

## A Quiet Leader in Soil Conservation

by Peter J. Furey, NJFB executive director



Sometimes thought of as working in the “shadows” of state government, soil conservation districts and the State Soil Conservation Committee (SSCC) play an outsized role in natural resource regulation in New Jersey. Soil district managers, like Glen Van Olden of the Hudson-Essex-Passaic District, interact with developers and farmers alike on a constant basis. Profiling Glen, who also serves as the Farm Bureau director from Essex County, yields a perspective of soil protection in action.

Glen retired on August 30 after serving the HEP district for 37 years, nearly all of that time as manager. Under its governing statute (C.251, Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act), any commercial development project more than 5,000 sq. ft of soil requires an SCD permit that certifies compliance with state soil conservation standards. The district is also the gateway for farmers who seek federal NRCS financial or technical assistance for farm management projects; they

must obtain “cooperator status.”

NJFB met with Glen recently for an interview that looked back over his career. Does he see C.251 work more like environmental enforcement or as conservation? (ans. “guide to conservation standards.”) Role with farmers versus developers? (ans. “assist farmers on a voluntary basis, enforce standards with developers using a mandate”). Best part of the job? (ans. “worthy cause” “among the hundreds of recommendations over the years, never had to retract anything nor were we ever sued ... take pride in that.”) How has the SCD work changed since 1980’s? (ans. “statute in 1975 was well-written ... can accomplish amazing things when everyone works together ... project engineers and planners know the rules by now ... fewer confrontations/disputes with local officials.”) All budgetary documents and audits are filed with the SSCC by the districts; SCD meetings are open to the public; “everything is on-line.”

Regarding the ag side of SCD activity, Glen noted that in the early years farmers were selected due to their knowledge and appreciation of soil resources. That has evolved over time to a more diverse range of expertise. But Glen has a keen eye for farming operations at the edge of urban-suburban boundaries. “While fewer in number, farms in urban areas still provide great value to the community yet can be harassed. They become a magnet for right to farm disputes that soil conservation and Rutgers Cooperative Extension personnel can clarify.” Farms that want to create a side business (mulch, wood chips) come under heavy scrutiny ... local governments can impose tedious procedures at the behest of complaining neighbors. Glen advises farmers: “get professional expertise early in the process, it will save much time and expense.”

Glen will continue his service on the Farm Bureau board. Reflecting on his long experience with soil conservation and property owners, he is well-suited for that role on issues like SADC-soil protection standards, special occasion events and climate-related changes in land management. His reputation for “getting the job done” in upholding environmental standards from a pragmatic, problem-solving background was an asset to the district and a great benefit to New Jersey agriculture.

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