Is an Environmental Health Fund Missing from the Lower Merion Township Budget?

By Isa Betancourt

With alarming news about an insect apocalypse, threatened pollinator populations, invasive species, and climate change, “now is a better time than ever to incorporate a ‘Wildlife and Environment Fund’ into the [Lower Merion Township] budget,” says Rumaan Malhotra, PhD candidate in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department at the University of Michigan who studies human impacts on wildlife. Such a fund would support wildlife protection, restoration, monitoring, and beautification.

There is rising concern from Lower Merion residents about the increasing population density in the township. Apartment complexes continue to be proposed and built within the Township, despite the public schools exceeding maximum student capacity. Many residents are not happy about this, according to discussions on the popular “Lower Merion Community Network” Facebook group.

High population densities and land development put pressure on environmental resources and green spaces. This may in turn affect the health of residents.

Scientists have documented and recognized positive effects of an intact natural environment on human mental health. For example, a 2015 study from Stanford University found that walks in nature improved mental health through reducing rumination, which is linked with increased incidence of mental health problems including depression.

Yet, “the natural environment faces growing pressures,” says Malhotra. He says that with rising density and climate change pressures, the natural environment as we know it is at serious risk of degradation and disrepair. “We are lucky to have lived during a time when we didn’t have to think critically about our use of environmental resources. We have reached the end of that era in human history,” says Malhotra.

The township manages funds for programs, equipment, and activities to provide “the highest level of public service delivery and quality of life” for its residents, according to its mission. This includes road maintenance, refuse collection, sewer maintenance, public school operations, police and fire services, and township administrative salaries. The suggested environmental fund fits into the township’s mission.

In addition to being aesthetically beautiful and important in their own right, Stephen Mason, PhD candidate in the Biodiversity, Ecology, and Environmental Sciences Department at Drexel University, says that “wildlife serve important roles in our environment.”

Entomologists at Cornell University estimate that in the United States alone, pollination contributes more than S15 billion annually to the economy. Although agriculture is not a significant source of income for Lower Merion residents, Mason says that, “pollination is a glimpse into one of the many ecosystem services provided by wildlife that benefit humans.”

Another example is decomposition. Wildlife breaks down organic material, making it available to other organisms. They cycle nutrients. “It would involve a disproportionate and unsustainable amount of effort from humans to operate without a healthy wild organism population and environment,” says Mason.

The township budget allocated $91,000 to 11 non-profits in 2019. One of the 11 non-profits was the Lower Merion Conservancy, which monitors open spaces and waterways in the township. Still, their fraction of the budget is a drop in the bucket compared with the $370,000 spent on salt for road maintenance, which contributes to environmental degradation.