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Agriculture

County's Soil and Water Conservation District turns 50

by Carrie Miller | 09/24/2014 8:00 AM

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The Suffolk County Soil and Water District celebrated its 50th anniversary with an event last week. (Credit: Carrie Miller)

Before there was a state Department of Environmental Conservation tasked with protecting local soil and water resources, there was the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Formed in 1964, the county-funded district celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. But even with so many decades under its belt, many are still unfamiliar with the organization.

"What exactly does a soil and water district do? That's always been the question," district chairman George Proios said during a celebration of the milestone anniversary last Thursday.

With just five employees, each Soil and Water District staff member wears a number of hats in order to help protect water quality and improve agriculture's impact on the environment, Mr. Proios explained.

The DEC's regional director, Peter Scully, was one of many officials who touted the district's work last week.

"Given the challenges the agricultural community face on Long Island, [the agency] has never been more important," Mr. Scully said.

District employees work with growers on an individual basis, assisting them with identifying different ways to improve farm practices.

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Instead of simply making suggestions, the district helps farmers access cost-sharing grants, which serve as incentives to encourage farmers to update aging equipment and old farm practices.

Over its lifetime, the agency has secured more than \$1 million in grant funding from the state Department of Agriculture and Markets and has helped 84 farmers update fuel tanks and pesticide spraying equipment, according to a release from the district. Another \$1.5 million was awarded to farmers through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, helping to update 105 motor engines and reducing carbon emissions, officials said.

The agency works on a budget of approximately \$315,000 a year that is fully funded by Suffolk County.

County Legislator Al Krupski, a farmer himself, said last week that "Today, it is trendy to say, 'It's all about the water.' But [the district has] been focusing on water for 50 years."

Augie Ruckdeschel of the county Department of Economic Development and Planning called the Soil and Water district an "ally" in the fight to improve water quality countywide. The district's role goes beyond agriculture by offering informational and educational resources for storm water management, energy efficiency, and conservation planting including rain gardens and native plants, officials said.

The district also works with high school students by offering scholarships and internship opportunities for those pursuing environmental studies. One hundred and twenty-five students have benefited from a total of \$67,500 in scholarships, according to the agency.

During last week's celebration, the Soil and Water Conservation District awarded two farmers — Tom Wickham of Wickham's Fruit Farm in Cutchogue and John Halsey of The Milk Pail in Water Mill — with Ag Environmental Management awards for their conservation efforts.

Mr. Halsey said "programs would mean nothing to [him] as a farmer if it wasn't for the staff that takes the time to explain them."

cmiller@timesreview.com

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