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EXETER TOWNSHIP

IMPROVED SCHUYLKILL



About 30 state, county and local officials pilot kayaks for a 5-mile paddle from the improved Reeser's Landing launch site in Exeter Township after a brief ceremony Wednesday to mark the opening of the site, which features an improved boat launch, parking and other infrastructure. **COURTESY OF SCHUYLKILL RIVER GREENWAYS**

River Water Trail access point opens in Berks

FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP

For Jacob Gardner, improving Reeser's Landing in Exeter Township meant giving back to a place he grew up enjoying.

Gardner grew up across the Schuylkill River from Reeser's Landing, spending time in the area walking, biking, running and fishing.

Now, as trails project manager for Schuylkill River Greenways National Heritage Area, he has helped make that familiar stretch of river more accessible to others.

Gardner joined local officials and project partners on Wednesday to celebrate the opening of the newly improved river access point. The more than $250,000 project brought a new concrete boat launch, expanded parking and other amenities to a place with deep personal meaning for him.

"This project was very personal for me from the beginning," Gardner said. "In the end, we were able to greatly improve this area's ability to connect the community and visitors to the river and trail."

The improvements welcome people arriving with paddles, bicycles, fishing gear or simply time to spend along the water. More than 40 parking spaces include accessible and trailer parking. Safety and informational signs provide guidance in English and Spanish, while a bicycle fix-it station and several benches serve visitors exploring the river and nearby Exeter Scenic Trail.

The work builds on an effort to preserve public access that began years ago.

Reeser's Landing became a popular place to enter the river after PennDOT installed a landing during a bridge reconstruction project about a decade ago. Former property owner Eileen Reeser wanted to keep that access available to the public and worked with Schuylkill River Greenways, which secured funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to purchase the property.



Jacob Gardner, left, Schuylkill River Greenways trails project manager, and Kent Himelright, Greenways trails director, install a sign at Reeser's Landing launch site in Exeter Township on Wednesday designating the Schuylkill River as the first and only National Water Trail in Pennsylvania. The designation is bestowed by the US Department of the Interior, which issued the designation earlier this year. **COURTESY OF SCHUYLKILL RIVER GREENWAYS**

As more people discovered the site, the need for better parking, safer access and other improvements grew.

As Gardner puts it, the site was being "loved to death."

For Gardner, addressing those needs also offered an opportunity to help shape future projects along the river.

"I believe this project will set a standard for other water trail projects we work on

See **IMPROVED** on Page A3

MONTCO COURTS

Man faces retrial on child rape charges

By Carl Hessler Jr.
CHESSLER@POTTSMERC.COM

NORRISTOWN — A Hatfield Township man who was granted a new trial on charges he sexually assaulted an underage girl on multiple occasions in Lansdale, Telford and Perkasie lost his bid to prevent the original trial judge from presiding over the retrial.



Brian Julian Marchini

Brian Julian Marchini, 52, whose previous sentence of 16 to 32 years in prison was vacated by a state appellate court, showed no emotion in Montgomery County Court on Monday as county Judge Wendy G. Rothstein rejected his request to recuse herself from presiding over his retrial, slated to begin with jury selection on Dec. 8.

"The court has been and continues to be impartial in this case. The jury will be the finder of fact. The court has no bias against the defendant. The court can be impartial," Rothstein ruled after a brief hearing.

Defense lawyer Basil D. Beck III, referring to comments Rothstein made during Marchini's August 2023 sentencing hearing, suggested Rothstein had "personal contempt" for Marchini and should recuse herself from presiding over his retrial.

"While it is true that a judge at sentencing can be expected to inject personal comments

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PENNSYLVANIA

Lawmakers push to pass statewide school phone ban

By Zack Hoopes
PENNLIVE.COM

In early July, as state lawmakers were in the final stretch of negotiating the 2026—27 budget, among the few bipartisan ideas appearing to have traction was the creation of a statewide no-phones-during-school policy.

Fast forward three months, and the legislation has failed to cross the finish line, despite other, seemingly more difficult items having made it into the final budget deal.

But with two voting weeks remaining until the November election, lawmakers are mounting a behind-the-scenes effort to get a school phone policy done.

"I think we're close to getting it home," said Sen. Vincent Hughes, D-Philadelphia, one of the legislation's key proponents.

"You usually don't get bills that are of this much consequence that have that level of bipartisan support, so I think there's a good chance we come together to get this done," Hughes said. "It is hugely popular."

The issue has been around since the first smartphones hit the market 20 years ago, but Pennsylvania is one of relatively few states that doesn't have uniform rules for phones in classrooms, leaving the matter up to individual school districts and in some cases individual teachers.

A growing body of evidence links phone use

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Carlisle High School uses cell phone lockers to store student phones during class. October 2. **DAN GLEITER/ PENNLIVE.COM**

SCHOOL

From Page 1

— particularly access to social media apps — to broad declines in students' mental health, although some studies suggest getting phones out of classrooms may not provide the immediate boost in academic performance and well-being that some have hoped for.

Over three-quarters of Americans believe students should not have access to phones during class time, according to Pew polling averages, and roughly half support 'bell-to-bell' bans that would bar students from using their phones at any point from morning arrival until afternoon dismissal.

Gov. Josh Shapiro endorsed a statewide 'bell-to-bell' rule in his budget speech in February. It was one of several items seen as potentially easy wins for lawmakers and would not require significant funding.

A 'bell-to-bell' phone bill authored by Sen. Devlin Robinson, R-Allegheny County, and co-sponsored by Hughes and a bipartisan slate of senators passed the Senate and is now in the House. A virtually identical bill from Rep. Mandy Steele, D-Allegheny, passed the House and is now in the Senate.

"Sens. Hughes, [Steve] Santarsiero, and I are working hard with all parties involved to get this bill across the finish line before the end of the legislative session," Robinson said in an email. "Parents, teachers, and even students support this legislation, and we're doing all we can to get it done for them this year."

The bills require every school administration in the commonwealth to adopt a policy to "prohibit the use of a mobile device during the school day while on school property" and to "establish the manner in which a student's possession of a mobile device is to be restricted." Beyond that, the specifics are left to individual districts and schools.

The bills received overwhelming bipartisan support when they were considered earlier this year, with the primary concern being allowing students access to their phones if they are having a family or medical emergency.

But in recent weeks, the sticking point has shifted to the question of whether the rule should apply to all schools or just the public school districts that receive direct state funding.

The bills "should move, in my opinion, next week," Steele said last week. "My version does include private schools, so I think that's probably the sticking point."

Recent legal proceedings, including the multi-billion-dollar settlement with Meta to which Pennsylvania is a party, "clearly showed that many of these platforms on kids' phones are intentionally designed to be addictive," Steele said.

"This is a public health issue," she continued. "Why on earth wouldn't we protect kids in private schools?"

It's unclear what exactly private school operators are asking for; the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, the state's most powerful lobbying bloc for religious schools, did not respond to a request for comment on its position.

But the issue has become pointed enough that it has started to irritate the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), the influential teachers' union. Initially opposed to another state mandate on classroom rules, the PSEA changed its position on the bell-to-bell bills earlier this year, saying teachers need more backup from their administrations in fighting what has become an overwhelming classroom distraction.

As with many issues, however, the PSEA is staunchly opposed to exempting private and religious schools from requirements that public-school union teachers have to follow.

"The feedback that we've gotten is that there is some disagreement in terms of how it would be applied, or if it would be applied, to all schools or only public schools, and we strongly believe this legislation should apply to all schools and all students," PSEA spokesman Chris Lilienthal said.

"One of the components of the Senate bill and the House bill that is really important is that while it calls for bell-to-bell policies to be put in place, it leaves it up to each school entity how to enact it," Lilienthal said, thus giving both public and private schools significant room to tailor the details to their own needs.

"It should be a priority for lawmakers this fall session, and it should apply to all students at all schools," Lilienthal said.

The school boards' association told lawmakers last year that roughly 85% of districts in Pennsylvania have some type of phone policy, although many of these allow students to use their phones in between classes and during lunch, which would not be allowed under the bell-to-bell policy envisioned by Shapiro and the legislature.

Private schools have also gotten out in front of the issue. The Harrisburg area's own Bishop McDevitt High School, part of the Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg's school system, bans phone use bell-to-bell, according to its student handbook.

Some schools allow students to keep their phones on their person during the day if the phones are silenced, which would still be allowed under the current language of the bills.

Others, like Mechanicsburg Area School District, have introduced racks of plastic pockets in classrooms where students deposit their phones before every period. In the most hardware-intensive example, Carlisle Area School District rolled out small steel lockers specially made for students to keep their phones during class time.

School leaders who testified before the state Senate earlier this year said phone bans were initially disliked by students, but that they came around to the idea after seeing that the policy had improved the schools' social environments.

This idea is backed up by research showing increases in disciplinary actions and decreases in students' self-re-

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IMPROVED

From Page 1

along the Schuylkill River and can serve as an example for water trail managers thinking about design, funding and partnerships," he said.

The project brought together Exeter Township, The Crossroads Group and contractor Gordon H. Baver Inc. Funding came from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Imagine Berks and Pennsylvania American Water.

Wednesday's celebration also marked a broader milestone: the Schuylkill River Water Trail's recent designation by the U.S. Department of the Interior as Pennsylvania's first National Water Trail.

After the ribbon-cutting, local officials and project partners launched from Reeser's Landing for a 5-mile paddle.

Their departure put the improvements to use, connecting more people with the river Gardner grew up enjoying.

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