



# COMMISSIONER **STEVE** TANELLI

Proudly serving the residents of Bergen County

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# Special Improvement Districts (SIDs)

## An Interview with Stuart Koperweis, Executive Director for the Fort Lee Business District Alliance

Throughout the United States and more locally in Bergen County, small businesses and downtown areas have been economically impacted by the coronavirus. In this interview, I sit down with Stuart Koperweis, one of the premier economic and revitalization consultants in New Jersey, to discuss how SIDs might be a way to improve a community's commercial district and his experiences in Fort Lee, New Jersey as part of the Fort Lee Business District Alliance.

**Commissioner Tanelli: We are both aware of the economic impact the coronavirus has had on small businesses. In a recent article published in Downtown New Jersey, you mentioned how SIDs might be an essential source of support and investment for municipalities throughout New Jersey. What is a SID and its role within a community?**

Stuart Koperweis: SID is the acronym for Special Improvement District. A SID is a public and private partnership in which property and business owners elect to make a collective contribution to the maintenance, development, and promotion of their commercial district.

The idea behind creating a SID is modeled on the shared maintenance program of many suburban shopping malls. In most malls, the tenants pay a common area maintenance fee that goes towards enhancing the appearance of common areas and providing marketing and advertising material for shops at the mall.



A SID works in a similar format. It is meant to deliver a range of supplemental service in coordination with municipal services to improve the long term economic development of a commercial district. These supplemental services can include street and sidewalk maintenance, visitor assistance/hospitality, business development, marketing, large scale capital improvements, landscaping and beautification, and community events.

It should be noted that a SID represents a long-term financial commitment to all stakeholders; therefore the formation of a new SID requires the support of property owners, business owners, tenants, and local elected officials in the proposed district. Prior to forming one, a local municipal government should form a steering committee and engage in active outreach to ensure everyone is fully informed about the proposed program and its aims and goals.

**In many ways, a SID sounds similar to a Chamber of Commerce or Merchants Association. In what ways does it differ?**

Without going into the nitty, gritty details, a Special Improvement District is established by ordinance by the local municipal governing body and the ordinance states that all property owners within the SID must pay an assessment. As such, a SID has a steady and reliable source of funding.

It is this funding that pays for SID programs and services. The assessment is billed and collected by the municipal government and then disbursed to the SID, which in turn delivers the district's additional services.

The SID itself is governed by a Board of Trustees that is elected in accordance with the by-laws of the SID. The Board hires the management that administers the SID on a day-to-day basis.

This is in contrast to a Merchant Associations or Chamber of Commerce, which is completely voluntary in nature and depends on voluntary contributions for funding programs and capital improvements.

**You are currently the Executive Director of the Fort Lee Business District Alliance, a SID that was formed in partnership with the Borough of Fort Lee to revitalize and promote the Main Street Shopping Corridor. What was the impetus to form a SID in Fort Lee?**

This might be a better question for Mayor Sokolich and the Fort Lee City Council, but it is my understanding that the initial catalyst was the Mayor's vision to revitalize the borough into a 21st century business, social, and cultural hub under the "Be FORT LEE" motto. "Be FORT LEE" epitomizes the Borough's promise of aspirational enrichment conveyed within its characteristic welcoming embrace. It should also be noted that the commitment from the board and the leadership has created an outstanding partnership with the borough; their enthusiasm to support the businesses is a major driving force.

“This year the idea of ‘Be Fort Lee’ took on quite a significant meaning, one we could have never anticipated,” explained Mayor Mark Sokolich.



“What started out as a marketing campaign to highlight the remarkable economic development in town, organically became far more relevant as our community has faced the most unbelievable challenges that 2020 has offered our residents, businesses, and visitors. Yet, we have come together in the face of this adversity and ‘Be Fort Lee’ profoundly strengthened everything our town stands for – solidarity, compassion and kindness.”

Throughout the last several years, Fort Lee has become a central point of interest for social explorers and families alike as they discover the unique blend of cosmopolitan chic and small-town charms that Fort Lee offers. Its unique collection of shops, restaurants, theaters, cultural and recreational events, surrounded by charming neighborhoods creates an atmosphere unrivaled anywhere else in Bergen County. It also helps that it has significant historical value stemming from the colonial era.

Many are unaware that Fort Lee was the motion picture capital of America prior to the advent of Hollywood in the early 1930s. In the 1910s and 1920s, film companies such as the Independent Moving Pictures Company, Peerless Studios, The Solax Company, World Film Company, Fox Film Corporation, and Metro Pictures Corporation were all making pictures in Fort Lee.



**What has been the reception by the merchants and residents of Fort Lee since the formation of the Fort Lee Business District Alliance (BDA)?**

It has been overwhelmingly positive, especially the last year or two; with our retail promotions and programs. It has also been an educational process. We are lucky to have such a close partnership with the municipal governing body and they have been extremely supportive of the Fort Lee BDA throughout the years.



While all property owners within the area defined in the Special Improvement District must pay an assessment, this does not mean that all business owners are obligated to participate in SID events and programs. This is why it has been important for the Fort Lee BDA to discuss all of our programming with restaurants and retail owners in Fort Lee's Main Street corridor and the surrounding area. For us, it is important for them to understand the benefit to their business in participating in events, such as Fort Lee Restaurant Week and Promotion Programs, such as the latest 40% off discount cards; which was a huge success for retailers.

One of the great strengths of our Main Street corridor and surrounding area is the diversity of cuisine and shopping. Fort Lee is the home of a sizable Korean community with smaller enclaves of Russians and Japanese that in recent years have settled in Fort Lee.

We realized early on that we would need to ensure that we formed key partnerships with prominent stakeholders in these specific communities, so that they could understand that our role was not to regulate their business, but serve as an additional voice of advocacy and assist them with marketing.

### **What is on the horizon for the Fort Lee Business District Alliance?**

We are very excited for the upcoming completion of the Barrymore Film Center (BFC). The ground breaking for the project was October 2018 and the BFC is slated to be completed and open sometime in 2021. Although, this may need to be re-evaluated because of coronavirus.

The Barrymore Film Center will not only feature a museum dedicated to the history of the birthplace of American film in Fort Lee, but will also have a 260-seat cinema. The programming at the BFC will include major film retrospectives, an annual silent film event, foreign film screenings, and showcases for emerging filmmakers.

We have no doubt that this will serve as an economic catalyst for the businesses in the BDA, as individuals will have a wealth of restaurants and shopping opportunities just a few blocks away from the BFC.

Switching gears, I think it is important to touch upon on how our SID is taking a proactive role in supporting Fort Lee's businesses, promoting the districts to consumers, and helping to maintain health and safety standards.

In the few months since the crisis began, the Fort Lee BDA has aggregated resources and information to help small business owners understand what is available to them and have been making meaningful connections with small business owners, and amplifying their messages via social media — sharing ways the community can support their businesses, ways they have pivoted to be there for the community and beyond.

Now more than ever, it is important to recognize that SIDs stand with local governments, effectuating a critical partnership that supports and strengthens municipal services, especially during times of crisis. The time will come shortly when we know that we must be “Socially Together,” yet “Physically Distant.” SIDs have the mechanism to create the new paradigm.

**Stuart, thank you for your insight!**





# Public and Private Collaboration to House Formerly Homeless and Disabled Veterans

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Since eliminating veteran homelessness in Bergen County, we have sought to increase supportive, affordable housing for our formerly homeless and disabled veterans.

In September 2020, we hosted the opening of two apartments at 23 Kenmore Place in Glen Rock, NJ for two formerly homeless and disabled veterans and their families.

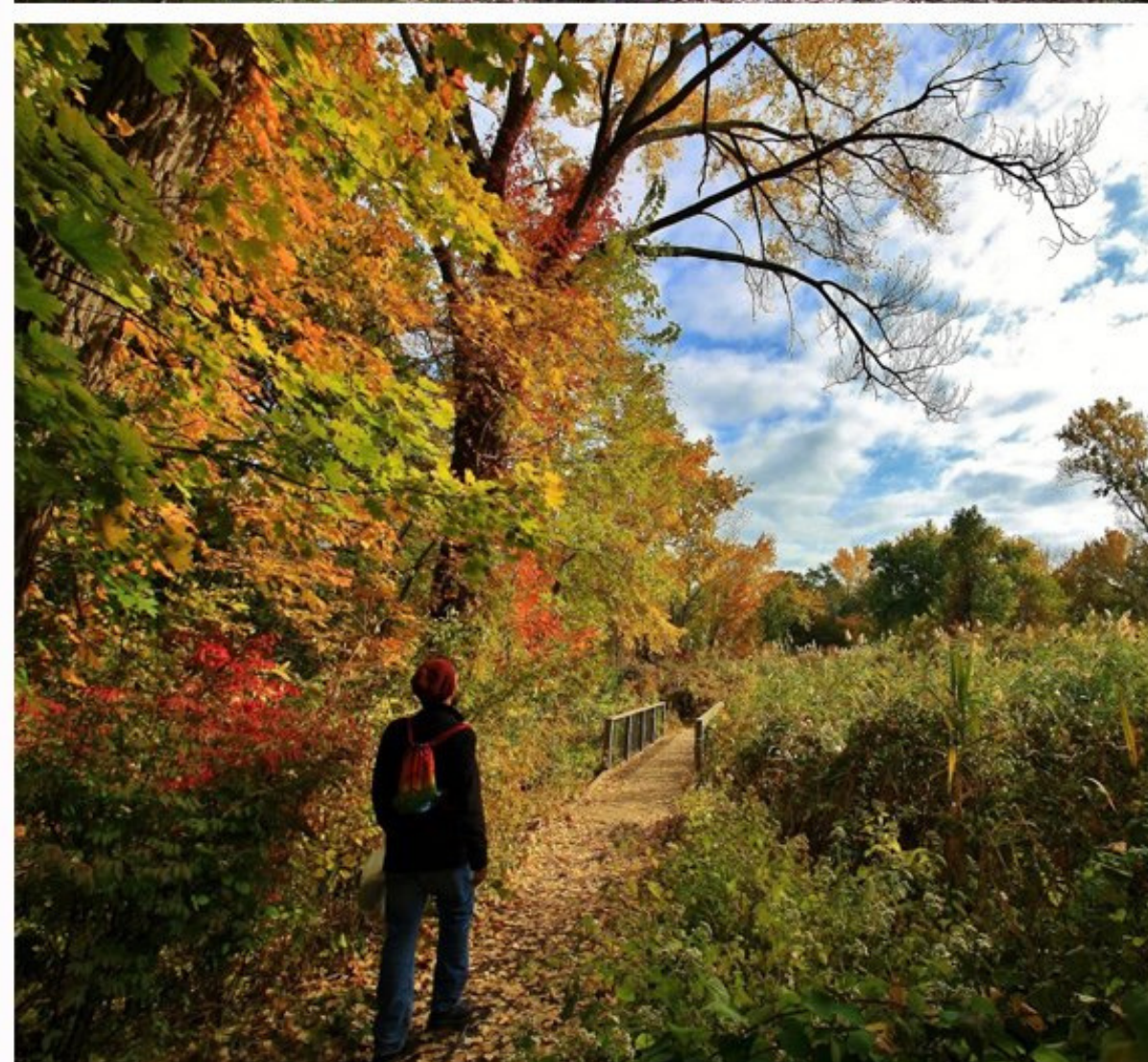
The project was made possible by Nouvelle, LLC, a commercial/residential design and construction firm and developer of affordable housing and the assistance of 12 community partners to ensure the homes were fully furnished including living room, dining, and bedroom furniture at no cost to the families.

As a governing body, we will continue to support all of our veterans and their families. Our veterans are the reason why we enjoy the many freedoms we have today and the above project will serve as a blueprint for many more in the coming years.



# Teaneck Creek Park

*Large-Scale Habitat  
Restoration Project  
Begins TODAY*



## Teaneck Creek Park Restoration Project

Parks and open space play a pivotal role in the quality of life enjoyed by Bergen County residents. However, prior to 2019, the Bergen County parks system had no comprehensive Master Plan. Realizing the critical importance of one, I worked with the County Executive, my colleagues on the Board of Chosen Freeholders, the Bergen County Department of Parks, and Rutgers University to create one.

The adoption of the Bergen County Parks Master Plan in late 2019 will help us build on the original park system, focus on restoring and rehabilitating rivers and critical habitats, and set forth capital improvement plans to enhance open spaces for all of our residents.

As part of our efforts, Bergen County began a \$5.6 million restoration of the 46-acre Teaneck Creek Park that will restore native plants; improve stormwater management; repair existing trails; and rehabilitate an area that served as a dumping ground during the construction of Route 95 in the 1950s.

The funding for the project was obtained from New Jersey Green Acres and the Bergen County Open Space Preservation Trust Fund.



# Steve in the Community



Visiting our COVID-19 community mobile testing site in North Arlington. Throughout the summer, we tested over 38,000 residents and just started our fall mobile program.



Joining Bradley's Baseball camp at Riverside County Park for the renewal of youth baseball with social distancing protocols in place to ensure our children's safety.



It was an honor to present a proclamation on behalf of Bergen County to Sgt. Michael Miller - Cliffside Park PD for his outstanding service to our residents.



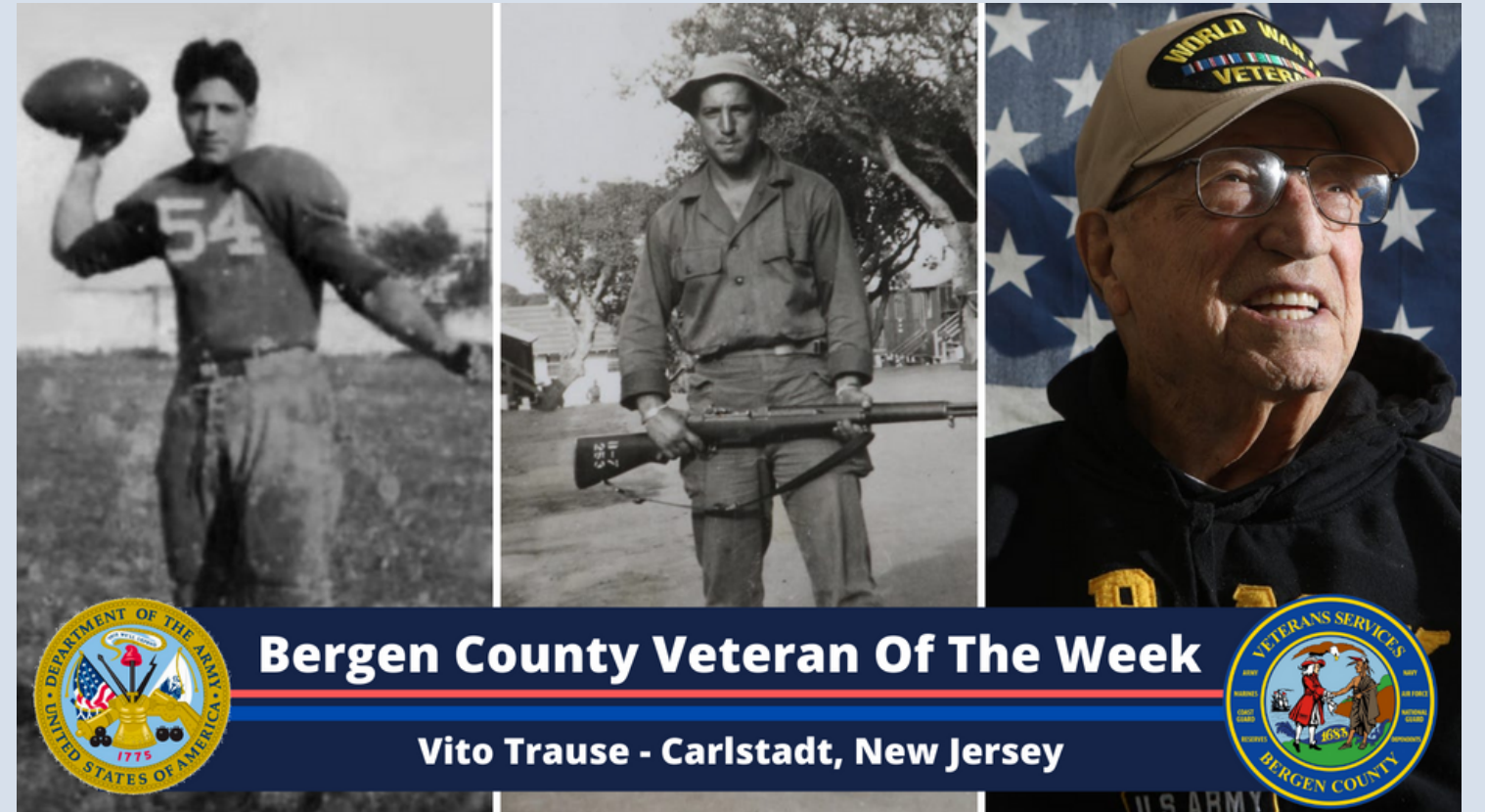
It was a privilege to speak at this year's 9/11 Memorial Service. We will never forget the 148 Bergen County residents we lost on that fateful day.



# Nominate Your Bergen County Veteran of the Week

## Submission Guidelines

Bergen County Veteran Of The Week works best with 3 to 5 good photos — at least one of them should be in uniform. If possible, submit larger file sizes with better resolutions. Consider scanning a physical photo if you do not have a digital copy readily available.



Send the photos with the following information: Name, branch, occupation, and years of service.

### Example:

(Timothy “Tim” Lawson, Marines, 6672 Aviation Supply, 2006 to 2011)

Tours, deployments, and campaigns (OIF, OEF, Vietnam, Gulf War, etc.)

Notable awards (Purple heart, Bronze star, NAM, Army Achievement, etc.)

Current geographic location (so we can localize the story and promote to the community)

Bonus info includes what they’re doing now, significant moment(s) during their service and other unique information.

You can send all of the material to [JDarley@co.bergen.nj.us](mailto:JDarley@co.bergen.nj.us).

## Issue Spotlight: Hydrocephalus Awareness



It was an honor to partner with the National Hydrocephalus Association throughout the month of September to help spread awareness about this life-threatening neurological condition, which affects nearly 1 million Americans.

Since my grandson was diagnosed with hydrocephalus in utero, I have advocated for increased research and funding throughout Bergen County and Northern New Jersey.

I am overjoyed that due to our advocacy Rep. Josh Gottenheimer (NJ-5) has joined the Congressional Pediatric and Adult Hydrocephalus Caucus.

