

# SUSTAINABILITY CONFERENCE KICKS OFF THIRD YEAR IN MONTCLAIR

January 31, 2018



*Purple Dragon Co-op general manager Janit London answers questions from Paul Mickiewicz at the Third Acting Locally for a More Sustainable World Conference, networking for environmental issues with activists, businesses, and organization directors in the Montclair Public Library, Sat. Jan. 27. PHOTO BY ADAM ANIK*

**By ERIN ROLL**

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“The earth is not flat; the earth is round,” said Jerry Vorbach, one of the presenters at the Acting Locally for a More Sustainable World Conference.

“What?!” Gray Russell, the township sustainability officer, said in mock surprise as the audience laughed.

Jokes about flat-earth conspiracy theories aside, it was a fun day talking about serious issues at the Montclair Public Library on Saturday.

The Northeast Earth Coalition presented its third annual Acting Locally for a More Sustainable World Conference: a series of talks and activities that brought together environmental groups and businesses from around northern New Jersey.

The conference was made possible by a grant from Partners in Health.

At one point in the conference, coalition founder Jose German-Gomez presented awards to different individuals and groups for their service to the community, including one award to Toni's Kitchen and one to Gray Russell, the township sustainability officer. Gomez also presented an arrangement of flowers to Fourth Ward Councilor Renee Baskerville for her support of the NEEC and the efforts to establish community gardens in Montclair.

Last week, the township council officially adopted a series of new guidelines for the planting and maintenance of community gardens.

In addition to the featured speakers, there were information tables from several local groups, including Clean Water Action, City Green, the Greater Newark Conservancy, the Passaic Neighborhood Center for Women and Montclair Community Farms.

Cyndi Steiner, director of the New Jersey Bike Walk Coalition, was the event's keynote speaker. She talked about the need to make Montclair's streets, especially Bloomfield Avenue, safer for walking and biking.

"This is livability," she said. "This is making your commute more friendly." She added that if Montclair was going to permit growth in its downtown areas, the township also had to make more of an effort to make streets and sidewalks safer for bikers and pedestrians.

Steiner's presentation came a few days after Essex County announced that it would be investing in traffic signals along Bloomfield Avenue, including several intersections that have been the scenes of crashes, including pedestrian accidents. "And I hate to have to talk

about it, but we do," she said. In 2016, Bloomfield Avenue was the scene of 10 of Montclair's 49 pedestrian-related accidents.

Arterial roads, by nature of their design, can be hazardous for road users and for the towns they pass through. "These are roads that slice through our downtowns and move cars at highway speeds," Steiner said.

The day ended with a panel by five of the presenters: Steiner, Russell, Vorbach, Julia Sickler and Nelson DePasquale, following a screening of Sickler and DePasquale's short film "Spotlight on Sustainability."

The audience asked questions about composting availability in the Montclair area, whether it was possible to ban plastic bags, and how to encourage solar panel use in parts of the state where wood and coal are still used as energy sources.

Steiner said that only eight counties in New Jersey have complete streets policies. There was also the question of whether those policies were actually being put into effect.

One audience member asked Russell if it would be possible for Montclair to require businesses to put up no-idling signs, noting that drive-through customers at the bank leave their engines running while they use the ATM.

"I'm thinking about all the restaurants; I'm thinking about all the things in stores that are within their expiration date," said Trina Paulus, of Cornucopia. She asked whether it would be possible to encourage, or require, stores and restaurants to donate unsold food that is still edible.

Russell said that the five growers at the Montclair Farmer's Market take unsold produce at the end of the market day and donate it to Toni's Kitchen and other area soup kitchens and food pantries. "We need to have much more of that," he said.