

Clarke Caton Hintz

Architects
Planners
Landscape Architects

Station Place
400 Sullivan Way
Trenton NJ 08628
clarkecatonhintz.com
Tel: 609 883 8383
Fax: 609 883 4044



Essex County Reptile and Education Building at the Turtle Back Zoo in West Orange, NJ Opens

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TRENTON, NJ – Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo cut the ribbon and opened the Essex County Reptile and Education Building at the Turtle Back Zoo in West Orange, NJ. The building houses 20 different types of reptiles, including a pair of Black Dragon Monitor Lizards, believed to be a new species recently discovered in Malaysia. Turtle Back Zoo is the only location in the world where such animals are on display. “The opening of this building is a significant milestone in the history and revitalization of the Zoo. This is a one-of-a-kind facility with a unique collection of exotic animals that cannot be seen anywhere else. It puts Turtle Back Zoo on the map as one of the premiere places to learn about reptiles,” DiVincenzo said. “The modern classroom space will help us to expand and enhance our education and outreach programs and our new entrances make the Zoo accessible and user-friendly”, he added.

John Clarke, FAIA
Philip Caton, AICP
Carl Hintz, AICP, ASLA
John Hatch, AIA
George Hibbs, AIA
Brian Slaugh, AICP
Brian Slaugh, AICP
Michael Sullivan, AICP

“What is happening at Turtle Back Zoo is truly amazing,” said Dr. Jeremy Goodman, Director of the Zoo. “We’re not just exhibiting animals anymore, we’re getting endangered animals, rare



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animals, participating in nationwide breeding programs....We're getting animal transfers from all over the country, Goodman said. "The changes we are making are transforming Turtle Back into a top-notch educational and recreational facility that is a fun place for children and people of all ages to visit."

The new exhibits are reigniting interest in Turtle Back, which broke its all-time attendance record last year and hopes to attract even more visitors this year. By building year round exhibits and adding classroom space inside the reptile house, the zoo has put itself on course for accreditation with the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA), a distinction that will make the zoo eligible for more government funding and more exotic animals.

Clarke Caton Hintz Architects designed the Education Building and Reptile Exhibit. The new complex will provide two new classrooms, a large gift shop, reptile exhibit area and administrative space. This complex will replace two existing outdated classroom and administrative facilities which were built during the 1960's. The new 12,000 square foot building and renovations will provide much needed space for zoo activities and administration.

The building is divided into three main areas with differing roof heights to match the scale of the adjacent zoo buildings. The exterior materials compliment the existing Tudor and wood framed zoo buildings and provide a jungle-like flavor with heavy timber entrances, wood members, corrugated metal panels and large overhangs. The zoo side presents a playful entrance with signage and tile reptile 'fossils'. The airy, light-filled gift shop has large glass windows facing the zoo and exposed wood trusses. A wood columned 'porch' provides pedestrian shelter and connects the building to



the main pathway. The improved entry gates and ticketing areas will better handle visitor entry and exit and a separate group entrance will provide access and waiting areas for the large number of school children who visit the zoo.

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The new flexible classroom space will allow for increased educational activities with adjacent space for animal holding, offices and public restrooms. The museum quality reptile exhibits will house a number of smaller exhibit tanks and three large exhibits, the main feature being an area for Black Dragons. Interpretive exhibits will allow for visitor interaction and public education. Site improvements will greatly improve building accessibility and help alleviate flooding problems. In addition to providing an improved Master Plan for the zoo, Clarke Caton Hintz had previously re-designed the visitor entrance area with the creation of a new plaza.



The Essex County Park System was created in 1895 and was the first county park system in the United States. Turtle Back Zoo is located in Essex County's South Mountain Reservation and was opened to the public in 1963. There are over 80 different species of native and exotic animals from five continents featured at Turtle Back Zoo.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Richard A. Carbone, *Marketing Manager*
(609) 883-8383
RCarbone@cchnj.com

