

May 2025



## Donna Goggin Patel

**Chair, Summit Environmental Commission**  
Union County, New Jersey

Donna Goggin Patel is a driving force behind environmental progress in the [City of Summit](#). As chair of the [Summit Environmental Commission](#) for the past six years, she brings a sharp legal mind, strong organizational skills, and an unwavering commitment to sustainability. A former securities litigator, Donna now channels her energy into raising her two children and leading green initiatives that benefit the entire community.

Donna works closely with city officials, advisory committees, and local environmental organizations to spearhead initiatives such as the Tiny Forest, annual Earth Day clean-ups, the Community Energy Plan, and the Summit's Sustainable Jersey certification—an effort in which the city has excelled, earning [Sustainability Champion](#) honors six times in the medium population category. Donna also chairs the Green Schools Committee and is a passionate advocate for climate action, making her a sustainability leader in Union County. “Sustainability is crucial to our survival on the planet,” she said, and through her efforts, Summit is making meaningful progress every day.

Currently certified at the silver level with Sustainable Jersey, the City of Summit is preparing its 2025 recertification application. To support sustainability projects over the years, Summit has received \$35,887 in grants from the [Sustainable Jersey Grants Program](#). To learn more about recent actions, explore the [2024 City of Summit Certification Report](#).

## Summit's Tiny Forest

Donna has played a critical role in the creation and promotion of [Summit's Tiny Forest](#)—one of the first of its kind in New Jersey. Located behind the Summit Community Center, this 11,000-square-foot plot was transformed from a grassy field into a thriving native ecosystem using the Miyawaki Method, a reforestation technique developed by Dr. Akira Miyawaki and popularized globally by Shubhendu Sharma. In 2021, the Summit Environmental Commission secured a grant from the New Jersey American Water Environmental Grant Program to launch this innovative project, which now features over 700 plantings representing more than 55 species of native trees, shrubs, and bushes. Designed to become self-sustaining within a few years and to mature into a full forest within 20 to 30 years, the Tiny Forest provides both ecological and educational value in the heart of Summit.

Centrally located near downtown, the Summit Community Center offers high visibility and accessibility for the Tiny Forest, making it a model of how limited green space in urban areas can be creatively preserved and restored. Educational signage was installed in 2024 to help residents and visitors learn more about biodiversity and the many benefits of native plants.



Thanks to its uniqueness and success, the Tiny Forest has attracted national and international interest. Donna frequently gives tours and takes calls from individuals and organizations eager to replicate the project, including inquiries from Sweden, Iowa, Texas, and New York.

From 2021 through 2025, Donna and other Environmental Commission members led tours and shared insights with officials and environmental groups from across New Jersey. They also engaged with academic institutions such as Seton Hall University and Kean University, and organizations like the Rahway River Watershed Association, the Great Swamp Watershed Association, and Groundwork Elizabeth. Two public Tiny Forest tours led by Donna are scheduled for June 14, 2025, through the [Rahway River Watershed Association](#). To learn more and register, visit [Tiny Forest Tour](#). The Tiny Forest has not only become a local treasure but a beacon of environmental innovation, with Summit Mayor Elizabeth Fagan among its volunteers and champions.

## Native Seed Library

Donna is actively involved in the Native Seed Library, a collaborative project that brings local biodiversity directly into the hands of Summit residents. Launched in 2023 by the [Summit Free Public Library](#), the seed library offers free native plant seeds to the public, creatively housed in a repurposed card catalog case. Each drawer is organized by species, with clearly labeled packets that include planting instructions and growing conditions. Community members are invited to take up to three seed packets per visit, making it easy for gardeners of all experience levels to participate in restoring native habitats at home.



Popular selections include species like Foxglove Beardtongue, Sweet Joe Pye Weed, and Yellow Giant Hyssop, all sourced from a New Jersey-based native plant nursery. In an exciting development, Environmental Commission member Mimi Zukoff, who also helps manage the Summit Tiny Forest, recognized that the Tiny Forest itself could serve as a sustainable seed source. With guidance from native seed expert Jessica Miller of the Essex County Chapter of the [NJ Native Plant Society](#), two Environmental Commission members and the library's Executive Director were trained in seed collection and preparation techniques during the summer of 2023.

That fall, approximately 5% of the native flowering seeds from the Tiny Forest were harvested and delivered to the library. With the help of library-recruited volunteers, the seeds were carefully cleaned, sorted, and packaged, becoming available for public distribution in winter 2024. Additional seed harvesting and restocking in summer and fall 2024 ensures continued availability through 2025.

To promote a self-sustaining cycle, the community is encouraged to collect seeds from the native plants they grow and return them to the library, helping to grow this shared resource over time. In just its first two years, the Native Seed Library has distributed approximately 850 seed packets, sparking enthusiasm for native planting and deepening the community's connection to local ecology.

## Stuffed Animal Recycling with Helpsy

Donna helped lead a creative recycling initiative in partnership with Summit Public Schools and the textile recycling company [Helpsy](#). In a coordinated effort with all five of Summit's elementary schools, families discarded more than 1,000 stuffed animals that were then repurposed through Helpsy's textile recycling program. The drive was not only a success in keeping difficult to dispose of items out of the waste stream; it also served as an educational opportunity, raising awareness among families about Helpsy's broader mission and local drop-off options.



"Our collection drive was a great way to keep unwanted stuffed animals out of the waste stream," said Donna. "This is especially true as stuffed animals are hard to dispose of because thrift stores and The Summit Free Market do not accept them. This drive also helped promote the bins, located at the Summit Transfer Station, to Union County residents. They can bring clothing, shoes, backpacks, and stuffed animals, regardless of condition, to the Helpsy bins."

Helpsy is a certified B Corporation dedicated to reducing textile waste by reusing or recycling 95% of collected materials. Higher-quality items are resold to thrift stores and secondhand markets, while lower-grade textiles are transformed into industrial rags, insulation, or stuffing. In partnership with Union County, the City of Summit is now participating in a countywide Helpsy textile recycling program. Helpsy received the [2024 Sustainable Business Leadership Award](#) from Sustainable Jersey.

## Book Recycling with BookSmiles

The City of Summit also has an active [Recycling Advisory Committee \(RAC\)](#), who came up with a new solution to a growing problem at Summit's Book Barn, located at the [Transfer Center](#). "We were struggling to keep up with the volume of donated books at the Book Barn," Donna explained. "We were heartbroken to see excess books, many still in great condition, being thrown away and incinerated." To address the issue, RAC partnered with [BookSmiles](#), a New Jersey-based nonprofit that collects and redistributes children's books to underserved communities. Thanks to the overwhelming community response, BookSmiles now conducts monthly pickups at the Book Barn, helping to ensure that donated books are put to good use instead of being sent to a landfill or incinerator.



Children's books are distributed through BookSmiles' network of educators and nonprofits. Most adult-level reading books are traded for more children's books through partner organizations, while others are sold to collectors to help support the organization's mission. The small percentage of books that cannot be reused are recycled into cardboard, games, and puzzles. Virtually no books end up in the trash stream.

RAC Chair Mimi Zukoff arranged the first large-scale donation pickup on March 7, 2024, handing off approximately 3,000 books that had been sorted and stored by Summit's Division of Public Works (DPW) staff over several weeks. The DPW continues to store surplus books at the Transfer Station until the next monthly BookSmiles pickup, which averages over 3,000 pounds per collection.



## Community Energy Plan

On December 5, 2023, the City of Summit officially adopted its [Community Energy Plan](#) (CEP), developed with support from a \$10,000 grant through the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities' [Community Energy Plan Grant Program](#). Adoption of the plan was a required step to receive funding and reflects Summit's ongoing commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing climate change.



The CEP outlines actionable strategies to reduce emissions from municipal operations—such as buildings and the vehicle fleet—as well as community-wide initiatives that promote clean energy and energy efficiency. The plan was shaped by public input gathered through in-person and virtual meetings, and guided by Sustainable Jersey's [resources](#) and [Sustainable Energy Communities framework](#). Work on the plan began in July 2022, through collaboration among the Environmental Commission, City staff, Council members, and resident volunteers. After presenting the draft plan in public meetings, it was adopted by resolution.

## More About Donna

Donna grew up in Altamonte Springs, Florida. She earned a B.A. in History and Environmental Engineering Sciences from Rice University in Texas, followed by a J.D. from New York University School of Law. Donna spent eight years practicing securities litigation at the international law firm Latham & Watkins. Donna met her husband, Henrik, while in law school, and they now live in Summit with their two children. She was recruited to join the Summit Environmental Commission in 2017 by former chair Beth Lovejoy and quickly stepped into a leadership role. At home, Donna implements the sustainable actions she learns as an Environmental Commission member, such as food waste composting, which she does through Java's Compost and the composting program at the Summit Transfer Station. Her home is also equipped with solar panels and battery storage and features native plant landscaping.