



LOCAL YOUTHS watch Wes Ryan, a sophomore at Rockbridge County High School, perform a jump off a metal ramp at the Lexington skate park in late August. City staff announced earlier this month that the city would provide \$5,000 in maintenance funds to repave the space. Other fundraising efforts for park improvements are already under way. (Emma Coleman photo)

# Growing Skateboarding

## *City, Supporters Work To Revitalize Park*

**By EMMA COLEMAN**

Wes Ryan is a sophomore at Rockbridge County High School. He likes to skateboard, so much that he attended a skate camp this past summer in Woodward, Pa. But his ability to grow as a skater is limited in Lexington.

“Once you get to a certain point in skating, once you sort of progress, there’s just so much you can do here. And some of the stuff here, you just can’t skate it,” he said in an interview with *The News-Gazette* at Lexington’s skate park last month.

“This thing doesn’t grind at all,” Ryan said as he pointed to a piece of equipment. “There’s only like one trick you can actually do on that. There’s a lot of just rust here. This thing hardly slides. This ramp is rusted. If you fall on it, you’d probably get tetanus or something.”

Ryan is one of several local residents calling for improvements to the city’s skate park, originally built adjacent to the city swimming pool in 1997.

“Skateboarding is like the only sport in Lexington that doesn’t have a facility where you can actually really practice it,” Ryan said. “I mean, I guess it does, but there’s only so much you can do here. If it was repaved, and it had just a few really good things, like maybe three or four obstacles, but they were actually skate-able, it would be perfect.”

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WES RYAN, a sophomore at Rockbridge County High School, performs a trick on a metal ramp at the Lexington skate park one hot Saturday afternoon. (Emma Coleman photo)

## Skateboarding

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Lucky for Ryan and his fellow skaters, the park may soon get the sought-after makeover. City Manager Jim Halasz said at Lexington City Council's meeting Sept. 16 that he and Public Works Director Jeff Martone intend to set aside some funds to resurface the space.

"Of course, we all know that there is money that was put in reserve for the skate park maintenance several years ago from the fundraising," Halasz said. "And that was about \$5,000."

According to meeting minutes, in April 2012 Council unanimously agreed to "appropriate \$5,000 from the Contingency Fund for repair work to be done at the skate park."

The following October, as efforts to repair equipment at the park began, public works employees found that the pieces were not salvageable and removed them from the park. Fundraising efforts by skate park advocates continued, but the appropriated \$5,000 remained untouched — until now.

"Jeff and I met with proponents of improvements to the skate park, and their No. 1 priority is resurfacing the asphalt base of the park," Halasz said Sept. 16. "As Jeff and I looked at the cost of that, and that being their No. 1 priority, they indicated they would do additional fundraising, and if that is the case, we believe we can, with that money that's reserved for the skate park, resurface that park."

Mary Harvey-Halseth, a former City Council member and Lexington resident who has advocated for the skate park's maintenance since its inception, confirmed the city manager's comments.

"If more funds are needed, we will reach out for assistance by fundraising for that," Harvey-Halseth said in an email last week.

"We'll try and get that done later this fall when our paving folks come back," Halasz said.

Several fundraising efforts for the park are already under way. Lance Branham, another local skateboarder who organized the Greater Rockbridge County Skateboarder Coalition through Facebook, is selling stickers to raise funds for park-related projects.

"One of the first things that almost anyone that becomes a skater, or a biker, or something like that," Branham said in an interview Aug. 13, "the first thing you buy is a sticker, kind of representing what you what you think is cool. And I was like, 'Okay, as a way to get another part of the community in here, let's hold an art contest for a logo for what we're doing.' And we got one entry, but it's beautiful."

The sticker features a deer with a skateboard in its antlers, backed by a sunrise over mountains and encircled by the

Coalition's name. The stickers cost \$2 each.

Branham said in a post on the Coalition's Facebook page on Sept. 21 that sticker sales have already raised \$298. The goal is \$2,000.

"I've got 1,000 stickers, so if I can sell us 1,000 stickers, that gives us \$2,000," Branham said Sept. 13. "I have a lot of people asking for t-shirts of the logo. But I'm just kind of waiting a little while until some stickers move and can get some more money off of them to kind of make a move on that."

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The Lexington Police Department is contributing to the fundraising effort, too.

"As part of the police department's enhanced community outreach and eagerness to provide our city's youth with a safe and robust skate park," Police Chief Angela Greene said in an email Sept. 9, "we are vigorously looking at opportunities to partner with local establishments, professionals and grant funding to revitalize this skate park."

"Once we secure a provider for the design and development of this project, we will hold an open community meeting for all interested citizens to relay their vision of Lexington's skate park, in order to construct a venue all citizens will be proud of and enjoy for years to come."

Harvey-Halseth said the coalition, in addition to setting up a GoFundMe page, is working on establishing itself as a nonprofit organization.

"I'm working with Washington and Lee University law clinic in establishing our nonprofit," Harvey-Halseth said in an email Sept. 1. "This will help with fundraising and grant-writing efforts for not just the Lexington location of the skate park, but also for Buena Vista and future Rockbridge County locations."

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The coalition is hosting an awareness event at the park on Oct. 30 from 3 to 5 p.m. It will feature skaters, music, a food truck and a community art wall. A can of food for the Rockbridge Area Relief Association food pantry is the cost of admission.

"The lack of visible pieces, the weeds growing up through the asphalt, the removal of the bench and the disrepair of the pavilion will help us in spreading awareness of why it's termed 'the worst skate park in Virginia,'" Harvey-Halseth said in an email Sept. 9.

A video posted on YouTube by the channel McCANN Travels in July 2020 labels the park as the worst of its kind in the state. The video has over 900 views.

"That video, boy, I think that really turned some heads," said Kim Dorey, a Lexington resident with three sons. Her second oldest, Kellan, 14, took an interest in skating earlier this year.

"He kept talking about this skate park, state park, skate park. So, I had to take him up," Dorey said in an interview last month. "I didn't even realize we had one. And when I saw that ramp, it was just kind of pitiful."

The park features a large square of asphalt with a small pavilion in one corner. The open space is dotted with cement and metal blocks and ramps. All wooden structures were removed from the park on Sept. 8.

"The city of Lexington dismantled and removed DIY pieces of equipment from the skate park for safety reasons," Harvey-Halseth said in an email Sept. 9.

"Our concrete blocks from Rockbridge recycling were pushed around by machine rather than picked up and moved, in turn grinding the bottoms down on our already challenged surface. We are a ghost town again," a post on the Coalition's Facebook page said Sept. 8.

The coalition poured a small concrete ramp at the park on Sept. 6, just two days before public works employees removed the park's wooden pieces.

"The forms on the new concrete ramp will come off one day earlier to restore some sense of dignity to the people who use this park as fast as possible," the Facebook post Sept. 8 said. "Skate on."

Park users had long been under the impression that do-it-yourself blocks and ramps were acceptable. But Halasz said that's not the case.

"Obviously, there is a level of liability associated with skateboarding that the city does accept. However, we cannot allow citizens or volunteers to place equipment, play structures, etc. in the skate park or any other park without supervision and approval," Halasz said in an email Sept. 9. "We would not put out home-made swing sets or teeter-totters without being sure they are safe. This is first, a common-sense safety issue, and second, an avoidable liability and financial issue."

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Halasz said that those who believe that City Council and city staff do not hear their pleas for improved skate park conditions are wrong.

"It's not a question of not listening. It's a question of help us understand how important this is and who it's important to, because it's part of our jobs to hear from the community. I love to hear from the community, and I know City Council feels the same way. But I can't meet all the needs, all the desires," Halasz said in an interview Aug. 17. "It's up to the public to help on these things. Those who are advocating, that's, I think, what the definition of advocating means. Let us know."

Halasz said Sept. 16 that the coalition has prepared a list of



LOCAL YOUTHS skate at the park adjacent to the city swimming pool in late August, before wooden pieces of equipment were removed from the space for safety reasons on Sept. 8. (Emma Coleman photo)

65 names and addresses of individuals who are interested in using the Lexington skate park.

But Branham, who skated in Lexington in the early 2000s, during the park's "hay day," said interest in skating in the Rockbridge area is much broader than that.

"I've watched generations and generations of skaters come and go. And the one thing about it is, most of us are all friends. We still respect each other, we still know each other. It's kind of our own little network, and it's bigger than anybody thinks it is," Branham said. "To us, this is the coolest thing in the world, in the universe. And for anybody that has that coolest thing in the universe to them, just replace your passion with this, and it's equal. It's the same. And in this time when many groups of people worldwide are demanding recognition, I don't think we have any reason to be shy about asking for that."



LOCAL SKATE park advocate Lance Branham sports a Greater Rockbridge County Skateboarder Coalition sticker on his helmet. The stickers are being sold to raise funds for skate park improvements. (Emma Coleman photo)

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One of the greatest privileges of running for Supervisor of Rockbridge County is that of meeting the people. I've seen their faces, heard hearts, and gotten some great feedback. Of the feedback I've received, the most consistent comment is, "We don't know what the supervisors are working on or what they've accomplished." With that in mind, once elected, I plan on holding monthly meetings throughout the district to hear and address citizens' concerns and answer your questions. As I've mentioned before, this is your government, and you deserve, not only to be heard, but to see results accomplished for which your tax dollars payed.

**Leaders need to lead, not expect others to do what they are not willing to do themselves. I just want to give the government back to the people where it belongs.**

"- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." - Abraham Lincoln

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