

75th Anniversary for Ocean County Parks & Recreation

By: Victoria Ford

The Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation provides the residents of this ecologically rich and diverse county – nearly 600,000 of us – with more than 4,000 acres of open space dedicated for public enjoyment.

The system has grown and flourished over the course of 35 years, under the leadership and guidance of Ocean County Freeholder John C. Bartlett, Jr. He has been the liaison to the parks system from the time he took office in January 1980. Department Director Mike Mangum has held his post since 2003. Parks and Recreation is a department under direct purview of the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders.



“I think people need to be able to get away from it all, take a walk or a drive, commune with themselves and with nature, without having to pay money to do it,” Bartlett said. A park should be accessible to everyone, he said, to allow families to spend time together, to be surrounded by nature, to be near water, picnicking, talking, running around, playing catch. For that reason, none of the parks have an entrance fee. Comfort, convenience and safety are hallmarks of the many parks in the system.

“I think you build a better society when you do that,” he said. “That’s what I stand for; that’s what I believe in.”

Bartlett is the longest-serving freeholder in the state. He is also the man responsible for building and shaping the system as it is known and loved today, with the mission

to put passive and active recreation within reach of every county citizen. “There ought to be a county park within reasonable commuting distance to everyone within Ocean County,” he said – a goal that has come “darn close” to fruition. But a parks

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*Ocean County Park Main Entrance.
Photo credit: Ocean County Parks Department*

system, like a living organism, is never truly complete, always evolving.

Before he took office, when the county was more rural, only a couple of county parks existed, plus a lot of “road-end” parks with water access, many of which have since been turned back over to the municipalities. The oldest parks in the system include Ocean County Park, Berkeley Island, Tip Seaman and A. Paul King. Today the system comprises 20 parks, four conservation areas and two golf courses. Conservation areas are left as is, in their natural state, and are for passive recreation only. Gull Island, for example, is an area for nesting shorebirds and ospreys, accessible only by boat.

Ocean County Park in Lakewood, with its circular road pattern and its majestic old trees, was the county’s first, originating as a hunting and fishing club before it was purchased by John D. Rockefeller. “He called it his farm,” Mangum said. Many of the trees on the property were planted by his personal forester. The property also hosted one of the earliest PGA tournaments; Rockefeller himself loved golf and played into his 90s. Though it was never official, some, including Bartlett’s own mom, always referred to the park by its nickname, “Rocky’s.” Rockefeller died in 1937, and by 1940 the county owned it. In August that year, the estate hosted a grand opening event they called “Ocean County Day.” The park was also a training ground for the New York Giants baseball team during WWII. In those days, Lakewood had a downtown but the rest of the area was farmland and woods.

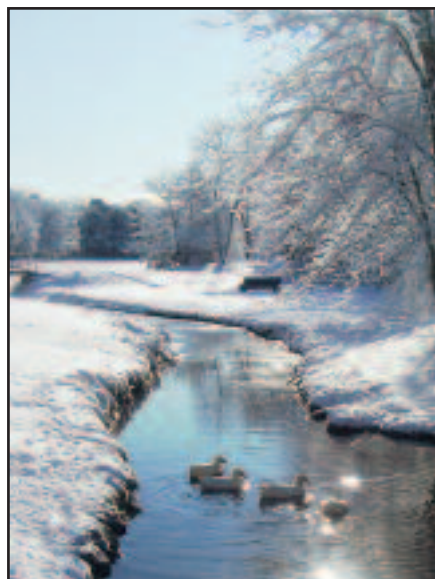
“In the old days, you could walk on private property, go hunting or whatever, and there was plenty of open space,” Mangum said. But, given so much development over time, parks have had to be planned with a little more strategy and thought given to geographic location.

A county park, the men explained, is meant to be regional. From playgrounds and picnic areas to competition sports fields and hiking trails, the objective is to develop each park to fit the needs of a given region.

Once Bartlett came aboard, Berkeley and Tip Seaman got redesigned and the county started adding sites to the roster. Cattus Island, a project then in its infancy, was the first major new park project. Additional land was acquired by donation or through the Green Acres or the Natural Lands Trust programs.

“We had a growing county with a growing tax base, so we had the money to do it,” Bartlett said. Of course, times and methodologies change. Green Acres, he explained, is a state program that used to fund up to 50 percent of project cost in the form of grants, but now it’s a low-interest loan program. “It was exceedingly beneficial to the public; now it’s marginally beneficial to the public,” Bartlett said.

One of the important changes he implemented right away was to outfit the department with its own maintenance division, ensuring the right



Winter Scene.
Photo credit: Ocean County Parks Department

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equipment was available to do any necessary job immediately and efficiently. Previously, he explained, the parks system had been treated like a second-class citizen – e.g. when the roads department got a new truck, the parks department got the hand-me-down. But, a lesson Bartlett learned prior to becoming a freeholder, from his six years as councilman, then mayor, of Pine Beach: “You can’t run an operation with junk equipment.” It follows, then, that to have a first-class parks system you need first-class tools and resources, a proper infrastructure, to address and fix problems right away.

Maintenance and vandalism prevention are top priorities, Bartlett stressed.

Along with thinking strategically about location, a key to developing a successful park is to rationalize the use of the property, Bartlett explained. You have to look at it like, what fits the property, not the other way around, he explained. When a town has donated a spot, the county determines the best use for it, given the existing conditions, with an eye toward regional purpose. For example, playing fields are more appropriate in some areas than others. Similarly, you can’t have conflicting uses on one property. (In other words, you can’t please all the people all the time.) As the county, you have to be able to say no, while also making reasonable accommodations, Bartlett said. That takes some balancing. Robert J. Miller Airpark, for example, is suitable for use for the county fair, even an annual truck show. Other sites are not suitable for that. You have to recognize and support the integrity of the facility, and look at what types of activities a given site can support, otherwise you’ll ruin it.

Giving the Ocean County Vocational-Technical Schools space inside the Atlantis facility for its Cuisine on the Green culinary school restaurant is one example of a working collaboration that is a creative and effective use of space. The Ocean County Board of Health also has an office at the site. The Mantoloking Bridge Fishing Pier was another example of a creative solution: The DOT was requiring a fishing pier, and Brick Township wanted to buy Traders Cove, with the county’s help. The result is one of the best fishing and crabbing spots in the county. “When those opportunities come along, we’re going to grab them.”

In the park system’s 75-year history, some projects have taken longer than others. Cloverdale Farm in Barnegat, purchased through the Natural Lands program, has been about a decade in the making, he said, with issues surrounding cranberry bogs and permit delays. It’s just about ready to open now, he said, describing it as a place for low-impact recreation, bird-watching, a place to go wander and explore.

After Superstorm Sandy forced closure of two parks, Berkeley Island and Cattus Island, county residents spoke up in earnest, eager to regain access, Mangum said. “People are anxious to have them back,” he said. Berkeley Island was partially reopened last summer but is still in the process of being redesigned, with special attention being paid to shoreline protection. Cattus Island’s nature center was destroyed by the storm and will undergo complete reconstruction; since it can’t be raised, it will be made more water-resistant and better prepared overall for future storms. The storm took its greatest toll on those two parks, but throughout the system multiple thousands of trees were felled, Mangum said, commending the Freeholders’ swift action to address the debris.

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Bartlett is meticulous about the way things look. In his view, form is tantamount to function, and upkeep is everything. “It has to look nice,” he said.

He elaborated: “I want you to say when you drive in, ‘Gee, I wonder what this is!’” For a walk, a drive, to achieve a feeling of relaxation, park users can take pride in knowing “it’s partially mine, and I should take pleasure in it, enjoy it.”

Bartlett calls himself “a frustrated architect,” to which he owes his eye for aesthetics. At Freedom Fields, in Little Egg Harbor, for example, a retention basin has a natural look to disguise its engineering function. “It’s those kinds of details that are enjoyable to me,” he said.

Another of Bartlett’s tenets of park development: “I do not build big parking lots.” They’re an eyesore, in his opinion. In one instance he asked an engineer to redirect a driveway in a way that might be considered counterintuitive and he said, “That’s what signs are for.” He likes roads that meander, parking lots no one sees.

Jake’s Branch, in Beachwood, is perhaps the crown jewel – “our best effort,” Bartlett said. “It’s so beautiful. Just beautiful.” It has sports fields along Double Trouble Road, wooded hiking trails and a nature center filled with taxidermy, with an observation deck accessible by elevator. From it, one can see the Forked River Mountains and Hangar 1 at Lakehurst Naval Air Base.

Mangum’s source of pride is being able to provide a good system in a cost-effective way. To him, the parks system’s importance is “a quality-of-life thing,” he said.

“It can’t all be oil refineries,” he joked. Industry might mean jobs, but the reason people choose to live in Ocean County is for the scenery, the landscapes, the beaches and parks. We’re fortunate to have well protected resources, he added.

Mangum agreed the natural beauty and the parks’ careful design evoke a feeling upon entering; the scenery and layout make a visual impact, and extend an invitation to leave behind the cares of the world. “You’re there to relax and have fun, so it should reflect that,” Mangum said.

As the parks system continues to grow and change, sooner or later the older projects need updating, Bartlett said. Berkeley Island was Bartlett’s first redesign, and by the time Sandy got to it, it was in need of some re-envisioning. Now its reconstruction is taking place while two brand new parks in Barnegat are being established – Cloverdale Farm and Lochiel Creek. Lochiel ties into the Barnegat Branch Trail, which, when completed, will stretch from Barnegat to Toms River.

The county plans to introduce a “pilot concept” at Berkeley Island in the spring – a spray park feature to add to the recreation options there. Though Bartlett himself “grew up in the water,” he said swimming opportunities seem less common nowadays. Instead, the spray park trend – multi-dimensional play areas where water shoots from the ground or from fountains or showers or sprinklers – offers fun and relief from the summer heat.

“We’re going to see what it would cost, and if it comes in at a reasonable price, we’ll probably do it. And if it works well, we’ll expand it and add two more in the northern and southern parts of the county,” he said.

Both men made sure to mention the system has a lot of dedicated employees and volunteers to thank for its successful and smooth operation, including naturalists, interpreters and educators. The parks system has the largest group of non-union employees in the county, according to Bartlett. They take ownership in how the place looks and pride in the jobs they perform. They are people who reflect the surrounding culture. Those who work or volunteer there do so with a sense of family, both in terms of pride and responsibility, many personally having forged meaningful memories in the same parks for generations.