



# South Mountain Conservancy

South Mountain Reservation Stewardship and Advocacy

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 3, 2013

Contact: Dennis Percher, 973-868-6994  
South Mountain Conservancy

### LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS SEEK ALTERNATIVES TO 880-FOOT RESERVATION DAM

In response to an ongoing study by the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) of flood abatement options along the Rahway River that is considering an 880-foot long dam in the southern section of the South Mountain Reservation, the South Mountain Conservancy (SMC) and local environmental leaders have formed **RAFSA**, the **Rahway Alternative Flood Solutions Alliance**. The goal of RAFSA is to champion a more balanced approach to flood abatement by providing an alternative perspective to the work of the USACE and the Mayors' Council on Rahway Watershed Flood Control.

The founding members of RAFSA are: Václav E. (Vic) Beneš, Millburn; Jennifer Duckworth, Millburn; Katalin Gordon, Orange; Robert McCoy, Maplewood; James McGowan, South Orange; Dennis Percher, Maplewood, Chair of the South Mountain Conservancy with the unanimous support of the SMC Board of Trustees.

In the last year, efforts by USACE and the Mayors' Council, an informal body of nine township officials coordinated by a former mayor of Cranford, gathered momentum to study and undertake flood abatement in the Rahway River watershed. In partnership with the NJ Department of Environmental Protection, USACE has drafted the *Risk Management Feasibility Study* after initial work started nearly a decade ago. The Mayors' Council, has also been collaborating with the Rahway River Watershed Stormwater Advisory Board, to draft a more stringent model stormwater management ordinance, establish 1000 rain gardens in the watershed, and identify floodplain restoration opportunities (see [www.rahwayriver.org](http://www.rahwayriver.org)).

USACE is currently evaluating the costs and benefits of seven abatement alternatives. These are outlined in a July 2013 USACE presentation, *Rahway River Basin Flood Risk Management Study* (see [www.somocon.org/issues-and-positions/](http://www.somocon.org/issues-and-positions/)). Of these alternatives, two involve constructing an 880-foot long, 70-foot high dam across the southern end of the South Mountain Reservation's valley. The dam would create an extensive South Mountain Reservoir, a dry detention basin that would flood up to 80 acres in times of extreme rainfall, such as Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Floyd, and a lesser area, 23 acres, during heavy annual storms. The proposed detention basin would then drain over a period of up to 3 ½ days. While USACE's assessments are not complete, the Mayors' Council seems in favor of those options that include the dam.

In a position statement posted this week on the Conservancy's website, RAFSA contends that reliance on a large, centralized detention basin for flood abatement is misguided as "the pursuit of such a massive construction project would be environmentally destructive and socially unfair, and may not provide the needed flood abatement." Dennis Percher, Chair of the SMC, explained that "a 70-foot deep South Mountain Detention Basin, even if dry most of the time, places in jeopardy the vegetation, trails, and roads of Essex County's treasured century-old park, one of the few large, natural open spaces in central

New Jersey,” and that “Essex County is already challenged by proportionately less open space than neighboring counties, so any acreage lost would be keenly felt.” This loss, RAFSA argues, would be especially tragic considering that such a reservoir would only address a portion of the Rahway River’s overall flow and may not prevent the most serious flooding downstream in towns like Cranford.

RAFSA hopes to champion a more balanced approach involving best management practices founded on a preference for low-level, low-cost, environmentally-sound designs and methods. It requests USACE to consider seriously the many distributed abatement solutions possible along the length of the Rahway and its tributaries. As explained in RAFSA’s Position Statement, the idea would be to modify the waterway channel where beneficial, especially at choke points, and to establish multiple, distributed water detention zones with substantial local action by the municipalities in flood-prone areas.

RAFSA is committed to working with USACE and the Mayors’ Council to study the river and identify a broader range of solutions to watershed flood problems. Based on long-term, holistic designs, these solutions would avoid “Band-Aids” that preserve grandfathered bottleneck features, and not rely on one or two centralized detention basins. RAFSA’s position is that to be equitable, “large-scale disruption upstream cannot, and should not, be a substitute solution for historically poor planning decisions that have made certain areas prone to flood.”

RAFSA approach is based on the following principles and premises:

- 1. Distributed Responsibility.** Every township in the watershed should be involved in planning for, and contributing to, overall flood abatement.
- 2. Historical Development Causes.** Most of the Rahway River watershed’s flooding problems are caused by a combination of factors, including increased areas with impermeable surfaces that hasten flow into the river channel, reduced breadth of the channel itself by short-sighted construction in historic flood plains, and long-established choke points behind which flood levels rise. These choke points and flood-prone areas are clearly identified in FEMA flood profile graphs and maps and provide obvious opportunities to reduce potential flooding.
- 3. Fair, Open Planning.** An open, transparent planning process is needed that engages stakeholders and informs the public throughout the watershed.
- 4. City of Orange Water Needs.** Any abatement plan must take into consideration emerging water quality and capacity problems of the City of Orange, which relies on wells in the South Mountain Reservation.
- 5. Integrated Planning.** Planning for abatement should be carried out in an overall watershed approach and in concert with municipal redevelopment and Greenway completion along a restored flood plain from the Arthur Kill to the Watchungs.

To find out more about developments focused on Rahway River flood abatement and RAFSA activities, RAFSA encourages interested members of the public to contact individual RAFSA members, e-mail [RAFSA@somocon.org](mailto:RAFSA@somocon.org), or sign up on the [somocon.org](http://somocon.org) website and indicate an interest in RAFSA.

---

The South Mountain Conservancy (SMC) is a volunteer, non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation dedicated to preserve, protect and enhance Essex County’s 2,110-acre South Mountain Reservation. It promotes the sustainable use this great resource through education and public service by individuals and community groups. Founded in March 2000, it works in concert with the Essex County Department of Parks by providing ongoing assessments of the Reservation’s ecology and infrastructure and helping manage restoration projects. For more information about joining and supporting the SMC, visit [www.somocon.org](http://www.somocon.org).