



PA House of Representatives
Republican Policy Committee

414, Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120
(717) 260-6144

Rep. Joshua D. Kail
Chairman

PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing
“Removing Obstacles to Opportunity to Save the Cokeburg Dam”

February 21, 2024, at 1:00 p.m.

Cokeburg Volunteer Fire Department
171 Lincoln St.
Cokeburg, PA 15324

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| 1:00 p.m. | Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance |
| 1:10 p.m. | Hon. Holly Detts-Dranzo
<i>President, Cokeburg Borough Council</i> |
| 1:15 p.m. | Dave Lambert
<i>Chief, Cokeburg Volunteer Fire Department</i> |
| 1:20 p.m. | Questions for Testifiers |
| 1:50 p.m. | Closing Comments |



Testifier Biographies

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“Removing Obstacles to Opportunity to Save the Cokeburg Dam”

Hon. Holly Detts-Dranzo President, Cokeburg Borough Council

An educator for over 33 years and a board member for the Bentleyville Public Library, Holly currently serves as the President of the Cokeburg Borough Council.

Dave Lambert Chief, Cokeburg Volunteer Fire Department

Under the leadership of Chief Dave Lambert, a dedicated public safety veteran with over 28 years of service, the Cokeburg Volunteer Fire Department responds to an average of 250 calls annually, a number that continues to rise each year.

Established in 1947, the Cokeburg Volunteer Fire Department consists of approximately 25 dedicated volunteers who respond to emergencies in Cokeburg Borough and North Bethlehem Township.



February 13, 2024

Good afternoon esteemed guests, 50th Representative Bud Cook, and the residents of the great Borough of Cokeburg.

My name is Holly Detts-Dranzo, President of Cokeburg Council and I want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to be with us today. We really appreciate the support and attention this project has received.

We are gathered here to discuss the many issues and roadblocks with making the Cokeburg Dam a viable resource in the community once again.

For many of the long-term residents of Cokeburg and surrounding communities this dam has been a beacon of recreation and a symbol of everything wholesome to our youth.

The Cokeburg Dam began with the Bethlehem Mine Corporation which constructed the dam, also known as Reservoir number 4, in 1902, for use in their mining operations. In 1953, Cokeburg Borough acquired the dam and began using it as a water source for their residents. In addition, the body of water also became a source of recreation for the community.

From 1958 until 1992, the dam was stocked with fish for recreation.

In 1992 Cokeburg Borough leased the dam to Ellsworth Sportsmen's Club where they hosted events including an annual tournament for their members and outside groups. This continued until the Borough was forced to cancel the lease due to receiving grant money.

As an educator in the community for over 33 years, I would often hear stories from my students excited about the upcoming "Kid's Day" at the dam.

It was a great feeling to see my former and current students with their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. It was not uncommon to see folks teaching and mentoring not only their families, but others who needed help with baiting hooks, reeling in fish, and looking for spots where fish were swimming.

Kid's Day was sponsored and was open to everyone in all of the local communities and became a great way to unite and bring us all together. It was not uncommon

to see cars and trucks lined Route 917 and parking went well into neighborhood streets. It was a well-received activity and was always welcomed by Cokeburg Borough. This is just one of numerous examples of the impact the Cokeburg Dam had on the community.

This community fun continued on for many years, in 2012 I transferred to 8th grade to teach ELA. The boys would ask each other, "Do you want to go fishing after school? Are you fishing today?". I finally asked, "Where do you fish?". The boys said, "Cokeburg Dam." I would see not only middle school kids walking with their tackle boxes and fishing rods, but also adults doing the same. Providing this resource to the community provided a safe place for kids and adults to gather in a constructive positive way.

I share these stories with you as a way to demonstrate how the loss of the dam has impacted our community.

Now I would like to share with you a historical perspective of the Borough's interactions with the DEP. Bear with me as I take you all through various interactions and dealings we have had while trying to resolve our many structural issues and concerns.

In 1981, a routine National Dam Inspection was performed, which resulted in the Cokeburg Dam being designated as a high hazard small size dam. The structure was then classified as an unsafe nonemergency dam. The report then concluded with numerous measures to be taken to ensure safe operation of the dam.

In 1989, updates and repairs were made in response to previous dam inspection findings of maintenance on the spillway.

In 2000, the DEP expressed concern over the previous repairs to the spillway which could potentially reduce the water intake, so again modifications were made.

Finally.... on April 16, 2001, a DEP letter considered the repair of the dam complete.

Then in May 2007, an additional letter was submitted to the Borough which now referred to a previous report concerning the stability of the dam's embankment.

It stated, "Previous management overlooked the need for the submission of a complete dam application ...and found that a permit was never issued for the dam". Although this was a minor concern to the DEP, they were still concerned about the stability referenced in the 1981 report.

Since 2009 the Borough and our engineering team has worked towards a design that would be approved by the DEP. A dam stability investigation was completed among other items that were of concern to the DEP in conjunction with the design approval.

During a July 2012 telephone conversation with the DEP, it was confirmed the sale of the water supply to Charleroi Water Authority and the water treatment plant was abandoned. This acquisition now changed the classification from a high hazard to a low hazard dam which then also caused a change to the overall design.

A December 26, 2012 DEP letter confirmed the review of the preliminary design plans submitted by our engineer in December 2012 and concurred with the approach stated in these plans.

A February 2016 letter, referencing a 2015 telephone conference, informed the Borough that the dam would become high hazard again because in the department's judgment a failure would fill the area below the dam with water which would flood Route 917 by half a foot of water and the business located there would be impacted. This letter once again changed the design.

Four times in 2019 and once in 2020, our engineers submitted and resubmitted updated plans for the DEP to review. Cokeburg council had no further communication until early 2023 when Representative Cook questioned what the DEP was doing to help our borough with this ongoing issue during a session in Harrisburg.

Shortly after we were sent a letter once again outlining our deficiencies and asking for an annual inspection report, revisions, and new dam stability report although these documents had been provided in 2020.

A drawdown of the water in the dam was completed in December of 2023 as required by the DEP and is being maintained. In January of this year, our

engineers electronically submitted an annual inspection report, the revisions outlined in the December 2020 letter and provided a new dam stability report all at the cost of Cokeburg Borough through our grant. Last week, the Borough requested via email an update of the latest submission. The DEP stated they did not receive the entire dam application package, annual inspection report, nor the emergency action plan. Our engineers responded via email they did indeed upload the required forms and provided them with a reference number.

These latest emails illustrate the numerous back and forth delays that we have experienced since 1981. We received a DCED Grant in 2013 and had to return most of it because of delays. Also, we currently have a \$200,000 LSA Grant with \$91,000 remaining which has had the deadline for completion extended numerous times. All of the money from this grant has been spent on engineering fees due to the continued request for changes to the designs that have been submitted. Once this grant is depleted our borough cannot afford any additional engineering fees nor the cost of any design plan that is approved. These delays have also increased the cost of repair.

What started out as a project costing less than \$1 million is now a \$10 million project.

In the spring of 1981, I was a junior in high school. I have graduated from college and went back to become a teacher. I have worked over 33 years in public education and have since retired. Our borough secretary and one of our council members weren't even born yet. This problem is still ongoing, but we are hopeful to have a resolution and a way forward by summer of 2024.

**In closing I would like to extend our deepest gratitude to 50th Representative Cook for his attention on this matter, for the past seven years he and his team have been nothing less than supportive and understanding. Thank you to the committee for your time today and I hope my testimony and the support of the great residents of Cokeburg will encourage you all to initiate internal changes to your departments and this process, so other small municipalities will not have incurred similar hurdles.

Testimony – Dave Lambert, Fire Chief, Cokeburg Volunteer Fire Department

Key points pertaining to The Cokeburg dam from a public safety aspect.

1. It is a very valuable Secondary water source for any type of fire emergencies in the surrounding area.
2. We utilized it as an emergency Water fill Location for tankers During the fire at the historic century Inn in Scenery Hill, approximately four years ago.
3. We have utilized it many times for A training location for Cokeburg fire department, and our mutual aid departments for training on water movement and drafting.
4. Having It has a training location gives us the ability to flow large volumes of water from the reservoir through our fire equipment, back into the reservoir without putting a burden on local hydrants and local water systems. Saving any type of money that may be involved for using water from The fire hydrants.
5. There is a great deal of uncertainty over the past few years on if the reservoir water level is usable for an emergency. There has been numerous times throughout the course of the last few years that the water level appeared to have been drained or lowered, causing uncertainty, if it would be available in the event of an emergency.
6. It would be a great piece of mind from a Fire chiefs standpoint Knowing that in the event of a true emergency, when time is of the essence That there is a large body of water that is easily assessable for fire apparatus, and has the ability to supply thousands of gallons of water when needed

Chief Lambert

Cokeburg vfc