



**Somerset County
Park Commission**

Post Office Box 5327
North Branch, NJ 08876

Mark Caliguire
President

D.J. Hunsinger
Vice President

Paul Drake

Helen "Chickie" Haines

Jim Leonard

Doug Ludwig

Kevin McCallen

Dorothy Paluck

Scott Ross

Geoffrey Soriano,
Secretary Director

Cynthia Sullivan,
Assistant Director

HEADQUARTERS

355 MILLTOWN ROAD
BRIDGEWATER, NJ 08807

TEL: 908.722.1200
FAX: 908.722.6592
NJ Relay 711

For the hearing/speech impaired

www.somersetcountyparks.org



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PHOTO ATTACHED

TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2020

**AN UPDATE ON THE SOMERSET COUNTY PARK COMMISSION
PLAN TO ADDRESS UNLAWFUL ACTIVITY AT
WASHINGTON VALLEY PARK LOCATED IN
BRIDGEWATER TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY**

BRIDGEWATER, NJ –The Somerset County Park Commission has announced that it is working closely with the Bridgewater Police Department and the Somerset County Sheriff's Office to limit vandalism, illegal alcohol consumption and trespassing at Washington Valley Park. This Somerset County Park is a 720-acre site featuring a 21-acre reservoir, scenic waterfalls, more than seven miles of trails for hikers and bikers, and a hawk watch that is enjoyed by thousands of visitors each year.

According to Somerset County Park Commission Director-Secretary Geoffrey Soriano, "This summer has been different than in years past. We have seen illegal swimming and trespassing, illegal drinking, and dumping of garbage and empty beer and liquor bottles. Last month a 37-year old man tragically lost his life when he drowned after jumping into the reservoir. One of the Park Commission's responsibilities is to keep our parks clean and safe for the law abiding visitors, and we take that responsibility seriously."

During the course of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, the Commission's Park Rangers have witnessed a myriad of violations—well above and beyond the number typically experienced—within the confines of Washington Valley Park and predominantly in or in the immediate vicinity of the waterways and bodies of water that comprise the reservoir and the East and West Branches of Middle Brook. It has never been intended that Washington Valley Park would to be utilized as a "destination point" for "beach-goers" to engage in activities that are in direct violation of the Park Commission's rules and regulations. According to Soriano, "illegal activities are interfering with the legal enjoyment of the park".

As a result and on a nearly daily basis, Park Rangers have had to call upon officers from the Bridgewater Township Police Department to undertake enforcement efforts to properly address the violations. These enforcement efforts, the need to clean piles of trash left behind, the resulting degradation of Washington Valley Park, and the adverse impacts to the neighboring property owners (noise pollution, potential forest fires, instances of trespass, and continued harassment) caused the Park Commission to consider taking action to authorize the designation of certain areas in Washington Valley Park to be restricted from public access. At an August 7, 2020 emergency meeting of the Park Commission, a plan was developed to enlist the services of the Somerset County Sheriff's Office to initiate a focused enforcement effort. The August 7th meeting was essentially adjourned and carried to Wednesday, August 12, 2020 at 11:00 a.m.

Sheriff's Officers patrolled Washington Valley Park this past weekend, and officers will continue to patrol the park for the foreseeable future. Sheriff's

Officers are prepared to issue summons-complaints for violations including trespass, swimming, possession of alcohol, and illegal parking.

As a result of these enforcement efforts, the Park Commission has suspended its consideration of the proposal to designate restricted areas in Washington Valley Park. As such, the continuation of emergency meeting has been canceled by the Park Commission. The Commission will continue to work with law enforcement agencies to increase enforcement of rules and local laws in this park.

The Park Commission wishes to express its great gratitude to Somerset County Sheriff Darrin Russo and the Sheriff's Officers of the Somerset County Sheriff's Office for their enforcement initiative this past weekend as well as their future enforcement efforts. In addition, the Commission recognizes the valuable assistance supplied by Chief Paul Payne and officers from the Bridgewater Township Police Department.

The Commission's Secretary-Director recognizes the many emails and telephone calls from valued park patrons who rightfully utilize Washington Valley Park and who have expressed genuine concern that access to this facility would be restricted.

The Park Commission is committed to protecting all of its parks and facilities to ensure that those individuals who use, enjoy, and respect them can continue to do so. With continued assistance from local and county law enforcement, the Park Commission will continue to welcome visitors who desire to avail themselves of these really special places—especially during the instant pandemic.

The Somerset County Park Commission encourages all who visit Somerset County parks to visit safely and respect and preserve their natural beauty by:

- Observing “No Trespassing” and “No Swimming” signs and staying out of designated restricted or dangerous areas;
- Carrying out whatever may have been carried in;
- Utilizing re-usable water bottles;
- Ensuring that alcoholic beverages, grills, and glass bottles remain at home and not in the parks.

Information of Park Commission programs and activities may be found at www.somersetcountyparks.org or by calling 908-722-1200.

PHOTO CAPTION: Some of the litter recently left behind by visitors to Washington Valley Park.

PRESS CONTACT: Rich Reitman 908-526-1390
rreitman@thereitmangroup.com