You can review the [Readington Township Tree Plotter Inventory](#). Before he focused on ash tree protection, Robert obtained a grant in 2014 to develop the first Readington Community Forestry Management Plan. To this day, the Township has maintained its approval status in accordance with the New Jersey Shade Tree and Community Forestry requirements.

Community Well Testing Program and Water Conservation Outreach: For over 20 years, the Raritan Headwaters Association and Readington Township have maintained a close partnership. The Environmental Commission recruits participants for the Raritan Headwaters Association stream cleanups and holds community events to support the Raritan Headwaters Association's [Community Well Test Program](#). Over 80 percent of the households in the region depend on private wells for drinking water, so regular testing is important. The data obtained informs the homeowners and provides critical data to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. The wells are tested for coliform bacteria, nitrate, lead and more. Robert said, "As residents pick-up the testing kits, Environmental Commission members have a chance to share program information and discuss the projects we are working on." The Environmental Commission also does water conservation community outreach events including the Readington School District Wet Festival in Pickell Park and a rain barrel workshop at Cushetunk Nature Preserve.

Supporting Animals in the Community: In 2015, because the high deer population became a problem for the township, two deer enclosure areas were constructed to demonstrate the impact of deer on the ecology. In 2019, the Wildlife Advisory Subcommittee of the Environmental Commission was created to manage the relationship of the Township to its nonhuman inhabitants. The subcommittee completed two Sustainable Jersey actions: 1) [Pledge Supporting NJ Wildlife Action Plan](#) and 2) the [Wildlife Interaction Plan](#).

A [Deer Population Study](#), conducted for the township by Raritan Valley Community College, indicated that the deer population of 130 deer per square mile, was far in excess of the 10 deer per square mile sustainable standard. With increases in vehicle damage, lime disease and other factors, the Wildlife Advisory Subcommittee made changes in the deer hunting program, changing emphasis from recreational hunting to managed hunting. Robert said, "Our future forest will not exist unless the deer population is brought under control. The action to reduce the deer herd is another example of Readington Township's commitment to sustain our forests and public health." The township supports animals in the community with the Hillcrest Dog Park, bat houses and a butterfly and pollinator garden at Cornhusker Park for bee sustainability. Read the [Readington Township Pledge Supporting NJ Wildlife Action Plan](#).

More About Robert: Robert has a BA in Chemistry/Pre-Med from Ohio Wesleyan University and an MBA from Central Michigan University. He met his wife Pamela in college; she is an accomplished [artist](#), with a long list of exhibitions, pieces in public collections and awards. For 25 years, they have lived in Readington Township; they have two children and two grandchildren. Robert is an avid cyclist. He is a member of the [Western Jersey Wheelmen](#), a recreational bicycle club. He leads rides through Hunterdon County, which provide him another opportunity to share the beauty of the community he loves.

