

Flowers sow bipartisanship

“It’s a gateway to the Garden State.”

A garden of gold flutters on the horizon like a mirage.

One wave of flowers follows another, a sporadic but exuberant parade of blossoms that readily inspires a smile.

Welcome to Cherry Hill’s Route 70, where eight miles of wildflowers are abloom between lanes of concrete and 60,000 daily vehicles.

“Residents love it; environmentalists love it; I love it,” says Mayor Bernie Platt, who championed the pilot plantings, along with State Sen. James Beach (D., Camden). The effort cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000, all of it from donations, including from township police officers and firefighters.

Cherry Hill and its public and private partners used the money to plant hefty clusters of *Cosmos bipinnatus* (pinks/whites/maroons) and *Cosmos sulphureus* (orange and yellow) between Cherry Hill’s borders with Pennsauken and Eve-sham.

Generally called cosmos, these annual flowers grace a grassy but largely unlovely median of the township’s unofficial Main Street.

The plantings are concentrated in the congested four-lane stretch between Haddonfield Road in the Erlton section and I-295 at the eastern border of Barclay.

“It’s a gateway to the Garden State, and the weeds were three feet high,” Beach says. “It certainly did not look as welcoming as the wildflowers.”

The seeds went into the ground in early June, during summer’s searing heat. The floral display exploded after Hurricane Irene.

“I’m hearing a lot from the community about how much they love it,” says Lori Braunstein, executive director of Sustainable Cherry Hill, a green-advocacy group that helped with the project.

The cosmos cut down on mowing costs and also pull pollutants out of the soil, notes Bart Mueller, executive director of the South Jersey Transportation Authority.

The authority pioneered this sort of high-volume highway beautification, sowing 47 miles of the Atlantic City Expressway with wildflowers several years ago.

A state agency, the authority advised the township about flower selection and helped with the planting. New Jersey Transportation Commissioner James Simpson and his department also assisted.

That’s right: The Republican administration in Trenton worked hand in (gardening) glove with the Democratic administration in Cherry Hill — in the Democratic bastion of Camden County.

So Route 70’s flowers are among the rarest of floral species. Call them *Bipartisan agreement-us*.

Jay Lassiter, a self-described progressive activist who lives in the township, declares the project a “fantastic” example that government can work.

“It was done in the spirit of Lady Bird Johnson, one of my personal heroines,” he says.

In the mid-1960s, the wife of President (and towering Democrat) Lyndon B. Johnson attracted strong Republican support for planting wildflowers along highways nationwide.

Her legacy is particularly visible in her native Texas. “In 2004, I came back from a conference in San Antonio with two” takeaways,” Mueller says. “All-electronic tolls, and wildflowers.”

Platt’s chief of staff, Dan Keashen, says the plantings require minimal maintenance — the outside edges must be trimmed — and have not created any visibility problems.

“It’s an extremely successful public-policy initiative,” he says. “I haven’t run into anyone, of any political persuasion, who’s against it.”

Indeed, longtime Cherry Hill resident and prolific blogger Dan Cirucci, who occupies the opposite end of the political spectrum from Lassiter, is a big fan.

“Lady Bird Johnson would love these flowers,” Cirucci says. “But so would Nancy Reagan and Laura Bush.”



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TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

Wildflowers bloom along the median strip on Route 70 in Cherry Hill. Residents of all ages are quick to offer praise for the colors that brighten the