

# CivicStory

*news that builds community*

## **New Jersey Sustainability Reporting Project Report on Pilot Phase**

### **Introduction**

The New Jersey Sustainability Reporting project was created to address a need for news and information that fosters awareness of - and response to - our urgent environmental crises. The goal of the project is to generate a critical volume of sustainability reporting that engages news editors and the public. Stories on [NJSR Hub](#) amplify newsworthy actions and initiatives to restore healthy eco-systems and help slow and ultimately reverse global atmospheric warming.

New Jersey's highly distributed municipal governance is composed of 565 cities and towns. The sheer number of elected officials and civic venues creates a challenge for those who gather public news and information. However, existing information assets are being leveraged by the NJSR project. These include: impactful, diverse nonprofits; innovative news cooperatives; coalitions of educational and environmental organizations; and robust information networks. Sophisticated technical information platforms are also available.

### **What Topics Are Covered?**

Stories cover a wide variety of aspects of sustainability, including food choice and waste reduction; storm water management; water, soil, and air quality remediation; renewable energy and home energy conservation; transportation; purchasing efficiency; health and recreation; urban agriculture; home management practices such as green cleaning and natural lawn care; and all factors pertaining to just, thriving communities.

### **What We Aimed To Do**

On January 17, 2019, sixteen representatives of allied New Jersey nonprofit organizations met at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. They discussed a possible "sustainability reporting hub" to address the need for news reporting that was oriented to health and ecological viability. Following a lively exchange of ideas, six attendees expressed interest in providing in-kind support for the project as founding partners or affiliates, advisors, and orientation trainers. There was general agreement on these principles:

- 8 early to mid-career reporting fellows would report for six months, working through diverse news organizations;
- reporting stipends would be paid directly to newsrooms;
- fellows would be selected through a competitive application and interview process by a committee to include journalists, science educators, and academic leaders; and
- stories would be on multi-media platforms and cover geographic diversity.

Nine organizations were represented at the initial meeting:

Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education (ANJEE) - Michael Chodroff  
Camden County Municipal Utility Authority - Andy Kricun and Scott Schreiber  
Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) - Stefanie Murray and Joe Amditis  
CivicStory - Susan Haig, Donna Liu, Tom Loughlin, and Anupam Iyer  
Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation - Naeema Campbell  
Ironbound Development Corporation - Drew Curtis

New Jersey Future - Edward DiFiglia  
Solutions Journalism Network - Liza Gross  
Sustainable Jersey - Lauren Skowronski and Randy Solomon

Attendees discussed a possible weekly dissemination of an NJSR Hub "digest" containing 8 to 10 sustainability stories in various reporting formats such as text, photo, video, and audio.

### **What We Did**

#### **Recruit Project Manager; Select Fellows; Letters of Understanding with Newsrooms**

A CivicStory board committee interviewed 4 final candidates and selected an NJSR project manager in mid-May, who helped publicize the opportunity mid-May through June. The Fellowship selection committee chaired by Dr. Maurice Hall, Dean of the School of Arts and Communications at The College of New Jersey, interviewed candidates at TCNJ in July and accepted eight NJSR fellows. CivicStory then concluded Letters of Understanding with editors of seven New Jersey newsrooms. (See [sample LOU](#).)

#### **Fellowship Orientation and Training; NJ Presidents Council Resolution**

Three full-day orientation sessions occurred at Montclair State University and in Paterson, at Stockton University and in Atlantic City, and in Newark at NJTV studios and Rutgers University-Newark. Sessions included presentations by 26 NJ experts and practitioners in sustainability, environmental science, journalism, and civic leadership. (See [attachment](#).) On October 21, the New Jersey Presidents Council (composed of higher education leaders) voted unanimously to endorse the NJ Sustainability Reporting Hub project. (See [attachment](#).)

#### **Expand to Project Director & Engagement Editor - Launch [www.SRHub.org](http://www.SRHub.org) and Digest**

By mid-October, the project manager's tasks and responsibilities had exceeded the capacity of one individual. CivicStory concluded the role according to terms of the LOU and contracted a project director and engagement editor. On Thursday November 14, the new NJSR Hub website, [www.SRHub.org](http://www.SRHub.org), was launched with 12 stories posted from 5 participating newsrooms. The first issue of the NJSR Hub Digest was distributed to 2800 email subscribers on Friday, November 15.

#### **Conclude Pilot Phase - What We Learned - Adjustments in Phase 2**

By February 28, 2020, a total of 59 sustainability stories published by 7 NJ newsrooms were republished on [www.SRHub.org](http://www.SRHub.org). Of 7 reporting fellows, 5 completed their quota of 12 print stories or 6 video/audio stories. A survey of fellows and editors indicated high overall value and benefit. The amount of reporting was a challenge for some, especially freelance reporters. For Phase 2, we have lowered the quota slightly to 10 print or 5-6 video/audio stories by 6 reporters.

A few procedural problems arose: one fellowship application form had not been signed by the news editor, resulting in initial confusion. One reporting fellow was assigned to a second editor who was unaware of protocols for alerting the NJSR project manager of published stories. One fellow lacked journalism training and needed editorial guidance and support. Each of these potential issues has been avoided in Phase 2.

#### **Press Citations - Responses from Fellows, Editors and Affiliates**

The NJSR Hub project was cited as one of "[9 Great Business Ideas for Local News in 2019](#)" in a summary published by the Knight Foundation. The project received an [Excellence in Local Journalism - Collaboration award](#) from the Center for Cooperative Media (judged by an independent panel.)

Phase 1 survey responses from editors indicated high perceived value of the fellowship, with 100% indicating interest in a future NJSR Fellowship. 75% strongly agreed and 25% somewhat agreed that the NJSR Hub Fellowship was beneficial to the newsroom. Editors saw the NJSR fellowship as an opportunity to increase coverage of sustainability and climate change, gain understanding of sustainability action in New Jersey, and increase overall reporting capacity on a cost recovery basis. Recommendations for future phases included adding a digital/video budget, cross-promoting stories, driving readers back to newsroom sites, and adding travel allowance and operating cost offsets to enhance the fellowship stipend.

### Education and Career Development

Over the 2020 winter-spring semester, 10 combined teams of computer science and journalism students at The College of New Jersey focused on the SRHub.org and CivicStory websites. The teams have proposed various user enhancements and functionality upgrades. We are now seeking to create student internships to implement these improvements this summer.

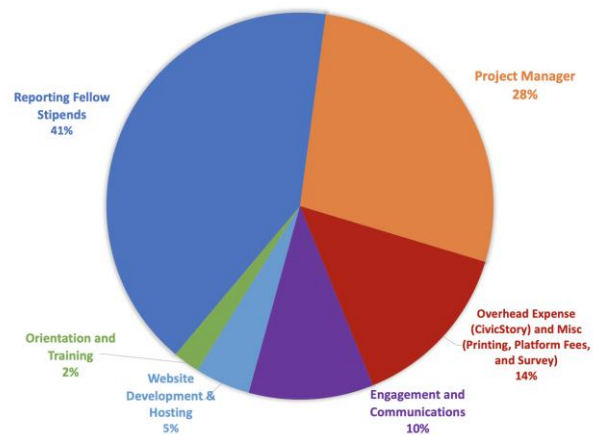
We are thrilled that NJSR Fellow Brianna Baker, currently reporting for Next City and formerly with Green Philly in Phase 1, will begin full-time work in August 2020 as a Climate Solutions Report for Grist. She specifically cited her work as a NJ Sustainability Reporting Fellow as having led to this professional opportunity.

### Expenditure and Support

Phase 1 of the NJSR Hub project was partially funded by a diverse group of donors, ranging from foundation sponsorship of \$10,000 to small individual donations. CivicStory has received project support from four NJ foundations: New Jersey Health Initiatives (NJHI); Victoria Foundation; Rita Allen Foundation; and The Leavens Foundation. The Center for Cooperative Media and Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education organizations contributed seed funding, and New Jersey Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability assisted with crowd-sourcing effort.

| Summary of NJSR Hub Phase 1 Expense  |               |             |
|--|---------------|-------------|
| Reporting Fellow Stipends  | 24,000        | 41%         |
| Project Manager  | 16,100        | 28%         |
| Overhead Expense (CivicStory) and Misc (Printing, Platform Fees, and Survey) | 8,300         | 14%         |
| Engagement and Communications  | 6,100         | 10%         |
| Website Development & Hosting  | 2,700         | 5%          |
| Orientation and Training   | 1,300         | 2%          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>58,500</b> | <b>100%</b> |

NJSR HUB PHASE 1: EXPENSES



### Sustainability News - Potential for Growth

The Institute for Nonprofit News has noted growing interest in sustainability news among national funders. We see potential in amplifying leading-edge sustainability initiatives of universities and colleges that are often bypassed in daily newscasts. Given the increasingly understood connections between health, sustainability, social justice, and civic action, and the presence of so many environmentally informed high school and college students "at home" in their communities, the potential national and global impacts of cooperative sustainability news reporting are significant.

## **Founding Partners**

CivicStory - Project Lead  
Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) at Montclair State University  
New Jersey Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability (NJHEPS)  
Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education (ANJEE)

## **Participating Newsrooms**

Cape May County Herald  
Green Philly  
Next City  
TAPinto Camden  
The Hammonton Gazette  
The Nubian News  
The Press of Atlantic City  
The Record  
VillageGreenNJ.com  
WBGO Newark Public Radio

## **Reporting Fellows**

Ambreen Ali, *VillageGreenNJ.com*  
Stephanie Avila, *WBGO Newark Public Radio*  
Brianna Baker, *Next City*  
Bill Barlow, *Cape May County Herald*  
Joseph Berenato, *The Hammonton Gazette*  
Molly Fichter, *WBGO Newark Public Radio*  
Vernon Ogrodnek, *The Press of Atlantic City*  
Kelly Ramos, *The Nubian News*  
Steven Rodas, *TAPinto Camden*  
Alexis Shanes, *NorthJersey.com*

## **Affiliates**

Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC)  
Camden County Municipal Utility Authority  
Ironbound Community Corporation  
New Jersey Audubon  
New Jersey Future  
PSEG Institute for Sustainability Studies at Montclair State University  
Sustainable Jersey  
Sustainable Princeton  
US Green Building Council, NJ Chapter

## **Advisory Board**

Daniel Day - Co-chair - VP Operations; Princeton University Office of Communications  
Kevin Englert - Co-chair former NJSR Hub Project Director; Marketing Analyst for  
Condé Nast  
Jon Gertner (author, journalist)  
Susan Haig - CivicStory Founder & Creative Director  
Dr. Maurice Hall - Dean of the School of the Arts & Communication, The College of  
New Jersey  
Daniela Shebitz - PhD, College of Natural, Applied, and Health Sciences, School of  
Environmental and Sustainability Sciences, Kean University  
Kimberly Tran, Princeton University student ('23); CivicStory Growth & Development Intern

**Project Staff**

Tom Dallessio, Project Manager (April 2020 – Present)

Kevin Englert, Project Director (October – April 2020)

Amanda McConnon, Engagement Editor

Hillary Richards, Project Manager (May – October 2019)

**Additional Information**

[Sample Newsroom Letter of Understanding](#)

[Orientation Speakers – Pilot Phase](#)

[Resolution – NJ Presidents Council](#)