Environmental activists honored for their efforts

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THE REVIEW

EDISON — Two of Edison's top environmentalists were recently recognized for their efforts to make the township a better place.

Robert Spiegel was cited by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), while Walter Stochel was awarded the New Jersey ReLeaf Award for Outstanding Tree Planting Accomplishments.

The two men have worked on several projects together, including appealing Planning and zoning board applications and promoting the Middlesex Greenway, a proposed linear open space along the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

But other efforts earned the pair their honors.

Spiegel and Superfund

Mr. Spiegel, director of the Edison Wetlands Association, was one of five New Jersey residents recognized by the EPA with an Environmental Quality Award for his work on Superfund sites in the township.

In giving him the award, the EPA noted many efforts by Mr. Spiegel:

- locating contaminated areas at the Chemical Insecticide Corp. Superfund Site;
- securing arsenic screening for Edison residents;
- gaining a Technical Assistance Grant which allows the community to participate in cleanup decisions;
- preserving wetlands and open space in Middlesex County.

"I was very flattered (to receive the award)," Mr. Spiegel said. "Nobody operates in a vacuum — I was given the award, but I consider it an award for all the members of the Edison Wetlands Association."

He said the award came as a surprise because of a rocky beginning he and the EPA had three years ago. Since then, the EPA has turned "a public relations disaster" into a model cleanup involving public participation at the prodding of Mr. Spiegel.

"If you harass the EPA enough, they will give you an award," Mr. Spiegel quipped during the EPA awards ceremony last month.

Known for his outspoken comments and behavior, which has included bringing a large turtle and hand puppets into Board of Adjustment meetings, Mr. Spiegel said he does not care whether people think he is an environmental nut.

"We've been criticized by everyone in the official and unofficial capacities. I really don't care because I am very goal-oriented," Mr. Spiegel said. "Really my only goal is to try and clean up the area and make it a better place.

"Once I had children I decided to shut up and start doing it. One of the things we learn as we go along is we are stewards for the earth and we are not being good stewards of the earth. We've created a mess."

And, Mr. Spiegel added, he's only just begun to fight.

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> — **Robert Spiegel**
> *Environmental activist*

The CIC off-site cleanup, begun last year, may be expanded and the EPA is projecting on-site cleanup will start in 1997.

"We have a long road ahead of us," Mr. Spiegel said. "The EPA is really trying to make a very difficult situation work — juggling the concerns of economic costs, the concerns of community and safeguarding public health."

In addition, Mr. Spiegel promises to continue the fight for sane development in Edison. He isn't opposed to all development, he said, just poorly planned development, which he insists the Planning and zoning boards continuously approve.

"One thing I've learned is the zoning board and Planning Board should really be abolished in Edison," he said. "It's really unfortunate that the zoning and Planning boards are worthless. It seems like they favor developers and polluters."

Acknowledging he isn't likely to receive their praise either, he said, "I wouldn't even want an award (from them.)

"I wouldn't even accept an award unless it was a piece of property," he said. "Sansone property."

Mr. Spiegel and the Edison Wetlands Association are negotiating with Paul Sansone regarding the development of a 60-acre tract of land in north Edison, known as the Sansone property. The Planning Board approved an application for Mr. Sansone to build single-family homes there.

Edison's Johnny Appleseed

Mr. Stochel was nominated by Karol Morrison, vice president of the Menlo Park PTA, for the New Jersey ReLeaf Award. In her letter recommending Mr. Stochel, Ms. Morrison said, "Every once in a while a truly wonderful person happens into the life of a community. Our community here at Menlo Park School has been richly rewarded by one very special man."

Principal Mary Reece added she could not "imagine life without Walter's involvement and support."

Another recommendation Mr. Stochel said he holds dear is a letter sent from a Menlo Park School student, in which the writer stated she had "wasted all my stickers on Mr. Stochel" to decorate her letter.

Edison's version of Johnny Appleseed said he got his start in the tree-planting business in 1988 when he learned the Menlo Park School needed trees around its playground.

The 6-foot Mr. Stochel jokingly denied being a druid, although his love for nature is apparent in the 150 trees and thousands of saplings he helped plant in the last eight years.

"I haven't done it alone," he said. "I've had hundreds of people help plant these trees, such as both Boths (Joseph and Eleanor) and the ladies of Menlo Park School."

Mr. Stochel, who is vice chairman of the Middlesex County Urban Forestry Advisory Committee, said it is natural he should have an affinity for trees since he grew up on Oak Tree Road in Edison.

"Somebody called me a tree-hugger. I've hugged a tree," he said. "I had to put my arms around a few trees to see how big there were. Somebody was on the other side to see if they could grab."

Mr. Stochel said his favorite trees are oaks, for their beautiful wood and foliage; his favorite conifer is the Douglas fir because the needles are soft.

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