

Hackensack Tidelines - Fall 2005

Crackdown Against Illegal Off-Roaders Taken To Next Level

State Police Begins "Fair Warning" Campaign; Prosecutions Looming

By Hugh M. Carola

On August 11, 2005, Colonel Rick Fuentes, Superintendent of the NJ State Police called together officers from the NJ Division of Fish & Wildlife, NJ Transit, and police officials from Lyndhurst, North Arlington, Rutherford and East Rutherford in addition to State Police personnel to devise a workable strategy to deal with illegal off-road vehicle (ORV) activity in the New Jersey Meadowlands. Also attending the meeting were Captain Bill Sheehan, executive director of Hackensack Riverkeeper, Tina Schvejda, executive director of the Meadowlands Conservation Trust, and several NJ Turnpike Authority representatives.

This meeting was a follow-up to two meetings held in July-one between Sheehan and Turnpike representatives, and one with Sheehan, Schvejda and Bergen County Prosecutor John Molinelli. What set this third meeting apart is that its goal was crystal clear from the start.

"After Col. Fuentes opened the meeting and we all introduced ourselves, he asked me to describe the ORV problem as I saw it," said Sheehan. "When I finished explaining about the damage that's been done and how these trespassers have been operating with impunity, the Colonel turned to his police colleagues and said, 'Gentlemen, this is why you're here.'"

One outcome of the meeting is the "fair warning" campaign orchestrated by the State Police to inform violators that it's time to abandon the Meadowlands and find a legal place to ride. Feature articles in The Record as well as in weekly newspapers like the South Bergenite have already appeared and State and local police are redoubling their efforts to root out places where ORVers gather. Once the police determine that a reasonable amount of warning time has passed, the next step will be prosecution of the alleged offenders and the confiscation of their vehicles.

Another outcome was the consideration of Homeland Security concerns in the three areas targeted by the crackdown: the area south of Laurel Hill Park in Secaucus, the area adjacent to Exit 16W in East Rutherford and the uplands at the Richard P. Kane Natural Area in Carlstadt. Each of these locations is situated near several Tier One and Tier Two Targets as defined by the Department of Homeland Security. Any unauthorized access regardless of reason will not be tolerated.

"As the owners of the Richard P. Kane Natural Area (formerly known as the Empire Tract - see page 1), we will play an active role in getting these people off our property," explained Schvejda. "This is an inappropriate place to ride, there are 'No Trespassing' signs in place and violators will be prosecuted."

Regarding the Kane Area, the Bergen County Police Department will soon begin mounted patrols there in a concerted effort to enforce the law. In addition, the department has asked for and received permission from the Meadowlands Conservation Trust to use the uplands to train its mounted officers because horses are one of the few effective means of chasing down ORVs.

Needless to say, the trespassers aren't happy about the looming crackdown especially since some of them are second- and third-generation violators. They don't even have the support of national ORV riders groups. In a published report, Tom Lindsay, public information director for the American Motorcyclists Association, told ORV riders: "Do what the overwhelming majority of off-road recreational riders do and... obey the law. There's no excuse for trespassing. There is nothing we will say to defend that."

For all of us who've seen the Meadowlands suffer from years of ORV-caused abuse, this is a truly a breath of fresh air.

Note: The quotes from TinaSchvejda and Tom Lindsay first appeared in the September 7, 2005 issue of the South Bergenite.