

In the heart of winter, a new park blooms

12 acres saved as open space

BY JACQUELINE HLAIVENKA Staff Writer

South of Route 35, beyond a wooden splitrail fence, a path to a quiet 12-acre forest peeks out from Middle Road.



Red maples, American beech and various types of oak trees line a new park recently acquired by Holmdel Township. The site is on the former Bachstadt property, which lies nestled between Laurel and Palmer Avenues.

Some think of it as the mini Pine Barrens of Holmdel: the soil is sandy, the trees are tall, and waterways are pristine.

The land features a half-mile-long walking trail constructed by the Friends of Holmdel Open Space (FOHOS) and participants in the Holmdel Volunteers in Parks program, serving as an extension to the adjacent 5-acre, L-shaped Allocco Park.

The trail is marked with white trailblazers and was completed on Oct. 24, but the park was truly christened on Jan. 1 for a community-wide New Year's Day walk.

Holmdel resident William Cahill and Committeeman Larry Fink, along with a member of the media, walk a trail Dec. 31 in the new Lady Slipper Preserve in Holmdel, which has been preserved as parkland. ERIC SUCAR staff

But one particular plant stood out — the lady-slipper, a type of orchid — and serves as a symbol and a name for the park's rare charm.

"One of our environmental commissioners came upon this rare and interesting-looking flower and found out it was the lady-slipper

orchid," said Township Committee member Larry Fink, who is also a member of FOHOS. "We've been using the name Lady Slipper Preserve. The name kind of stuck.

"We wanted to use the word 'preserve' to connote the difference between a developed park with playgrounds and ballfields," Fink explained, "and this was always intended to be a very low-key, passive recreation area to respect the fact it is environmentally sensitive wetlands along the stream ... and a beautiful forest, some of it original, some of it second growth."



Holmdel Committeeman Larry Fink shows the location on a map of the new Lady Slipper Preserve in Holmdel. ERIC SUCAR staff



Holmdel resident William Cahill and Committeeman Larry Fink walk a trail in the new parkland.

The roots of the Lady Slipper Preserve, however, did not happen overnight. The 1994-95 Holmdel Environmental Commission prepared a study with the aid of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) about the Mahoras Waackaack Greenway, which consists of two major waterways in the township.

The Mahoras Brook and the Waackaack Creek system run through Lady Slipper Preserve. The system drains about 40 percent, or roughly three square miles, of Holmdel's north slope, as well as significant portions of the neighboring townships of Hazlet, Middletown and Keansburg, according to a study titled "Preserving Open Space in Holmdel: An Inventory and Evaluation" by the 1999 Holmdel Environmental Committee.

Just a short distance from NJ Transit railroad tracks, the Mahoras Brook re-enters Holmdel on the east side of South Laurel Avenue,

where the Waackaack Creek passes under the avenue and connects with the brook, the study explains. It flows in a northerly direction, passing under Middle Road a few hundred feet off Palmer Avenue, continuing northward through Holmdel and then entering Hazlet.

Along the trails, the terrain meanders and has slight changes in elevation due to the natural sandy soil beneath the ground, according to Holmdel resident William Cahill, of W.J. Cahill and Associates P.C.

"This area was very disturbed," Cahill said. He pointed to the curves in the land. "See that dip? That's called a ridgeline. All that land was excavated out. It was excavated out, and there was sand taken out of here for the [Garden State] Parkway."

Cahill explained that a team of community volunteers and companies chipped in to make Lady Slipper Preserve a reality.

J.E. Mowery Inc., located on Stillwell Road, and AMP Electric donated wood chips, equipment and operators to help smooth the land and create walkable paths. The acquisition was done essentially without municipal taxpayer money, Cahill said.

"We laid it out, but they came in with the machines and smoothed it all down, and they came back with the wood chips and put them all down," Cahill said. "We had about 20 volunteers with all of the rakes moving and shoveling. It was an 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. day, morning to night. Everybody worked very hard. We got it done in one day. It was incredibly generous, both the cost of the labor and everyone who contributed to it."

Years ago, the preserve hit a rough patch and was in danger of being bulldozed to make way for a large housing development.

"This was actually approved for a subdivision," Cahill said. "This was going to be six or seven 'McMansions.'"

The developer, Pulte Homes, a company that serves the Mid-Atlantic region, was interested in the property.

"It is the two-side story of the recession," Cahill said. "When the recession began and housing collapsed, there was a lot of pain on one side ... people losing jobs, houses not selling, and property values going down. But at the same time, it created a situation where the developer [Pulte Homes], they decided this would not be a profitable opportunity in this economy. They knew we were interested in preserving the property."

The discussion subsequently turned into a negotiation among FOHOS, the NY/NJ Baykeeper, and Pulte Homes. Essentially, Pulte agreed to sell it for \$1.83 million, which is the same price they had agreed to buy it for from the original Bachstadt landowner. Additionally, Pulte covered some of the engineering costs they had in the property.

Additional funding came from a unique circumstance from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

A program called the Harbor Estuary Program qualifies land that should be acquired, if it can be, and preserved.

"When the Port Authority was going to do a big dredging project in New York Harbor— they were dredging down to get bigger ships in — they agreed, as mitigation for some of the environmental damage that it was causing, to create a fund with many millions of dollars in it to acquire property and mitigate some of that damage both in New York and New Jersey," Cahill said. "New Jersey had a certain amount of money allocated to it; the NY/NJ Baykeeper had a very close relationship with the Port Authority in this regard."

The Port Authority contributed over \$1.3 million of the actual acquisition costs.

The rest of the money came in through the Green Acres Program funding and a \$250,000 grant from Monmouth County.

Between those three funding sources, FOHOS put up the original \$50,000 that Pulte required as a good-faith deposit. The others made up the balance.

"It was a great opportunity," Cahill said. "The silver lining of the economic conditions created the opportunity where if the economy had not been in a recession, there would have been six or seven McMansions in these woods right now."

One of the project's allies was Greg Remaud, deputy director of the NY/NJ Baykeeper. FOHOS also received support from the Bayshore Watershed Group in Keyport and the Monmouth County Park System.

Fink said the Baykeeper got involved because the brook and the creek flow from the north and drain into the Raritan Bay.

"Scientific studies have shown time and again that runoff, especially if it is laden with fertilizer and pollutants, will degrade the water quality in not only the streams, but the downstream," Fink said. "It all starts there in the estuary, and the Baykeeper recognized that preserving this land, even though it is miles away from the bay, helps protect the bay."

The Hudson-Raritan Estuary is home to more than 150 species of fish and shellfish, 330 bird species and 15 million people.

"It is so important to protect areas like this for flood control," Fink said. "In fact, we've had some issues with flooding on Middle Road and Palmer

Avenue which only would have gotten worse if this property were to be developed. It would have added more runoff. It would have diminished the ability for these natural areas to drain water and soak it into the ground, and release it more slowly into the stream system. This is nature's detention basin, instead of having to engineer and build it."

The preserve will also serve as a village green for nearby developments, with approximately 1,000 homes within a waking distance of a quarter-mile, according an environmental commission report. Paths linking Allocco Park and neighborhoods will also be created.

"Another thing that is special about this preservation is that it is a success story that only could have happened through good long-term planning," Fink said. "By having the vision for the stream corridors and the more environmentally sensitive areas in town early on, and identifying places that ought to be preserved, we were in a much better position to know what we were looking at when the developer proposed homes. Our antennae went right up, and we said, 'Wait a minute, that's one of the key parcels that we want to preserve along the Mahoras Brook/Waackaack Creek Greenway. What can we do to ensure its preservation?'"

Fink walked toward the creek and took in the scenery with a feeling of accomplishment.

"What I love about this property and the Mahoras Greenway nature area which is on the south side of Route 35, you can take a five-minute walk off a very busy road like Laurel Avenue across from a major shopping center, and before you know it, the sound of the cars diminishes," Fink said. "When you look around, you don't see any highway, any structures, and you can easily lose your orientation."

The Township Committee is planning to hold a Name the Park contest for Holmdel schoolchildren.