

**ESSEX COUNTY EXECUTIVE DIVINCENZO ANNOUNCES PLANS
FOR 41st ANNUAL ESSEX COUNTY CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL**
Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ Joins as Marquee Festival Sponsor

Newark, NJ – Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo, Jr. outlined the schedule of events for the 41st annual Essex County Cherry Blossom Festival on Friday, March 31st. The festival, which will be held Saturday, April 8th to Sunday, April 23rd, highlights the blooming season of the 5,000 Cherry Blossom trees. The Executive also welcomed Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ as the Marquee Sponsor of the festival.

“The natural beauty of the cherry blossoms has been attracting visitors to the park since they were first planted there in the late 1920s. The festival has helped unify the community, highlighted the benefits of Branch Brook Park and the local neighborhood, and enabled the public to enjoy the blooming trees in a variety of ways,” DiVincenzo said. “We invite the public to come out and enjoy our display of 5,000 trees, which is larger than the national display in Washington, DC, and the most diverse collection in the world,” he added.

“We have an exciting line-up of activities where visitors can admire the beauty of the trees, learn about the history of our Parks System and engage in Japanese cultural demonstrations. The blossoming trees create a pink and white canopy that is perfect for picnics, photographs and simple enjoyment,” the Executive said. “We also want to welcome Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ as our new Marquee Sponsor. Horizon has been an anchor in Essex County and we are pleased to have them as our partner for these community events,” he added.

“We are happy to sponsor the Cherry Blossom Festival,” Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ Chairman, CEO and President Robert A. Marino said. “As a native of Newark and lifelong resident of Essex County, wherever my life has taken me, I have never forgotten my roots. Part of Horizon’s mission goal is to promote healthy lifestyles and the Cherry Blossom Festival really works well with our mission to make our community more healthy,” he added.

Community leaders and elected officials shared their appreciation of the Cherry Blossoms during the press conference.

“I am happy that the hard work of Joe DiVincenzo and the Branch Brook Park Alliance has made Branch Brook Park the place with the most cherry blossoms in America,” Freeholder Patricia Sebold said. “This natural spectacular attracts people from all over the country and the world. It truly is an amazing display,” Freeholder Len Luciano said.

“Branch Brook Park has become a major attraction because of the attention the County Executive and the Branch Brook Park Alliance have given it. The Cherry Blossoms invigorate the local economy with the number of people who are attracted here and allows us to showcase the park and the things happening in Newark,” Newark North Ward Councilman Anibal Ramos said.

“It’s wonderful that we have the opportunity be so close to nature and the Cherry Blossoms,” Deputy Chief of Staff William Payne said, reminiscing about his family having picnics and spending time in Branch Brook when he was growing up.

“Nature does nurture, so there never is a bad day in Branch Brook Park. There is something magical when the Cherry Blossoms are in bloom, and they really become the incandescent stars of the landscape,” Branch Brook Park Alliance Co-Chair Barbara Bell Coleman said.

The *41st Annual Essex County Cherry Blossom Festival* includes the following events:

Cherry Blossom Challenge Annual Bike Race

Race through Branch Brook Park in the Cherry Blossom Challenge, a competitive New Jersey tradition, or cheer on the cyclists while enjoying a day in the fresh, spring air. Various races occur throughout the morning, with the first race at 7 a.m. and the last race at 12 Noon. **Registration fees apply to racers.** It’s free to enter the park and watch. The *Cherry Blossom Challenge Bike Race* will be held as follows:

Date: Saturday, April 8, 2017
Time: 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Place: Essex County Branch Brook Park
Heller Parkway
Newark, NJ

Cherry Blossom 10K Run

Run through the historic cherry tree groves in this race that is sanctioned by the USATF and is Women’s Master’s Championship race. A portion of the race proceeds benefit the Special Olympics. Online registration can be done at www.compuscore.com. Same day registration begins at 8 a.m. Advanced registration is recommended. Race starts at 10 a.m. It’s free to enter the park and watch. The *Cherry Blossom 10K Run* will be held as follows:

Date: Sunday, April 9, 2017
Time: Registration: 8 a.m.
10K Race: 10 a.m.
Place: Essex County Branch Brook Park
Cherry Blossom Center
Mill Street
Newark, NJ

Cherry Blossom Guided Tours

Have knowledgeable guides take you on a 45-minute journey and point out over 120 years of history hidden within Essex County Branch Brook Park’s structure and design. Tours leave from the Essex County Cherry Blossom Welcome Center daily at 11 a.m., 12 Noon, 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. Transportation around the park is provided. Tickets are \$5 person and can be reserved by calling 973-433-7469. Tickets also will be available for purchase in the Cherry Blossom Welcome Center on days the tours are being held. Space is limited. For group or private tour bookings, call 973-433-7469. The *Trolley Tours* will be held as follows:

Dates: Sunday, April 16th through Saturday, April 22nd
Times: 11 a.m., 12 Noon, 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.
Place: Essex County Branch Brook Park
Cherry Blossom Welcome Center

**Mill Street
Newark, NJ**

1-Mile Fun Run and Walk

Celebrate the arrival of spring and get fit with your family or friends. Children are encouraged to run individually or as a member of a school team. Schools and groups must register in advance by calling 973-268-3500. **This is a free event.** All participants will receive a commemorative T-shirt. The *Fun Run and Walk* will be held as follows:

Date: Saturday, April 22, 2017
Time: 8 a.m. Registration
10 a.m. Race
Place: Essex County Branch Brook Park
Southern Division, Prudential Concert Grove
Newark, NJ

Essex County Family Day

The public is encouraged to come out and enjoy an afternoon of family-fun with a variety of events including live performances, children's activities, a fishing derby and more. Bring your own picnic lunch or purchase food from vendors who will be on site and enjoy the picturesque views overlooking the lake. **Admission is free but food and other merchandise will be for sale.** The *Family Day* will be held as follows:

Date: Saturday, April 22, 2017
Time: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Place: Essex County Branch Brook Park
Southern Division, Prudential Concert Grove
Newark, NJ

Bloomfest

Enjoy a family day in the pink park! A packed schedule of events includes cultural demonstrations, children's activities, live music, a crafter's marketplace, food and more at the Cherry Blossom Welcome Center. Winners from the "Why My Essex County Park is Important to Me" essay contest for 4th graders and "Cherry Blossom Poster Contest" for 6th graders will be recognized on stage. Additional musical performances will be held at the Prudential Concert Grove. **Admission is free; food and merchandise will be for sale.** *Bloomfest* will be as follows:

Date: Sunday, April 23, 2017
Times: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Place: Essex County Branch Brook Park
Main Areas: Cherry Blossom Center
Mill Street, Newark, NJ
Second Stage: Southern Division, Prudential Concert Grove
Newark, NJ

Historic Tours by Cell Phone

This free, self-guided historic walking tour can be accessed by cell phone or smart phone. Spend the day exploring all 72 tour stops or pick and choose your favorites. One call to 973-433-9047 or a scan of the bar code at each tour stop unlocks a world of park history and horticultural information.

History, driving directions, a complete list of activities and a web cam where the public can monitor the cherry trees for the peak of the bloom season can be accessed by visiting www.essexcountynj.org and clicking on the Cherry Blossom link. More information can also be obtained by calling 973-433-9047.

The Essex County Cherry Blossom Festival is hosted by the Essex County Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs. It is sponsored by Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ.

Cherry Tree Planting Campaign

The general public and business community can participate in a fundraising campaign to purchase and plant Cherry Trees in Essex County Branch Brook Park. Each new Cherry Tree can be purchased for \$225 from the Essex County Parks Foundation, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Contributions to the foundation are tax-deductible, checks can be made out to “*Essex County Parks Foundation*” and mailed to the **Essex County Parks Foundation, 115 Clifton Avenue, Newark, NJ 07104**. Please write “*Cherry Blossom Campaign*” on the memo line of the check.

Donations are being recognized in a “Cherry Blossom Giving Tree” located at the entrance of the Essex County Cherry Blossom Welcome Center. Donations of \$250 are recognized with a leaf on the Giving Tree and donations of \$1,000 or more are recognized with special plaques on the Giving Tree wall. Donors can choose to have their name inscribed on the Giving Tree or make the contribution in memory of a loved one.

Many of the original Cherry Trees planted in Branch Brook Park were donated to the Essex County Park System by the Bamberger and Mrs. Felix Fuld family in 1927. At its height, there were about 2,500 Cherry Trees in Branch Brook Park. According to the Branch Brook Park Alliance, the original Cherry Trees began to die because of old age and, in 2006, it was determined the original collection had diminished significantly.

The Essex County Park System was created in 1895 and is the first county park system established in the United States. The Park System consists of more than 6,000 acres and has 23 parks, five reservations, an environmental center, a zoo, Treetop Adventure Course, ice skating rink, roller skating rink, three public golf courses, golf driving range, two miniature golf courses, three off-leash dog facilities, a castle and the Presby Memorial Iris Gardens. Branch Brook Park was created in 1895 and is the first park in Essex County’s system. At 359.72 acres, it is the largest county park in Essex.