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Residents demand Greene commissioners preserve Ryerson Park's waterways

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WAYNESBURG – The Greene County commissioners' meeting room was packed Thursday morning as residents expressed their concerns about mining near Kent Run, a stream that flows into Ryerson Station State Park in Richhill Township. The stream crosses paths where longwall mining is being conducted by Consol Energy's Bailey Mine, prompting a fight between environmentalists and the coal company. The Center for Coalfield Justice, a local environmental advocacy organization, and Sierra Club, have been at odds with Consol supporters in recent weeks after a Jan. 24 ruling by state Environmental Hearing Board Judge Steven Beckman that permits the company to continue mining in its 3L longwall panel, but prohibits it from coming within 100 feet of Kent Run until an appeal is litigated. Veronica Coptis of Carmichaels, who is deputy directory for Coalfield Justice, told commissioners she was "deeply disappointed" by the mischaracterization on social media that protecting Kent Run would cost mining jobs. "You know me and my family. My husband was a coal miner. The jobs at the Bailey Mine are not threatened by Consol leaving a 100-foot barrier before Kent Run," she said. Wheeling Creek Watershed Conservancy president Attilia Shumaker of Sycamore urged commissioners to support protecting Kent Run that supplies Ryerson Park with water for trout fishing and other water-related developments being planned for the future. "Saving this park means saving this county," Shumaker said. "Polen Run is already gone. We can't

allow this to happen.”Polen Run, another important stream feeding into Ryerson Park was part of the original Coalfield Justice filing, but was undermined before Beckman’s ruling was implemented. Commissioner Archie Trader responded that “30 percent of the county budget comes from coal” severance taxes. Commissioner Zimmerman added that it was heartening to see so many residents at the meeting and thanked them for voicing their concerns. “We’re all about making things better for Greene County and we’re here to listen and help if we can,” he said. “Don’t do it over social media. Come talk to us.” Consol has previously said changing its longwall to another panel in order to avoid coming near Kent Run would be costly and problematic. It estimates the panel that isn’t mined in the 100-foot buffer zone is worth about \$15.3 million. The disagreement prompted about 200 coal miners, mostly from Consol’s Bailey Mine, to protest Jan. 9 in front of Coalfield Justice’s headquarters in Washington. Greene County Commissioner Dave Coder said in a written statement at the time that “political radicals” were interfering with the ability for the miners to earn a living. Center Township resident Chuck Hunnell said that without enough water resources the state park faces a bleak future. Hunnell added that he wants to make sure Greene County is ready when the coal reserves are gone. “We’re not anti coal,” Hunnell said. “Coal isn’t going to last forever and we’re interested in the transition. I don’t consider myself a radical. Is preserving our water radical? The point is something has to be done. Perhaps if we made plans for the future together we would not have these divides.”

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