

## **Brush Valley, Northumberland County, Pennsylvania**

### *The History*

In March of 2000, a handful of concerned citizens of Shamokin, Pennsylvania formed an organization called the Brush Valley Preservation Association (BVPA). Shortly before, they had attended a public meeting where they learned that the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) had proposed building a prison in their area and was working with local politicians to formulate a plan. Politicians had already identified the most likely spot to build a prison—a place called Brush Valley.

Brush Valley is an uncommonly pristine area located just north of Shamokin, in the eastern central Pennsylvania county of Northumberland, which is bordered on the west by the Susquehanna River. The larger valley of which Brush Valley is a part runs east from the river. State Route 61 follows the valley, and along the road lies a string of old coal mining towns, like Shamokin. This region is known for its anthracite coal, which was laid down by an ancient sea that covered the land long before the Appalachian Mountains rose out of the flat plain that the seas left behind. Over time, as the mountains eroded, veins of coal in some of the valleys were exposed. In these regions, cultural history is strongly tied to coal mining. In this valley can be found such infamous towns as Centralia, which is mostly abandoned because an active, decades-old underground mine fire has threatened homes in the area. Shamokin itself is surrounded by relics of the era. The most obvious are the huge culm heaps which anyone driving into town cannot avoid seeing. These heaps, some of them covering mountain slopes hundreds of feet high, are composed of leftover waste from old coal mines and literally encircle the town, some of them dotted with old mining structures as well. These eyesores are a constant reminder of the town's troubled history. One particularly unpleasant spot is on the side of the mountain that divides Brush Valley from Shamokin.

In more recent history, the coal mining towns in the anthracite region have not fared well. Most of the economically-recoverable coal has been removed, and the large companies have moved on or folded, leaving devastation and depressed economies in their wake. In this atmosphere, any new hope for jobs is eagerly jumped upon by local politicians and citizens. Hence, the prospect of the arrival of a federal prison to employ a sizable number of local residents has been met with great excitement. However, the Brush Valley Preservation Association sees a different role for Brush Valley in their community. BVPA members want to preserve it in its natural state, perhaps as a community park.

It is surprising to find a place as untouched by mining as is Brush Valley. Through a geological trick, the land in Brush Valley does not contain any coal, and so its history is quite different. A large part of the valley, which is about 12 miles long, is owned by the Roaring Creek division of Pennsylvania Consumers Water Company. The specific 2,000-acre area under consideration for a prison site is called Trout Run. The Trout Run reservoir, a nine and one half acre lake on the valley floor, currently serves as a reserve water supply for the water company. The primary source is a reservoir farther east up the valley on the other side of a major highway. Trout Run had been used as a water source until 1995, when a nearby water treatment plant became operational. Since the valley has been privately owned by one company for so long, access has been extremely limited. This situation has served to preserve the natural features, such as at least one pure sand spring, but it has also prevented people in the community from enjoying the area. With the current debate over the land, new “No Trespassing” signs have gone up, and violators are immediately arrested.

Brush Valley is touted as the perfect spot for the prison for several reasons, a primary one being that since there has been no mining, the ground is unquestionably stable enough to support a structure as large as a prison. Most large acreage’s in the area have been damaged by undermining, and the BOP has made it clear that they will not build on undermined areas. Another reason that has been cited is the presence of a state correctional facility (SCI-Coal Township) at the western end of the valley. The infrastructure from this prison could support further development. Finally, the site is easily accessible from major roadways. These are the qualifications of Brush Valley preferred by the BOP, but there are several other factors that will be discussed later. Incidentally, while the entire area under consideration is 2,000 acres, the federal government will only need about 900 acres, of which only about 200-400 will actually be used for building the prison.

Before the coal miners settled the area, there were of course other peoples who lived in the valley. Before Pennsylvania was settled, a group of Native Americans called the Susquehannocks populated the mountains and valleys around the Susquehanna River. During the early French fur trade, many of the Susquehannocks were forced out of the area by other Indians, and for a time after that, the Iroquois traveled through. There may be archaeological sites of interest in Brush Valley, not only from the Indians, but also from the early settlement era. According to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, “there is a high probability that significant archaeological sites are located in this project area and could be adversely affected by project activities,” which means that the area must be studied before and development can occur there (BVPA website).

The following analysis of the Brush Valley debate will first identify some of the key players in the controversy, from politicians to citizens. Then the situation will be analyzed from four different perspectives—ecological, economic, political, and cultural. Clearly, each of these areas overlaps with the others, but organizing them as such will perhaps give a clear picture of the factors involved.

### *The Players*

#### *Politicians*

Perhaps the most high-profile character in the Brush Valley controversy is US Representative Paul Kanjorski, D-11, who represents the eastern portion of Northumberland County, in which Shamokin and Brush Valley lie. He has served the area for more than 17 years, but if the current redistricting proposal is undertaken, that will no longer be the case next year. Rep. Kanjorski has worked on bringing a federal prison to the depressed area for about 12 years and is committed to seeing the project through by working hard before the redistricting and by working with Rep. Don Sherwood, the republican who will take over the representation of the county afterwards (McArdle, Jan 2002). Kanjorski has been quoted as saying that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has no comprehensive economic plan to encourage growth, and so individual communities must plan for themselves. According to Kanjorski, “We have to decide if we’re going to maintain the status quo and shrink or we’re going to grow” (Kidd, June 2000). Apparently, he believes that a prison in eastern Northumberland County could be part of the community’s economic growth plan.

Locally, two other politicians have taken center stage in the debate. County Commissioners Allen Cwalina and Charles Lewis, both democrats, who represent the majority among the three commissioners, have come out as strong supporters of the federal prison. They have been at the forefront of negotiations among local and federal leaders about bringing the prison to the county. They are strong supporters of locating the prison in Brush Valley as well, claiming that the BOP may be “scared off” if the county cannot offer a flawless spot for development. In addition, they have other plans for Brush Valley, although they have not been entirely clear with the public about what those plans are. The commissioners have alternately said that the acreage not used for a prison could be used for further development to bring additional jobs to the area, or that the rest of Brush Valley could be used for recreation. In this scenario, Northumberland County would have to buy the 2,000 acres from the current

owners—the water company—and then sell what is needed to the federal government. There has been considerable debate and pressure upon Cwalina and Lewis to explain how the county will pay for that purchase.

There are some state politicians that have entered the fray as well. State Representative Merle Phillips, R-108, has come out in support of BVPA's plan to preserve Brush Valley, whereas his colleague from the area, State Senator Edward Helfrick, R-27, and one from a neighboring district, Rep. Robert Belfanti, D-107, have supported the county commissioners' prison plan. The third county commissioner, Samuel Deitrick, supports the prison in Brush Valley as long as taxpayers are not expected to pay for it. Interestingly, a former commissioner, Eleanor Kuhns, has been an outspoken BVPA supporter and has volunteered her time to help their cause. It should be noted that there are other local politicians who are also in favor of preservation, but that their voices have not been heard as loudly in the media. Pennsylvania's rural areas are divided into administrative units called townships, and most local township officials support the goals of the BVPA. There are other county officials who support the organization as well. Finally, BVPA suspects that US Senator Arlen Specter supports their work to preserve the valley, but he has made no public statement one way or the other.

#### *Federal Bureau of Prisons*

The BOP is a division of the US Department of Justice. It is responsible for building and maintaining federal prisons around the country as well as employing and training prison staff. In the Brush Valley issue, a primary figure from the BOP has been Mr. David Dorworth, site selection chief, who has been frequently quoted stating the BOP's position. He has cited the many factors that have the BOP interested in Northumberland County, including the reliable work force. But he has also said, "We're not so desperate to be in Northumberland County that we would want to do it (build on reclaimed mine land) again" (Rompolski, Apr 2000). It is statements like these that have the county commissioners nervous about the controversy over Brush Valley. On the other hand, the BOP at the time stated its willingness to consider Northumberland County sites other than Brush Valley. That was before they commissioned the preliminary environmental impact statement (EIS). According to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), the bureau is required to do a draft and a final EIS before building. Part of the process includes considering other sites, of which there are a few. The firm that conducted the EIS for the bureau did investigate other sites, but only very superficially, and named Brush Valley as the preferred alternative. Other government agencies, both state and federal, have criticized the insufficient EIS produced by the BOP. At this

point, the draft EIS is being revised, and by law the BOP should be addressing the criticism as they prepare the final EIS.

*Pennsylvania Consumers Water Company*

Brush Valley is owned by the Pennsylvania Consumers Water Company, while business is managed by a holding company called Philadelphia Suburban. The company's local arm is called the Roaring Creek division, which manages the water supply and service in the Shamokin area. Ultimately, since they own the land, they will decide the fate of Brush Valley. As mentioned before, the plan which Roaring Creek currently supports is for the county to buy the land and then sell what is needed to the federal government. The water company has been trying unsuccessfully to sell Brush Valley for ten or more years. Now, the county holds an annually-renewable \$5,000 option to develop Brush Valley, which means that the water company cannot consider other buyers while the option is in effect. The water company has a lot to gain in this deal in the form of what could be their largest water customer—a federal prison in their service area. In fact, the company's top local official has made it clear that the company would not support turning the area into a park because they do not see that as the optimal benefit to the community. As he put it, "The goal of the water company is and has always been industrial development. We need jobs, we need the community to survive so that we survive. We're part of this community, and we depend on it like everybody does" (Glassic, May 2001). In addition, the company has made it clear that building a prison in the valley will not endanger the watershed's quality or supply, as some have suggested.

*Brush Valley Preservation Association*

The BVPA is a quintessential grassroots activist group fighting for a cause in which they believe passionately. In this case, they believe that under no circumstances should Shamokin's last remaining large area of mature forest, un-mined land, and pristine watershed be developed for a prison or anything else that would not preserve the ecological integrity of the valley. The association, which is not yet an official charitable organization with 501(c)3 status, has close to 3,000 members and supporters. The three founders—President John Faraguna, Vice President and Secretary Nicole Dormer, and Treasurer Joseph Rebar—have garnered this support in just under two years largely by embarking in a massive education and publicity enterprise. Their primary goal is to keep the federal prison out of Brush Valley. Concurrently, in order to officially preserve the area, they are exploring options for turning the valley into a public park. They have identified possible funding sources from the state, such as from the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Pennsylvania Game Commission (BVPA website).

Importantly, even though BVPA's immediate goal is to preserve Brush Valley, their overarching goal is to foster sustainable development in the Shamokin area. Hence, they officially support bringing a federal prison to the area somewhere because of the economic benefits it could bring to the community. Towards this goal volunteers have devoted countless hours to researching alternate sites. BVPA has identified a site known as Natalie East within miles of Brush Valley and Shamokin and suggested it to the BOP as an alternate. However, they believe the site was not given thorough consideration in the BOP's DEIS. The DEIS rejected the site for being too damaged by mining, specifically by undermining and the potential for mine fires. However, BVPA's own research, recently corroborated by the state's Department of Environmental Protection Director of Mining and Reclamation, shows that there are at least 195 acres of un-mined land situated in a 600-acre site with mining around the periphery, a perfect place for the BOP prison. In addition, the Natalie East site is also owned by the Roaring Creek water company and is located within their service area (BVPA website). There are other benefits to this site as well that will be discussed in greater detail later.

#### *Other community players*

The residents of Shamokin and the surrounding area are represented in other ways as well. For instance, the Brush Valley Chamber of Commerce (the similar name is a coincidence) has been quite vocal in support of the prison at Brush Valley. Of course, the chamber's primary goal is economic development. Finally, the media have certainly played a role in the debate. Shamokin's local newspaper, *The News-Item*, has covered the story thoroughly, publishing numerous press releases from the BVPA as well as editorials which usually support the county commissioners. The other major paper from the area is from the county seat, Sunbury, about ten miles west of Shamokin. Since it is a bit farther from the site, *The Daily Item* has been a bit more impartial.

#### ***Ecological Analysis***

Ecological concerns are at the heart of the BVPA's position. James Best, chairman of the local chapter of the Sierra Club, which supports BVPA, summarized the situation well in the following:

"Pennsylvania faces a crisis of suburban sprawl—the never-ending destruction of 'greenfields' for new industry, homes and businesses—which has permanently degraded many formerly rural parts of the commonwealth. Brush Valley is a microcosm of this problem. This pristine valley is located only a few miles from some of the worst strip-mine damage to be seen and the depressed city of Shamokin. Sound public policy should direct public investment and initiative into the redevelopment and wise reuse of the minelands before and unspoiled valley is ruined" (Kidd, Mar 2000).

The fundamental question is, Why destroy one of the only remaining natural areas in that part of the county instead of reclaiming land that has already been abused and preserving the untouched area? This question is echoed by Mike Molesevich, an environmental consultant from the area. “All of us who have lived in the coal region know of the mistakes, and results, or past coal mining practices,” he wrote. “How foolish, then, to embark on a plan to clean up environmental problems from past coal mining, and at the same time, develop a pristine watershed with prisons, developments, roads, and industries” (“Plan. . .”)

Not only is Brush Valley an extraordinary piece of forested land, but it also has unique features, such as natural sand springs. The water from these springs is pure and the water in Trout Run and the reservoir therefore supremely clean. These waters support native brook trout populations, among a variety of other fish. The valley also provides habitat for a wide array of wildlife, such as black bear, white-tailed deer, coyotes, wild turkeys, whippoorwills, barred owls, veeries, thrushes, and other birds—creatures that continue to lose their homes all over the country. There may also be endangered species, like the Indiana bat, or species of special concern, such as the timber rattlesnake (BVPA website).

The BVPA contends that the county’s plan for Brush Valley—the federal prison followed by subsequent industrial development—will irrecoverably damage the ecology of the valley, whereas creating a public park would be one way to preserve the habitat. On the other hand, proponents of a Brush Valley prison claim that conservation and construction can go hand in hand, pointing out that a prison would not be a “smokestack” industry and that further development would promote high-tech companies that also do not tend to pollute. In addition, development advocates have not ruled out the possibility of including recreation in their plan for the valley. In fact, the manager of Roaring Creek claims that the so-called Bear Gap Commerce Center Concept Plan created by the water company about ten years ago includes a small portion of land devoted to “Bear Gap Park” (Glassic, May 2001). (Bear Gap is at the eastern end of the valley where state route 54 cuts through one of the mountains bordering the valley.)

Regardless of these speculations, the draft EIS did not appear to give thorough enough consideration to ecological concerns to satisfy state and federal agencies devoted to sound environmental management. The list of agencies that criticized the BOP for insufficient consideration of environmental impact includes the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), and the Fish and Boat Commission, as well as the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of the Interior. Specifically, the EPA wrote that the agency is “especially concerned with the potential direct and

secondary adverse impacts to aquatic and terrestrial habitat and biological species of special status that may result from the proposed project . . . We are very concerned that the proposed project will impact one of the largest expanses of mature mixed forest, interspersed with high-quality streams and possible exceptional-value wetlands in Northumberland County” (BVPA website).

Of course, if the BOP would agree to give thorough consideration to the alternate Natalie East site, these ecological concerns would vanish. Since Natalie East is in a mined area, there is little ecological integrity left to conserve. Certainly, it makes sense to use an area already impacted by development rather than clear a relatively untouched area for a prison. Using reclaimed lands would be within the objectives of government programs like former Governor Tom Ridge’s Growing Greener initiative, which plans to use several hundred million dollars over five years to promote preservation and conservation of the state’s natural resources (BVPA website).

In a completely separate process, the county contracted with an independent organization, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), to conduct an inventory of habitats and biodiversity in the county. The BVPA has pinned some hopes on this inventory because TNC may recommend preservation of Brush Valley and may even find some endangered species. One article reported that TNC expected to find a rare plant, the Jeweled Shooting Star, which was devastated during mining development (Glassic, “Taking Inventory”).

### *Economic Analysis*

A thorough economic analysis answers the questions of who owns, controls, pays for and receives the economic assets in the situation. The economic factors surrounding Brush Valley are a little less clear than the ecological ones. The BVPA believes this ambiguity is intentional on the part of the politicians because many of them stand to benefit economically from the prison being placed in Brush Valley.

The rhetoric of the proposal is fairly standard. Common wisdom claims that new penitentiaries in depressed rural areas like Shamokin bring jobs, both in the form of employment at the prison and through secondary means such as construction and other support from local businesses. As Bloomsburg College professor John Bodeman summarizes, “When you have an aging community that doesn’t have a vibrant economic base, there’s concern that leads community leaders to go after prisons. That’s the case in many rural communities in Pennsylvania” (Wiggins, Jan 2000). Certainly, this analysis applies to the attitude of Brush Valley prison supporters. The draft EIS seems to indicate that such economic benefits would be the case. The economic impact



portion of the EIS says that the prison could offer 350-400 positions on its staff, with an annual payroll of \$16.1 million. In addition, the prison could generate about \$10.4 million in sales within the local community and an estimated \$99 million in local sales just for the construction of the prison (Rompolski, Aug 2001).

One of the local businesses that would clearly benefit the most is the Roaring Creek water company. In fact, politicians are touting the Brush Valley prison as an all-around winning situation economically because the water company would sell the land and then gain a customer—the federal prison—that could prove to be its largest customer, a circumstance that could in turn stabilize water rates for the local area. This benefit combined with the increase in jobs and local business is supposedly unbeatable.

However, there are myriad economic concerns that have been glossed over by the local media and politicians. To start, it is still unclear as to why the county needs to buy the valley from the water company first before selling it to the federal government, and how that purchase will be paid for. Clearly, there are at least tentative plans to further develop whatever land the prison does not need, but the county has not been straightforward about those plans, even concerning whether or not they have studied the economic feasibility of those plans. Then there is the additional question of how the needed infrastructure upgrades will be paid for. The BOP wants to place the prison at the east end of the Trout Run section of the valley, completely opposite the location of the state prison. According to the BOP, it would be more cost-effective to build farther away from the state prison and stretch the needed infrastructure to the site than it would be to build on the steeper terrain near the state prison. However, according to BVPA, at the east end, the state highway would need significant upgrades to support increased traffic fostered by the prison (BVPA website).

The infrastructure debate is also a factor in the discussion of alternate sites outside of Brush Valley. The EIS suggests that no other site has as ready access to facilities as does Brush Valley. For instance, sewage treatment would be more readily available in Brush Valley than anywhere. However, in addition to criticizing the incompleteness of the ecological study in the EIS, government agencies also commented that a thorough examination of alternate sites was lacking.

Furthermore, BVPA questions whether the promise of jobs and a boost to local businesses is really a realistic one. To begin, the BOP has been quoted a few times as saying that they expect that at least 30-40 percent of the prison staff will be skilled workers transferred from elsewhere. With the most generous estimates of 400 jobs and 30 percent relocation, that leaves about 280 positions open. BVPA asks, are those 280 positions really worth

the destruction of the community's best natural resource? Not only that, the relocation percentage may actually be much higher. BVPA has pointed to a BOP publication about Brush Valley that states the relocation rate may be closer to 90 percent. If there were 400 prison jobs, that would leave only about 40 to be filled by local residents. In addition, anyone who fills those positions must meet stringent requirements—either a four-year college degree, several years of experience in management, or time served in the military. The politicians hope that this prison will encourage the educated children of the community to stay in the area rather than go elsewhere to find jobs, which is what they do now. As Joe Rebar of BVPA has stated, “What college graduate is going to come back to this area to become a prison guard? We need jobs for the 50-year-old man who lost his job or the 45-year-old woman who just lost her husband” (Wiggins, Jan 2001). However, the prison has a maximum age limit for starting jobs of 37 years. (Informal surveys conducted in local schools would seem to support Rebar's position. I asked 75 freshmen in a local high school to take a position on the proposed prison and draft a letter to the editor. Fifty of them did not want a prison in Brush Valley, a place not one of them has ever seen up close. Similarly, Rebar conducted a presentation at another high school in conjunction with a member of the chamber of commerce who supported the prison. A vote at the end of the presentation revealed an overwhelming majority, over 90 percent, favored preserving the valley.)

On the subject of the support to local businesses a prison would bring, the BVPA has uncovered some more interesting information. They have found that inmates around the country in federal prisons are involved in an in-house manufacturing company called UNICOR. Products made by UNICOR are sold only to federal agencies, including prisons. So, it would actually be rather unlikely that the Brush Valley prison would turn to local businesses to supply everything from brooms to beds.

Finally, after highlighting so many economic concerns about the prison, BVPA offers an alternative. If the valley could be preserved as a public park, it could promote more long-term, sustainable economic growth than the prison could. In an article early on in the debate, BVPA president Faraguna pointed to another Pennsylvania town north of here as an example of how one town bounced back from their industrial history by finding a sustainable use for their natural resources. Wellsboro, PA is located near a state park that is dubbed “the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania,” an area that has become a hotspot for outdoor recreation. Wellsboro is a thriving town because of the tourist industry, the second-largest industry in the state, next to agriculture. Developing a similar model for the Shamokin area is not an unrealistic dream. BVPA has located possible sources of funding, such as from the state

DCNR, to buy the land as a park. Whether or not it could be a state park is unclear, but the opportunity to make it a public attraction is there.

Modeling Rep. Kanjorski's comment, cited earlier, about the need for communities to have their own development plans, the BVPA does have a proposed plan that does not include a prison in Brush Valley. Their plan includes both a park in Brush Valley and, if necessary, a prison elsewhere, such as at their proposed Natalie East site. In fact, they believe that the economic benefits for a prison at the Natalie East sight outweigh those of the Brush Valley site. To begin, since Roaring Creek owns the land, they would still stand to gain from selling the land and having the prison as a water customer. But the real advantage comes from the existence of a nearby co-generation plant that could provide electricity and steam heat to the prison at Natalie East. This plant may in fact close down in a few years when their current contract ends. If they had a large customer like a prison, they could remain operational for years to come. In an added benefit, the plant uses culm from the unsightly waste heaps surrounding Shamokin as its energy source. It then continues to contribute to the health of the community by filling in old strip mines with the ash and then covering it with four feet of topsoil. In the end, there may be more infrastructure concerns at Natalie East, but the economic potential of the alternate site cannot be ignored.

### *Political Analysis*

Political questions in the Brush Valley debate are the most difficult to answer with facts. What determines political power, and how do those who have it wield it? The list of political players presented above indicates who stands where in the debate without considering why, which is the point of this section. First, it is interesting to note that a federal penitentiary is the type of issue that does not divide politicians along party lines. Both democrats and republicans support the prison, while the one prominent politician who publicly advocates Brush Valley preservation, Rep. Phillips, is a republican. So what does motivate individual politicians?

Citizens would like to be able to trust that their elected representatives have only their constituents' best interests in mind, but such is often not the case. Even if they are in fact acting in the interest of the community, their methods are often suspect. Some of this tension was captured in the BVPA's unsuccessful efforts to place the prison on the ballot in the fall of 2001 as a referendum vote. An editorial listed the reasons a county-wide referendum

would be a flawed idea, but the reasons were not good enough for BVPA, which responded with a piece of its own pointing out the solid political reasons a referendum could be a useful tool. Of course, the BVPA suspects that politicians do not want to know or do not care where the public truly stands on the issue (BVPA website).

Naturally, the BVPA has done research into the why's of the political debate. The biggest question is why politicians who say that they support the well-being of the community are so adamantly opposed to alternatives to a prison in Brush Valley. A Congressman like Rep. Kanjorski would know of the BOP figure of 90 percent relocation of prison employees to the area, so how can he contend that the prison will bring hundreds of jobs to Shamokin residents? According to the BVPA, a colleague from his hometown of Nanticoke owns some of the mostly-defunct coal companies in the Shamokin area. Is there a connection?

The debate between BVPA and County Commissioners Cwalina and Lewis has been the most vitriolic of all. The commissioners, apparently forgetting that the citizens fighting to preserve the valley are not being paid to do so, have accused the members of BVPA of being self-serving and inflammatory. In one particularly revealing comment regarding how the county will pay for the land, Cwalina and Lewis wrote, "The BVPA is feeding on fear that, again, they helped to create in order to make people believe something that is patently untrue" (June 2001). The BVPA could have made exactly the same comment about the commissioners, especially concerning the idea that the BOP will be scared away from Northumberland County and find another place to build the prison because of all the controversy over Brush Valley. Certainly, BVPA has been very critical of the two majority commissioners. The association has published numerous press releases questioning the motives of the two men. Unfortunately, the question has not been publicly and satisfactorily answered.

Certainly, some of the politicians involved will benefit financially and politically from a Brush Valley prison. For instance, State Senator Helfrick apparently owns about half of the company which owns the largest culm heaps in Shamokin. Why would Sen. Helfrick support a prison in Brush Valley? What are the connections?

The BVPA believes that there is a power ring in Shamokin that is not uncommon to rural areas. The ring is composed of politicians and some of the biggest economic players in the area, such as the water company and the chamber of commerce. The members have a relationship of "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine." Perhaps some of them believe that what benefits the members of the ring will "trickle-down" economically to benefit the community as well. Regardless, it is the job of citizens to ask these questions of their politicians. Exactly whose interests are being served?

### *Cultural Analysis*

Just as with politics, cultural analysis can be vague because facts are difficult to find. But the cultural topics surrounding Brush Valley are perhaps the most interesting. The question of common people's values and motivations is really at the crux of the issue. One must forget or at least ignore the motives of political and economic heavyweights in order to discern what people really believe.

For the BVPA, the most important cultural theme is quality of life. While not ignoring the necessity of jobs, BVPA asks, isn't the enhanced quality of life that the public enjoyment of Brush Valley could bring more important than the possibility of short-term economic gain that the federal prison may offer to a select few? They point over and over again to the state parks in the central Pennsylvania that hundreds of thousands of people enjoy every year as an example of what Shamokin could have—in fact does have—in its own backyard. Not only could area families have a spot to enjoy nature, including a large lake in which to swim, such an area could be the stimulus for more sustainable economic growth. Vice President Nicole Dormer has cited studies indicating that businesses often consider quality of life issues such as open space and outdoor recreation when relocating to a new area (Sept 2001). Similarly, a letter-to-the-editor from another citizen, one of the few residents who have actually seen the valley, pointed out that if the prison does bring in workers from other areas, Shamokin will want to make sure that those folks will want to live in Shamokin by providing jobs for spouses *and* by enhancing the quality of life (Apr 2001).

Shamokin's cultural history is an important consideration as well. Clearly, the area was economically tied to coal mining until the mid-1900's, and so it was also defined by a coal *culture*. How does that influence people's values now? People in the rural areas surrounding Shamokin (with which I am most familiar) generally have a negative opinion of Shamokin as being hopelessly downtrodden and crime-ridden. Realistically or not, some think that a public park in that area would wind up being a site of unsavory behavior and destruction. BVPA president John Faraguna has written that Shamokin needs to shake off its self-pitying acceptance of substandard living conditions and wages and stop using, "Eh, what are ya goin do?" as their motto (July 2000). Has this attitude led to the apparent acceptance of possible corruption of elected officials?

On the other hand, the preservation association has garnered an impressive amount of support. Almost 3,000 individuals from a rural and small-town area is a significant figure. Some of the few people who have had

permission from the water company to explore Brush Valley in the past have written eloquently of its beauty.

Perhaps the words of these folks have captured the imagination of other area residents, enough so that they too would like to share in the natural jewel so close to their homes.

### *Conclusion*

At this point, the final decision about the fate of Brush Valley has yet to be made. The BOP must respond to over 200 comments given on the draft EIS in the final version. Preparing such a response will take some time, especially if the BOP follows the suggestion of numerous agencies and gives thorough consideration to at least the Natalie East alternate site for the prison. BVPA expects the final EIS to be released some time after March. If Brush Valley is still named as the preferred site and construction plans are made, the association intends to pursue legal action. They are retaining an environmental lawyer who has been advising them from the beginning. They are unsure on what grounds they could prosecute, but they will surely relate to the comments made by agencies like the EPA about the EIS.

The role of community opinion is very important. If local political leaders truly felt their careers could be endangered by their persistence on building a prison in Brush Valley, they may think again. Likewise, the water company probably values its public image. BVPA has pointed out that one of the primary power companies in the area, Pennsylvania Power and Light, has provided central Pennsylvania not only with power but also with several nature preserves. One of these is Montour Preserve, which has a large recreational reservoir and is only about 20 miles north of Shamokin. However, the BOP may not be as likely to respond to individuals at this point. They will more likely continue to take their cue from the players they consider to be the community leaders. The question in the end is, then, who will be the community leaders? Who will decide the fate of Brush Valley?

### ***A Goal for Brush Valley***

Perhaps the Brush Valley Preservation Association will decide the fate of Brush Valley. It could be that the BVPA represents better than any other body true public opinion. I support the objective of the BVPA and think their goal is an appropriate one to work towards. The mission of BVPA as stated on their website is “to preserve Trout Run, a 2,000 acre portion of Brush Valley. This precious land harbors mountainsides, a valley floor, a 35 million gallon lake, continual bubbling sand spring [*sic*] and an incredible collection of wildlife. BVPA believes this land should remain in its natural state, and we are currently pursuing the possibilities to acquire and restore this land as a community park. BVPA believes in the importance to promote our community’s natural resources and oppose reckless and irresponsible development” (BVPA website).

### ***The TV Advertisement***

*Objective:* The objective of the following TV advertisement is to educate citizens of Northumberland County about the mission of the Brush Valley Preservation Association and to encourage them to actively support BVPA by joining the association or by learning from it what individuals can do to speak up for Brush Valley preservation.

*Audience, etc.*

The audience for this advertisement will be the residents of Northumberland County, especially those living near the Shamokin area but not excluding those in the rest of the county. The county is a rather odd shape, with a much wider south end and a sort of panhandle in the northwestern end. This shape, combined with the diverse cultural backgrounds of the population, has led to a lack in cultural unity within the county. The population is distributed in an understandable pattern. The largest town, Sunbury, which is the county seat, is a river town on the Susquehanna and so has a history based in trade and transportation. The community is fairly diverse. Most of the other larger towns, like Shamokin, share a coal mining history. Many residents of these towns are of Eastern European, Irish, or Italian descent. Finally, the more rural areas of the county are almost completely agricultural and have a heavy German background, sharing the Pennsylvania Dutch tradition with areas farther south in the state.

Because of this geographic and cultural disparity, airing one advertisement to reach the entire population is a challenge. In the rural southwestern part of the county where I live, people watch local news from cities to the south, such as Harrisburg or Lancaster. In the Shamokin area, they watch stations from cities to the north, such as Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. Therefore, if the advertisement were to be limited to one network, it should probably be one from

the northern cities. It should be aired during local news broadcasts in the early evening, as many people also watch cable or satellite television during other times of the day.

I am designing this advertisement to be as feasible as possible because the BVPA have expressed interest in using my script to film and air a commercial. Realistically, it may take some time to coordinate the logistics, but it would be best to air as soon as possible, before the release of the final EIS when new factors may influence the situation.

*Script*

As the commercial opens, music from local folk musician Van Wagner plays. A scene from downtown Shamokin is the first to appear on the screen. The viewpoint is from a high point in town, looking north down Market Street, which has divided lanes with a sidewalk-bordered grassy strip in between. Both sides of the street are lined with row houses, some of which have small restaurants, such as pizza joints, on the bottom levels. Cars are parked at an angle in front of the houses. About six blocks ahead, viewers can see where the street ends as it bends a small corner and runs into Route 61. On the other side of Rt. 61, overshadowing the entire scene, sits a huge culm slope, a black face of coal mining waste softened only by a few hardy saplings. The slope parallels Rt. 61, which is just a small, two-lane highway at this point, running east-west.

Initially, there is no one in the foreground, just the music playing. Then an older white man wearing casual clothing approaches the camera coming up the street along the grassy strip. As he comes into focus in the foreground, the music softens. He introduces himself.

*Narrator:* Hi, I'm \*\*\*\*\*. I'm standing here in my hometown of Shamokin a worried man because the future of my community is so uncertain. My ancestors came here to mine coal. My daddy did his time in the mines up until the 1960's, when the coal companies closed up shop and left. Of course, we all know what they left behind."

Viewers continue to hear his voice, but now the screen shows scenes from around the area of devastation from mining.

As he says, "Our ancestors didn't know any better and had little choice," viewers see the first image of the old buildings along Rt. 61 that processed and loaded the coal, now rusting in dangerous heaps very close to some main roads.

As the narrator says, "But Shamokin has been left with a legacy of devastation," the next image of a small drainage creek stained orange from mine drainage pollution is shown.

The camera returns to the narrator on Market Street.



“The quality of life in Shamokin took a huge hit. It’s just not such a pleasant place to live anymore. But now we have a choice that could change all of that.”

He points to the imposing culm slope behind him. As the scene zooms slowly in on the culm slope, the narrator continues.

“On the other side of that eyesore that has defined our town for decades lies a hidden, unbelievably beautiful valley. Take a look at Brush Valley.”

The screen now shows images from Brush Valley from a film by the BVPA. Scenes from the film include an aerial video of the forest-carpeted valley, a shot of one of the natural sand springs on the valley floor, a video of a white-tailed deer beside a creek, and views of the 9 acre reservoir. For a moment, the narrator is quiet. Then he resumes speaking.

“Some of our most powerful local politicians think that the answer to Shamokin’s economic woes is to turn this gem of a place into the site of a federal prison.”

After the narrator’s comment about the prison, a picture of a prison appears on the screen, either the state prison that already exists in Shamokin or another federal prison. It will be an aerial view to give a sense of the physical space that a prison will require. Then the narrator returns to the screen, but now he is standing next to the sign on Rt. 54, erected by the BVPA, that reads “Welcome to Brush Valley: Site of Public Park or Prison” He continues speaking.

“Haven’t we learned from our past that the way to make our community a better place to live is not by irresponsibly destroying our natural resources? We need to find a better way to take care of the environment and the community that we are going to leave to our grandchildren. Fortunately, there is a group who thinks they know how to do that. They are the Brush Valley Preservation Association. They are working to keep a prison out of Shamokin’s last pristine natural area and are looking into ways to turn it into a public park instead.”

The screen now shows people enjoying nearby recreation areas like the Montour Preserve or R.B. Winter State Park, places the audience should recognize. The narrator continues.

“A park would not only protect the natural resources like the pure water in Trout Run but would also give our families a place to go to enjoy fresh air and beautiful trees. And the best part is that instead of bringing prison jobs to the area, a public park would encourage more desirable industries based on recreation and would attract businesses who want a good quality of life for their employees.”

As he speaks, the camera returns to him for the last time. He is still standing near the sign, but with more of the forest visible behind him.

“If you agree that you want to preserve Northumberland County’s best-kept secret, Brush Valley, support the Brush Valley Preservation Association. Visit their website at [www.penweb.org/bvpa](http://www.penweb.org/bvpa).”

The screen now shows the contact information for BVPA, including their US mailing address, now backdropped by a snapshot of the Trout Run reservoir. The music, which has been playing softly the whole time, swells again. End.

### ***Discussion of Cultural Themes and Images***

#### *Preliminary Elements: Music and Narration*

Van Wagner is a folk musician from a neighboring county. He is in his twenties, but he values the region’s history and uses its influence in his music. He has actually worked in a mine as well. I do not have a specific piece of his music in mind. Rather, I would ask him to create something to reflect the mood of the commercial, something that would draw on ethnic music from the area, perhaps Irish folk music. He would not use lyrics but would rather just provide background. Especially towards the end, the mood of the music would have to be something upbeat and positive to complement the images of a pristine Brush Valley that everyone would want to enjoy. This would emphasize the positive cultural value that a preserved natural area could have.

The narrator should be a local Shamokin resident who can connect viewers with their own history. He must have a comfortable attitude and conversational tone. His role is not only to deliver a message but to provide a bridge for people from their own backgrounds to new possibilities.

#### *Community theme*

Early in the script, the narrator uses the word “community.” This is often a political buzzword, but it can also carry deep cultural meaning. My intention is to encourage viewers to think beyond their own immediate needs and consider all the members of their community. Political leaders have claimed to have the best interests of the community at heart, but this commonplace narrator should be more real to viewers than are politicians whose motives are suspect.

#### *Cultural history theme*

One way that the community is drawn together is by the commercial’s emphasis on a common cultural history. Unfortunately, this history may exclude some viewers from outside the mining area, but at least most school districts have some mining history in them, or are connected somehow to mining, so the mining history should resonate with everyone in the county. Certainly, everyone who lives here has seen the destruction around Shamokin and other towns.

Mining history defines Shamokin, and this commercial insists that citizens not take their history for granted. The history theme reappears towards the end of the commercial as well, when the narrator asks whether we have learned

from our history. This is an important theme in the sense that if we do not learn from history we are doomed to repeat it. This advertisement counts on people wanting and being able to learn from their history because the pristine quality of Brush Valley stands in direct opposition to the destruction of the past.

*Quality of life theme*

Another primary theme is that of quality of life. The commercial leaves no room for debate on this issue. It clearly indicates that a relatively pristine natural area shared by all would increase the quality of life in the community. Viewers who disagree with this stance will not be interested in anything else the BVPA has to say. This ad is not a numbers game about economic growth; it is about a quality of life that Shamokin area residents have not had. A sub-theme within this proposition is that nature in its unaltered state is necessary for the well-being of humankind. The commercial is not interested in promoting the preservation of wildlife habitat for the sake of the wildlife because that argument always loses to the need for economic growth, especially in conservative areas like rural Pennsylvania. Rather, the call to preserve nature is an anthropocentric theme in this ad.

*Future as a theme*

There is a final minor theme just touched on by the narrator. He mentions leaving a legacy to his grandchildren. I did not want to make this a primary theme because it seems as though the rights of posterity carry almost as little weight as the rights of wildlife in many debates. However, it is a theme that many perhaps some, especially older people, care about. Some viewers will have a sense of the flow of time and the needs of future generations. Many viewers care about the future of their community as a whole. The juxtaposition of the mining legacy left by their ancestors with the possibility of leaving a different legacy to descendants is important. This is why the narrator should be an older person who can connect to the past as well as care about the future.

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\*\*Note on other references: Numerous other newspaper articles from the Shamokin *News-Item* and the Sunbury *Daily Item* were used for this paper, even though they were not all cited. In addition, BVPA members offered information in personal conversations.