



C.R. Nelson/for the Observer-Reporter
Park manager Alan Johnson showing
the work being done on the new pool
complex in October 2020

Ryerson Station State Park gets by ... with a little help from its Friends

Story by C.R. Nelson



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 From left, State Park Pittsburgh Division Manager Kevin Blair, Ryerson manager Casse Criss and State Parks Regional Manager Jeremy Rekich at the April 3 Friends of Ryerson Station meeting



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 New Ryerson manager Casse Criss talks about an upcoming stream restoration project at Dryerson 2024

There was a fine drizzle on April 3 as I pulled into the parking lot at Ryerson Station State Park Visitors Center with a platter of fresh-baked cookies from South Fork Kitchen & Fixins’ — our newest local eatery — to deliver. Spring was definitely here, and so were the friends, neighbors, local business owners and state officials who came this evening to hear what State Parks Regional Manager Jeremy Rekich had to say. His long-awaited, much updated timeline for the massive stream restoration project, now scheduled to start in 2026, was breaking news. Everyone had questions. We freshly elected board members of Friends of Ryerson Station — FORS — were here to chair this public meeting, provide refreshments, ask many of those questions ... and have a stack of membership applications on the table beside the sign-in sheet. (Thanks for joining! You know who you are!)

Scott Hackenburg retired from the Bureau of State Parks in 2021 after “35 years of working in parks, 20 years living in them!” Then, he moved to Greene County to be closer to Steeler Country and started Pursley Creek Farm. Now he’s back in action as a savvy, good-natured Friend, with first-hand knowledge of how a state park can drive the local economy and how Friends groups can help make good things happen. “I look around and I see a lot of potential,” Hackenburg said, looking around at all of us who came. “This is a beautiful park. My role as chairman of the Friends group is to move forward. When I hear stories from people about how it used to be, I listen, then tell them what’s past is past. We’re moving forward. What I’d like to get tonight is where we stand on some of the projects because I’m new and have nothing to base it on.”

“Some of this is new to me, too,” newest manager Casse Criss agreed as she introduced Rekich.

Rekich’s happy smile spoke volumes. “I just got this timeline yesterday. We got the notice to proceed! All that slope analysis really did pay off because we found a lot of issues we want to resolve in the design so we don’t have a lot of change orders when it comes to this large a project. We want to make sure the money for construction goes to construction. We’ve been taking our time on purpose. We want to do it right.”

For those of you who didn’t make it to the meeting, Rekich also has the official short answer to a question that keeps popping up as the years go by and that overgrown stretch of what used to be a lake, anchored to a broken dam, is still painfully visible to anyone who passes through the park on Bristoria Road.

“I get that question all the time! All the money is still there. It’s legislatively mandated that it can only be spent here. It can’t be put into the general fund. And the amount has not changed.”

The money in question is the 34 million dollar settlement DCNR received from CONSOL Coal, Inc. in 2013. That money would compensate for the loss of Duke Lake (1960-2005). Portions of the settlement have already been used for some impressive improvements. When testing in 2015 showed the ground was still moving, DCNR withdrew its permit to rebuild the dam and a new task force, Revisioning Ryerson, was formed. The group held a series of meetings with residents, organizations and local officials that year, and those of us who participated put together a wish list for the future of Ryerson. That wish list has been slowly com-

ing true, one major project at a time. Upgrading what the public still had access to came first, and those who came to hike, hunt, swim and picnic were the first to be impressed.

The campground now has upgraded hookups, cozy cabins, a playground and modern shared amenities. This is what makes Ryerson a popular woody retreat throughout the year. During the COVID lockdown of 2020 into 2021, there was time to do the heavy work of excavating ground for the new pool, waterpark, modern pool complex and solar parking canopies. Under the watchful eye of park manager Alan Johnson, who became a dad during his tenure, there would be plenty of shaded areas to protect kids from the sun.

Rekich was here for the pool's ribbon cutting on July 7, 2022, along with State Parks Director John Hallas and DCNR Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn, elected officials, visitors galore and a beaming lineup of local lifeguards who continue to keep the summer pool seasons fully staffed.

This last major stream restoration project, headed by Land Studies, Inc., will bring a transformation to the landscape along Bristoria Road. That upper branch of Wheeling Creek will be rechanneled through wetlands, designed to be a "meadow and a stream bottom, taking it back down to 14,000 years ago, to what it should look like in Pennsylvania," Rekich was happy to tell us. "They keep a lot of the water just beneath the surface cover, which cools it and makes sure that trout can sustain."

The stream is "actually designed to flood and when you have higher water. You should be able to launch kayaks in the spring and fall. I'm a big kayaker and I'm extremely interested in this. I think it's a cool concept. One of the things we've heard from the community is they want interaction with the stream. So there are areas where you can easily get into it with a kayak, and you can easily fish it during trout season."

The crowning feature of this world-class restoration project will be the three-acre, off-stream pond in the meadow below the pool. "We tried to do the largest that we could without making it a DEP-permitted impoundment." The pond is designed to be both natural and accessible, with ample shoreline for both kids and adults to fish. "I have a stack of drawings that show the design structures for the fish and aquatics. I'll get those phase drawings, and we'll do a breakdown of the funding too. I can come back to a Friends meeting for that. The task force is done. It's time to transition to a Friends group. That's the best way to get info back to us on details as we work, and we can work together to make adjustments."

For those who grew up fishing, paddling and playing along its shady banks, Duke Lake was their world. For those of us who moved here, the magic of Ryerson began with our first picnics, hikes and sun-soaked days at the pool, maybe taking a paddle or dropping a line. Over the years, I turned herons in the shallows and people paddling into art for my Greene Country Calendar and shared the love. Our first informal Friends group hosted community festivals, starting in 1994 when park manager Jeff Anna came to manage

and stayed to raise a family and energize a community. This marked the beginning of unforgettable fall weekends, when apple butter got stirred over the fire, local crafters and musicians showed their stuff, reenactors camped out like they did when this was the Western Frontier and our kids learned as much as we did about history, ecology and the power of people working together. Festivals and gatherings have continued after the lake was gone, supported by those managers who came after Jeff Anna.

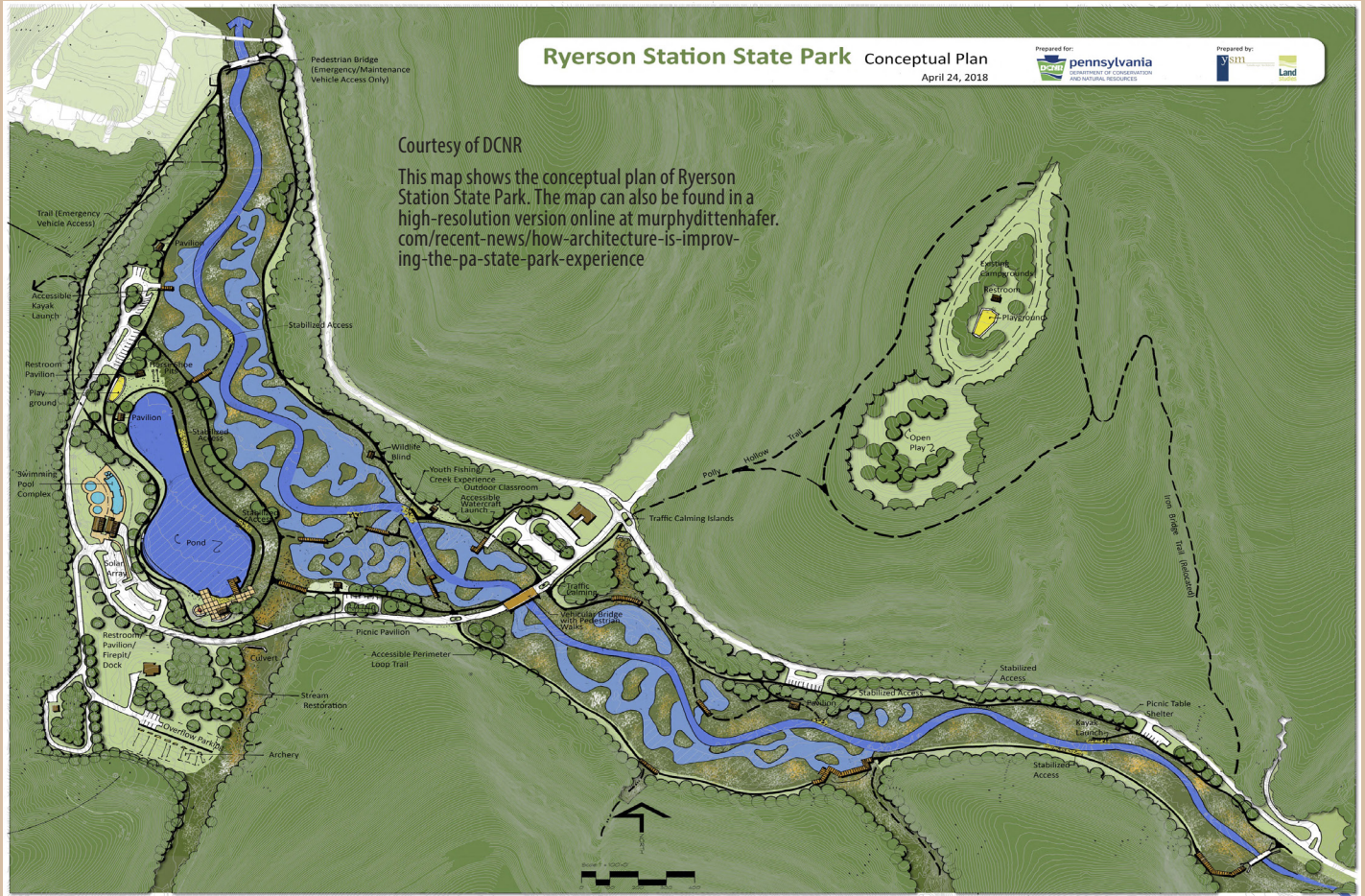
Tri-State Citizens Mining Network, a coalition formed in 1994 after Congress created federal regulations on surface coal mining operations, gathered at the park in 2006 for a first "wake for the lake." Two years later, the group became the Center for Coalfield Justice, and Dryerson Festival was born. This new summer event found its educational niche, keeping friends, neighbors, local officials and legislators in the loop as DCNR litigated for compensation for the damage done to a state park.

When Pitt graduate Lindsey Aranson went looking for a project to do for her master's thesis at American University in 2024, she talked to fiance Alex Downing, who does media work with CCJ. "He told me about Ryerson and the image of a lake that had no water stuck in my mind." She and her crew of fellow filmmakers from her graduate media program began camping out at the park that fall, as Aranson interviewed and filmed, then returned to interview and film some more. "I wanted to learn more and did a lot of research about the history of the park and started talking to people in the community. And by coming here to do my documentary, I've learned to love the park myself."

On April 3, Aranson was back to listen, learn and ask questions like the rest of us.

(Of course, she took an application!)





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far left: Remembering Duke Lake at Dryerson 2024

left: Lindsey Aranson and Sarah King attended the April 3 Friends meeting to gather information and interviews

above: FORS chair Scott Hackenburg and new member Lisa DePaoli meet at RGB Coffee in Waynesburg. For more information, call 717-360-8326.