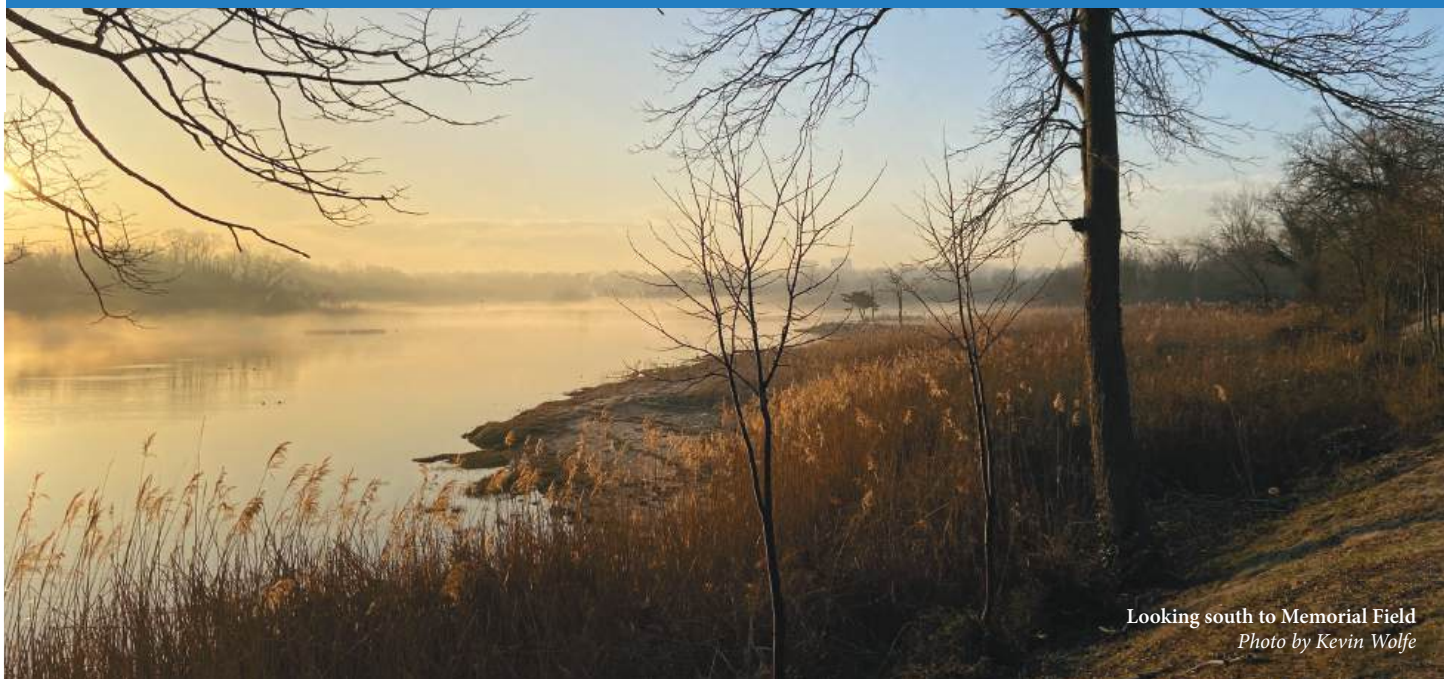




Douglas Manor Environmental Association

## SPRING 2024 · NEWSLETTER OF THE DMEA

### BIG ROCK WETLAND RESTORATION PROJECT RECEIVES \$4 MILLION IN GRANTS!



Looking south to Memorial Field  
Photo by Kevin Wolfe

The Big Rock Wetland Restoration Project was awarded a total of \$4 million in grants this year, ensuring that the entire 7-acre restoration project can be built all at once instead of in phases. Construction is expected to start later this year.

The project includes restoration of tidal wetlands and shoreline from Memorial Field to the Point, stabilization of the embankment along Douglas Road, and the regrading and replanting of the eroded shoreline at Memorial Field to help protect it from tidal surges and storms.

Invasive *Phragmites australis* reeds that have taken over large sections of the wetland north of Memorial Field will be removed by excavation and replanted using native species. The *Phragmites* reed, which is typically 14 to 18 feet tall, will be replaced by various native plant species to create a dynamic “living shoreline.”

The native plantings will enhance wildlife habitat and improve water quality. Open views of Udalls Cove along Douglas Road, long blocked by the super tall *Phragmites*, will also be restored.

Funding for the Big Rock Project is the culmination of an initiative that the Douglas Manor Environmental Association (DMEA) began 10 years ago. The Douglas Manor Association is the owner of the site and one of multiple partners with the DMEA.

Last summer, GEI Consultants, Inc., the landscape architecture and engineering firm designing the restoration, sent crews into the

wetland and along Douglas Road to collect final data and completed their design. The design is being reviewed by several government agencies for permitting and then will be sent out to bid to qualified contractors who specialize in wetland restoration.

Laura Schwanof, the landscape architect for GEI who is heading the design team, said that in just five years since GEI started working on the project, more than 20 percent of the healthy wetlands at the water's edge have been lost to erosion. She said that this loss of the tidal plant *Spartina alterniflora* is rapidly accelerating, making the shoreline along Douglas Road as well as Memorial Field increasingly vulnerable to storm and tidal damage.

Already there are large sections of the Douglas Road embankment near the Point that have been severely undermined, in much the same way that sections of Shore Road were undermined more than a decade ago, causing collapses that required the full reconstruction of the roadway. GEI has designed an interplanted stone revetment, a timber crib wall and erosion resistant plantings along Douglas Road from the Point to Memorial Field, that will be placed based on the scientific analysis by experts on tidal and storm data.

GEI is working closely with team members from Save the Sound (STS), which secured the \$4 million from multiple grant sources. STS is a private non-profit environmental organization that advocates for improving the marine habitat, including wetlands, estuaries and shorefront, for all of Long Island Sound.

## OYSTERS TO PLAY NEW ROLE IN BIG ROCK RESTORATION PROJECT



Newly installed concrete block oyster castles visible between high and low tide, to the left. Orange fencing and wires protect newly planted wetland grasses from wildlife damage. Photo by New York Restoration Project, Harlem River



Oysters have begun attaching themselves to recently installed oyster castles, a process that takes several seasons. Photo by New York Restoration Project, Harlem River

Oysters, which made New York City “The Oyster Capital of the World” in the 19th century, will play a prominent role in the Big Rock Restoration Project, but in an entirely new way.

Oyster “castles,” a concrete block system that will be set in the mud at the outermost edge of the newly restored wetland, will be a key element in protecting the marsh and also the embankment supporting Douglas Road. The artificial oyster reef that is created from the blocks will soften the blow of large waves, reduce flood damage, and prevent erosion along the shoreline.

The latest partner to join the Big Rock Project is the Billion Oyster Project, an internationally recognized not-for-profit, non-government organization, dedicated to restoring oysters to New York City waterways.

Last year, specialists from the Billion Oyster Project advised GEI Consultants, Inc., the landscape architecture and engineering firm for the Big Rock Project, on how best to design the oyster castles that will be a prominent environmental feature of the wetland restoration.

The location of the new oyster castles was determined by analysis experts from GEI, who examined tidal, wave and storm data. The blocks will be seeded with oyster spat, or larvae, that will grow and attach to the blocks. As the oysters mature, they will eventually cover the blocks completely, solidifying into an oyster reef.

For the Big Rock Project, the designers will also use bags of oyster shells to cover the concrete block structure on the landward

side. The bags of oyster shells have two roles. In the early days of the restoration, the shells will visually screen the concrete structure from view at low tide (at high tide the oyster castles will not be visible). The shells also provide further surface for the oyster spat to attach to.

It takes several growing seasons for the castles to be completely covered by new oysters, and so look natural. Although the water will be shallow at the new oyster reef, marine grade warning rods will be attached at the seaward side to alert boaters, like kayakers, of the reef just below the surface.

Along with GEI and Save The Sound, The Billion Oyster Project will also help monitor the reef installation over the coming years, to ensure its success.

Oysters feed and support marsh wildlife and improve water quality. Each oyster filters 30 to 50 gallons of water a day. Although the new oysters will play this important environmental role, they will not be edible. The waters of Udalls Cove and Little Neck Bay are still not clean enough. Wild oysters are also not attractive to illegal, would be oyster harvesters, because oysters are difficult to separate from the reef intact.

Wild oysters are also physically unattractive compared to the farm grown oysters restaurants serve.

**-Kevin Wolfe**

### ➤ \$4 MILLION IN GRANTS! *continued from page 1*

STS will help GEI select a contractor when the project goes out to bid later this year. STS will also manage construction of the project working in close association with the DMEA, the DMA and Manor residents.

The project takes its name from “Big Rock,” a locally-known natural landmark just off the northern tip of the Douglas Manor peninsula. The enormous rounded boulder, about 15 feet in diameter, is a glacially-deposited stone that is a remnant from the Ice Age. Big Rock is also an important site and landmark for the Matinecock Indians, the Native American tribe who originally populated the peninsula.

Since the DMEA began the restoration effort in 2014, the Big Rock Project has engaged more than 750 students and 20 teachers from local schools MS 67 and PS 98 through the STEM program. Hofstra University students from the Department of Geology, Environment and Sustainability, have also participated, returning to the site multiple times over the years, collecting data, and studying coring samples from the wetland.

Other DMEA partners for the Big Rock Project include the Alley Pond Environmental Center; Dadras Architects; the Douglaston and Little Neck Historical Society; the National Audubon Society; and the Udalls Cove Preservation Committee.

**Jamie Sutherland and Kevin Wolfe, DMEA Co-Chairs  
The Big Rock Wetland Restoration Project Committee**

## NYC AUDUBON JOINS THE BIG ROCK PROJECT



Tod Winston at Memorial Field Spring Survey 2022  
Photo by Jamie Sutherland

The first time I walked the shoreline of Douglas Manor’s Memorial Field, the morning’s quiet broken only by birdsong, I asked myself a question that must be familiar to the residents of this tranquil little hamlet: “This is New York City?”

I should know better. As a birding guide and bird surveyor for New York City Audubon, I have the privilege of visiting some of the city’s wildest places—from the wild marsh islands of Jamaica Bay to the rocky coast of Pelham Bay Park. I know NYC has beautiful green spaces, rich with wildlife. But few neighborhoods enjoy anything comparable to Douglas Manor’s secluded woodlots looking out over the waters of Udalls Cove and Little Neck Bay.

I had arrived in Memorial Field that April morning of 2022 with a simple goal: to count birds. And as part of the Big Rock Wetland Restoration Project, I have come back twice a season since then, spring through fall, to survey the birdlife that visits the park’s rich ecosystem of tidal marsh, shoreline, and forest. The multi-year Big Rock project itself has critical goals to accomplish: It will strengthen and protect Douglas Manor’s eroding shoreline through implementation of dynamic living shoreline habitat, including the installation of 600 linear feet of oyster castles and the ultimate restoration of four acres of tidal wetland. And as the neighborhood is provided with a strong buffer from further erosion from storms and sea-level rise, we expect the new habitat will also support and enrich the neighborhood’s birdlife, bolstering the special character of this community.

Through its bird surveys, NYC Audubon has been documenting the astounding diversity of birds that already visit Memorial Field and surrounding areas throughout the year. So far, we’ve identified a total of 81 bird species, summarized in the table at right. Readers may be familiar with the area’s nesting Osprey, as well as its frequently visiting Bald Eagle. Less eye-catching highlights including breeding wetland species such as Marsh Wren, uncommon in NYC, whose reedy little song can be heard among the louder “Conk-a-REE!” of the park’s many nesting Red-winged Blackbirds—while offshore, three swallow species swoop overhead and Forster’s Terns feed their young. The many other waterbirds that visit the cove’s marshes and mudflats include six species of herons and egrets, which forage for food to carry to their nestlings on breeding islands in the East River and Long Island Sound, plus an assortment of diving and dabbling waterfowl that spend the winter in the area’s sheltered waters.

The park’s forest and shrubby areas also attract a surprising number of bird species: Yellow Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Orchard Oriole, Cedar Waxwing, and Warbling Vireo are just a few of the species

that likely nest here, while many other varieties of warblers, sparrows, vireos, kinglets, and flycatchers stop here to rest and refuel during migration. In highly developed New York City, which lies right along the Atlantic Migration Flyway, natural spaces like those around Memorial Field serve an outsized role in providing respite for the millions of migrating birds that pass through here, spring and fall.

At NYC Audubon, we look forward to witnessing the benefits to both birds and people that will follow from this restoration project, and to sharing our findings as our surveys continue. We believe that once completed, the Big Rock Restoration Project will serve as an example of responsible and practical environmental stewardship for other communities to follow.

*The Big Rock Wetland Restoration Project, led by Save the Sound, is being undertaken thanks to the partnership of Douglas Manor Environmental Association, Douglas Manor Association, Udalls Cove Preservation Committee, Hofstra University, NYC Audubon, Billion Oyster Project, and NYC Parks. The project is funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through the Long Island Sound Futures Fund and National Coastal Resilience Fund, US EPA Congressionally Directed Spending secured by Congressman Tom Suozzi, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Water Quality Improvement Program.*

**-Tod Winston, NYC Audubon**



Orchard Oriole by Laura Meyers



Yellow-crowned Night Heron by Bill VanderMolen

### BIRD SPECIES OBSERVED April 2022–November 2023

Brant	Great Blue Heron	Gray Catbird
Canada Goose	Osprey	Northern Mockingbird
Mute Swan	Cooper’s Hawk	American Robin
Mallard	Bald Eagle	Cedar Waxwing
American Black Duck	Belted Kingfisher	House Sparrow
Lesser Scaup	Red-bellied Woodpecker	House Finch
Bufflehead	Downy Woodpecker	American Goldfinch
Red-breasted Merganser	Northern Flicker	Field Sparrow
Rock Pigeon	Eastern Phoebe	Dark-eyed Junco
Mourning Dove	Eastern Kingbird	White-throated Sparrow
American Oystercatcher	Blue-headed Vireo	Savannah Sparrow
Killdeer	Warbling Vireo	Song Sparrow
Semipalmated Plover	Blue Jay	Swamp Sparrow
Greater Yellowlegs	American Crow	Orchard Oriole
Least Sandpiper	Fish Crow	Baltimore Oriole
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Black-capped Chickadee	Red-winged Blackbird
Laughing Gull	Tufted Titmouse	Brown-headed Cowbird
Ring-billed Gull	Tree Swallow	Common Grackle
Herring Gull	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	Common Yellowthroat
Great Black-backed Gull	Barn Swallow	American Redstart
Forster’s Tern	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Magnolia Warbler
Common Tern	Golden-crowned Kinglet	Yellow Warbler
Double-crested Cormorant	White-breasted Nuthatch	Blackpoll Warbler
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	House Wren	Palm Warbler
Black-crowned Night Heron	Marsh Wren	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Little Blue Heron	Carolina Wren	Northern Cardinal
Snowy Egret	European Starling	
Great Egret		

## THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING WETLANDS

By Walter Mugdan

At the start of the 20th Century, the Douglaston peninsula – the “neck” in “Little Neck” – was still largely surrounded by a thriving tidal marsh, dominated by the salt grass known as *Spartina*. The Udalls Cove marshes on the east extended south to the Long Island Railroad tracks, and the Alley Pond marshes on the west extended south as far as the present day Long Island Expressway. As the suburbs and bedroom communities thrived and grew, the City government and most developers were united in their intentions to eliminate these “swamps” to the maximum extent possible. They were generally viewed as useless areas from which diseases sprang.

*Looking south along Alley Creek*



Since the Dutch first settled Manhattan and the surrounding lands, filling swamps was an almost universal objective that served several purposes. Filling created more land for the evolving urban center; real estate has been a commodity in limited supply and nearly unlimited demand from the earliest days of the city. In addition, filled land extended into deeper water, creating a well defined shoreline with bulkheads that provided better landings for boats and ships, the primary means of transportation for people and goods among the many islands of which our area is made up.

From the very beginning, the swamps were also considered to be the best places in which to dispose of the growing city’s growing quantity of refuse. First the swampy areas surrounding Manhattan were filled; in places, the island’s shoreline is literally hundreds of feet further into the water compared to 400 years ago. Then the swamps of the outer Boroughs were targeted. Hundreds of acres of wetlands were used for landfills. The vast, grass-covered hill just south of Co-Op City in the Bronx, visible from the Douglaston Point, was one such landfill. Both LaGuardia and Kennedy Airports are built on landfills. Other landfills surrounded much of Jamaica Bay. The world’s largest landfill, Fresh Kills (now closed), occupies hundreds of acres on Staten Island and, at 400

feet high, is reputed to be the highest point on the eastern seaboard between Florida and Maine.

The extensive marshes of the Flushing Bay estuary extended south nearly as far as Union Turnpike and became major dumping grounds during the first several decades of the 20th century. Because most buildings at the time were heated with coal, huge quantities of ash and cinders were dumped there, often still hot. The garbage would catch fire and continue to burn for months or even years. Putrid, stinking smoke plumes rose from every corner. (This hellish landscape is the setting for memorable scenes towards the end of Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*.) In the late 1930’s the huge dump was covered over with soil and became the site of the 1939 and the 1964-65 World’s Fairs. Most Fair buildings were later demolished, and the site was restored as Flushing Meadows Park ... but the marshes are irrevocably gone.

Filling of the swamps proceeded, like the growth of the City itself, outwards from Manhattan. When the Bayside, Douglaston and Little Neck areas were being developed the City prepared official maps that reflected the anticipated filling of hundreds of acres of marsh on both sides of the Douglaston peninsula. Streets were mapped starting just west of Douglaston Parkway and extending all the way to Bayside. The same was done on the Udalls Cove side of Douglaston to the east.

In the early 20th century, a large coal-fired power plant was built on the east side of Alley Creek, north of Northern Boulevard. The plant provided power to a trolley that ran from Flushing all the way to Hicksville. Wharves were built along the creek for unloading coal and other goods. The power plant is long gone, as is Kiddie City, the amusement park that operated there in the 1950s and early 60s. A mixture of woods and marshes have since reclaimed the area, but hints of the old wharves can still be seen in the stumps of wooden pilings along the sides of the creek.

*1949: The abandoned Douglaston power plant, a few years before it was demolished.*



Douglas Manor was developed in the first decades of the 20th Century by the Rickert-Finlay Company. By that time a seawall had been built along the west side of the peninsula, exchanging a natural shoreline with its beaches and marshes for the tidier waterfront we know today. On the east, a stretch of pristine marsh was used as a refuse dump; it was eventually covered over and became today's Memorial Field. A few houses were built, partially on fill, on the east side of Douglas Road, along Gabler's Creek. A small pond across from Memorial Field, at the corner of Douglas and Richmond Roads, was filled in for a new house in the late 1950's; the springs that fed that pond continue to run today, which is why there is a constant stream of water down the "300 block" of Richmond Road. A commercial boat yard was established on the east side of Gabler's Creek at what is now Virginia Point.

*Boat yard in 1911 at what is now Virginia Point; Douglas Manor in the background.*



Filling of the Douglaston and Little Neck "swamps" started in earnest around 1960. On the west side, behind PS-98, a developer filled in a large area of marshlands, laid out streets, and built a model home at the intersection of 38th Drive and 233rd Streets (south of Parson's Point, which was itself developed a few years later). A family named Guidice – a couple with three children – moved into the model home. Alas, the weight of the structure on the unstable fill caused the house to settle. One tragic night the gas line serving the house consequently cracked. The house exploded. Two members of the family died and the other three were severely injured. The tragedy halted development for a few years, but in due course a new developer completed the build-out of the area, now named Doug-Bay. The homes were all electric, with no gas service.

At the southern end of Alley Creek, construction of the Long Island Expressway eliminated the last remnants of Alley Pond. (A good deal of the waste concrete rubble from the removal of the LIE's predecessor, Horace Harding Boulevard, was dumped into the Udalls Cove Ravine opposite St. Anastasia's Church on Northern Boulevard. (The Udalls Cove Preservation Committee removed about 1.5 million pounds of that concrete between 2003 and 2006.)

On the east side of Douglaston, a development of single- and multiple-family homes was built to the north of the Little Neck Railroad Station, along streets laid out on either side of what was originally called Old House Landing Road and which was later renamed Little Neck Parkway.

## **'SILENT SPRING' AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL DECADE**

By the latter half of the 1960s, the great environmental awakening catalyzed by the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring* had given rise to a fundamentally different understanding of "swamps" than had ever before been held by our society. The emerging science of "ecology" – the study of how living organisms interact with each other and their environment – explained that wetlands are one of the most productive ecosystems on earth, and are vital to the health of aquatic habitats.

An unprecedented spate of national and state legislation followed during "the Environmental Decade" – a 12-year span from 1969 through 1980 that saw the enactment of essentially all of our major environmental laws. Among these were the federal Clean Water Act (1972), in which Congress for the first time gave protection to wetlands; and two New York State laws giving protection to tidal wetlands (1972) and freshwater wetlands (1975).

The rising wave of environmental activism in our own area brought then Mayor John Lindsay to the northeast corner of Queens in 1969 for his famous "Walk in the Alley." Accompanied by some 2000 citizens who demanded that what little of nature was left to us should be saved, Lindsay toured the Alley Creek area north of the Long Island Expressway and concluded that it should be preserved as a northerly extension of Alley Pond Park.

*1969: The Walk in the Alley; Mayor John Lindsay is circled.*



## FORMATION OF THE UDALLS COVE PRESERVATION COMMITTEE

Meanwhile, from “Bit ‘O Bay” – her house on Douglas Road – a middle-aged woman named Aurora Gareiss watched as the Little Neck marshes east of Gabler’s Creek were filled and scores of homes were built. Just beyond her backyard, the large salt marsh of some 100 acres straddling the Queens/Nassau County border still thrived. But then, in 1969, the Village of Great Neck Estates announced plans to fill in most of that marsh for an 18-hole golf course.

*Aurora Gareiss at her former home named "Bit O' Bay."  
The Udalls Cove salt marsh is behind her. Photo by Jon Meyer*



Aurora Gareiss cried, “Enough!” When she expressed her deep concerns about the loss of the wetlands to her neighbor Ralph Kamhi, he replied that the voices of a few disgruntled individuals would never make a difference. What was needed, he said, was an organization that would be better able to gain the attention of government officials. Aurora agreed, and so the Udalls Cove Preservation Committee (UCPC) was born on October 20, 1969. In February 1970 some 350 supporters of the nascent organization and a like-minded group in Great Neck Estates came out to march in protest of the golf course plan. On April 22, 1970 – the first Earth Day – UCPC held a cleanup of the trash-ridden swamp that bordered Sandhill Road (known locally as the Back Road), including the pond that would later be named for Aurora. Over a dozen car wrecks were pulled out, along with tons of rubbish ... and a tradition was born. UCPC’s 55th annual cleanup will be held April 13, 2024. The cleanups no longer yield the heavy refuse loads of the first few years; today, the volunteers mostly collect large quantities of plastic bottles, bags and other debris.

UCPC’s efforts to preserve the remaining undeveloped areas between Douglaston, Little Neck and Great Neck were ultimately successful. On the Queens side of the county line, Udalls Cove Park extends north from Northern Boulevard to the open waters of Udalls Cove (although the park is divided into segments by the LIRR and the Back Road). On the Nassau side, the Village of Great Neck Estates dropped its plans to build a golf course and likewise protected the area as a park. Acquisition of the privately held properties designated for inclusion in Udalls Cove Park did not take place all at once and is still not complete. Today, more than 90% of the area is publicly owned, but a few acres in the Ravine remain to be acquired. Completion of that long process remains UCPC’s primary goal.



*Udalls Cove looking North  
Photo by Walter Mugdan*

## DMEA HALLOWEEN



The DMEA's Annual Halloween Festival was held at Memorial Field on Saturday, October 28. We were joined by Douglaston Local Development Corporation (DLDC), who hosted a fun craft table and Divine Wisdom, who offered face painting. Our haunted forest delighted the attendees, as did our first time "Birds of Prey" exhibition. Families loved seeing live eagles and other birds up close. Many of these birds call our shoreline and Little Neck Bay home. We also held a costume contest, with categories such as best homemade costume and best pet costume. And, we held our apple pie contest, with a judge from the new bakery by the Little Neck train station, Fern and Aurora Dessert Shop.





Douglas Manor Environmental Association

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**WINTERFEST 2023**

On Saturday, December 9th, the Douglas Manor Environmental Association was excited to participate in the Annual Douglaston Local Development Corporation (DLDC) Winter Festival at the Douglaston Station Plaza.

A sunny winter day encouraged our neighbors to bring their holiday spirit to enjoy music, magic, ice skating, vendors, and great food. DMEA Board member Catherine Touwsma brought her amazing homemade palmier cookies and Mary Alice Dadras and Katherine Mueller shared their homemade chocolate chip cookies and brownies, respectively. We also offered hot cider for sale.

The DMEA was on hand to share the details of our work, highlighting our Big Rock Project, which will start construction this year.



Greeting State Senator Toby Ann Stavisky  
Photo by Jon Gallo

