

WYOMING VALLEY LEVEE SYSTEM

Laura Holbrook up for hiring as new overseer

By Jennifer Learn-Andes  
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A vote to promote Laura Holbrook as the new Wyoming Valley Levee System overseer is scheduled for Tuesday's Luzerne County Flood



Holbrook

Protection Authority meeting agenda.

Holbrook has worked at the authority for nearly a decade

and was promoted from flood mitigation specialist to deputy executive director in February 2024.

Holbrook is a certified floodplain manager.

If approved as the new authority executive director, Holbrook would receive \$92,500 annually in the position, the agenda said.

An executive director is needed because Christopher Belleman retired on Jan. 9 after 12 years in the position.

Belleman received approximately \$100,000 annually in the position, and the position was publicly advertised with a minimum compensation of \$80,000.

A motion is also on Tuesday's authority agenda to approve a consulting agreement with Belleman, who is an engineer.

Authority executive director duties include oversight of the 16-mile flood control system along the Susquehanna River, which protects about 14,200 properties in parts of Exeter, Wyoming, West Wyoming, Forty Fort, Luzerne, Pringle, Edwardsville, Plymouth, Swoyersville, Kingston, Hanover Township, and Wilkes-Barre.

This complex system includes drainage structures, relief wells, pump stations, and an electrical distribution system with multiple substations, transformers, and miles of underground and aerial transmission lines, authority representatives have said.

Belleman had stressed that he deliberately built procedures and expertise into the staff so that flood protection would never be compromised if the director position became vacant.

That includes developing the "Wyoming Valley Flood Response Plan," which outlines the coordinated response that must be provided by both the independent authority and county government when the Susquehanna rises to flood stage.

Tuesday's meeting starts at 1 p.m. in the authority building at 1989 Wyoming Ave. in Forty Fort.

Erosion repair

An engineering design contract to remediate an erosion problem is also on the agenda.

Erosion is creeping toward part of the levee wall in Wilkes-Barre near the intersection of Riverside Drive and Academy Street, adjacent to the Black Diamond railroad bridge.

Belleman has said the section was stable for decades, but started to slough in recent months. On slopes, slough is soil, rock, and debris that has moved downhill, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The engineering design with Wilkes-Barre area-based Verdantas would be up to \$59,700, the agenda said.

Frigid temps with negative wind chills in forecast

Staff Report

A cold weather advisory has been issued for Northeast Pennsylvania as the coldest temperatures of the winter season are expected to engulf the region this week.

An arctic cold front is in the forecast to move through the area, dropping low temperatures

into the single digits with wind chills five to 15 degrees below zero Monday night into Tuesday morning, according to the National Weather Service in Binghamton, N.Y.

High temperatures are expected to remain below freezing through Wednesday, with a slight warm-up for Thursday.

LOOK BACK



Richard Sabatura | Times Leader File Photo

Solomon's Creek overflows its banks on Cemetery Street in Ashley. Picture published in the Times Leader on Jan. 20, 1996.

30th anniversary of the 1996 flood

By Ed Lewis

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There were no weather advisories or warnings, but something was amiss on Friday, Jan. 19, 1996.

Periods of heavy rain, combined with temperatures reaching into the high 50s and low 60s, caused a significant snowpack left behind by a blizzard that struck the region just two weeks earlier to melt rapidly. Streets were instantly flooded as streams and creeks broke their banks, including Solomons Creek, forcing many homes and then-Mercy Hospital in South Wilkes-Barre to be evacuated.

Then-Wilkes-Barre City Mayor Tom McGroarty had planned to have the city's public works and fire departments assist flooded homeowners to pump cellars and basements first thing Saturday morning on Jan. 20, 1996.

By late Friday afternoon, all concerns turned to the mighty Susquehanna River. Those concerns turned to panic when river level readings upstream in Towanda were higher than expected.

Around 10:30 p.m. Jan. 19, 1996, a decision was



Lewis Geyer | Times Leader File Photo

Police Capt. Donald Crane carries a child from a boat along Church Street near Mercy Hospital in Wilkes-Barre. Picture published in the Times Leader on Jan. 20, 1996

made for evacuations of low-lying areas along the Susquehanna River from Exeter Township to Shick-shinny.

Then-Luzerne County Emergency Management Director Jim Siracuse, joined by then-county commissioner Tom Makowski, then-county clerk Jim Torbik, and McGroarty, announced during a live 11 p.m.

newscast broadcast by WBRE-TV 28 evacuations of the Wyoming Valley area that were affected by the 1972 Agnes flood.

Panic set in.

"It's a little too close for comfort. We apologize to those who are going to be affected, but we felt it's too close to allow people to stay," Siracuse is quoted in a Times Leader story published on Jan.

20, 1996.

The Susquehanna River, as forecasted late at night on Jan. 19, 1996, was expected to crest between 35 and 36 feet in Wilkes-Barre, one to two feet below the levee at the time.

At 10:34 p.m. Jan. 19, 1996, the river was 26.7 feet and rising.

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Winners of Earth Conservancy contest announced



Submitted Photo

Elizabeth Hughes, Earth Conservancy's director of communications, discusses some of the 62 artworks submitted for the Pollinator Seed Packet Art Contest.

By Bill O'Boyle

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Earth Conservancy selected the winning design for its Pollinator Seed Packet Art Contest.

Elizabeth W. Hughes, director of communications at Earth Conservancy, said Teall Vosburg, the first-place winner, will have her design featured on more than 1,000 packets of a specially-tailored blend of native wildflower seeds that Earth Conservancy will distribute throughout

2026.

The second-place winner, Addison Sippler, will receive \$100, and the third-place winners will receive \$50 each.

Launched in the fall of 2025, Hughes said the contest invited artists of all ages and skill levels to create original artwork for limited-edition native wildflower seed packets that will be distributed at conferences, classrooms, community events, and outreach programs later in 2026.

Hughes said the design challenge was specific — create artwork within a 4.25" x 6.25" space that explores both Northeast Pennsylvania's anthracite mining heritage and the transformation happening on former coal lands today.

"I'm incredibly proud of this project," Hughes said. "It brought fresh perspectives to the work we do, and it was fun — it got our staff and board talking about our mission in ways we hadn't before."

Hughes said the contest

enabled Earth Conservancy to make new connections with community members.

"One of my favorite things, honestly, was seeing the caliber of the student artwork," Hughes said. "They really took the time to learn about our region's history and what we do here, and it shows in what they created. I love having opportunities like this to bring art, education, and community together

See WINNERS | 6A



## Flood

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Shortly after the 11 p.m. newscast, at least 100 volunteers showed up at the Market Street Bridge to fill sandbags that were stacked on top of the levees stretching from the Luzerne County Courthouse to West River Street in Wilkes-Barre. By sunrise Jan. 20, 1996, there were about 500 volunteers.

“The Market Street Bridge was the scene of frenzied activity, as volunteers shoveled, filled, and stacked,” the Times Leader reported Jan. 21, 1996.

Evacuation centers were set up by the Wyoming Valley Chapter of the



Times Leader File Photo

Picture published in the Times Leader on Jan. 22, 1996

American Red Cross in record time in gymnasiums of several high schools in the area, with patients from then-Nesbitt Hospital in Kingston being taken to the West Side Career and Technical School in Pringle.

At 3 a.m. on Jan. 20, 1996, the emergency call to Shickshinny residents

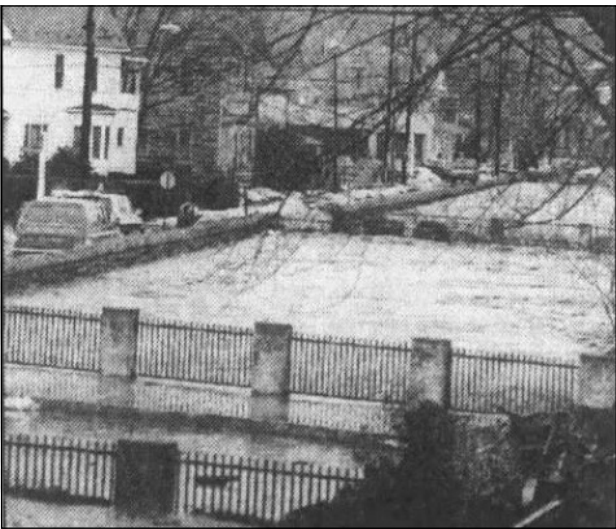
was “Get Out Now!” by firefighters going door-to-door. Less than three hours later, about 5:30 a.m., the lowest parts of Shickshinny were inundated by the river, and it was going to get worse.

In Hanover Township, firefighters slowly traveled through Breslau and Lyndwood, announcing a

mandatory evacuation at about 6:30 a.m. on Jan. 20, 1996.

While this was ongoing, many homeowners had moved items from their basements and first floors to their upper floors while loading whatever they could into their vehicles.

The Times Leader estimated 80,000 to 100,000



Chris Ritchie | Times Leader File Photo

Area waterways such as Solomon's Creek in Wilkes-Barre pose a threat. This was the scene looking from South Franklin to Barney Street on Jan. 20, 1996. Picture published in the Times Leader on Jan. 21, 1996.

residents evacuated the Wyoming Valley.

The river crested in Wilkes-Barre at 34.48 feet at 4:30 p.m. Jan. 20, 1996,

flooding Avoca, Duryea, West Pittston, Shickshinny, West Nanticoke in Plymouth Township, and Moca-naqua.



Submitted Photo

Second Place: ‘Progression’ by Addison Sipler, Harveys Lake (watercolor)

## Winners

From page 3A

around our past, while showing what reclamation can make possible.”

### The response

Hughes said 62 artists submitted original work in November 2025, including students from grade schools and colleges, hobbyists, and professional artists.

“While many came from the region’s historic coal communities, entries also arrived from outside Pennsylvania — as far away as Texas, Colorado, and Washington state,” Hughes said.

Media included watercolor, acrylic, colored pencil, batik, and digital design, with approaches ranging from illustration to pointillism to abstract art.

Hughes said Earth Conservancy staff conducted the first round of judging, followed by review from the organization’s Board of Directors. While many submissions featured

pollinators and wildflowers, Hughes said judges prioritized designs that engaged with the contest’s full thematic requirement — connecting the region’s industrial past with its ecological present and future.

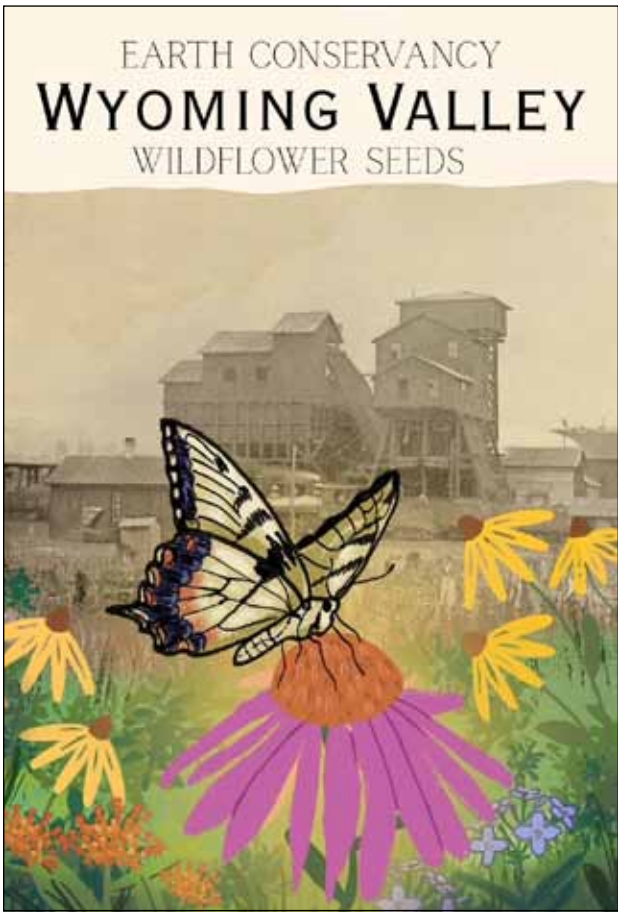
“This criterion proved challenging — and led to close competition at the top,” Hughes said. “Judging resulted in one first-place winner, one second-place winner, and a three-way tie for third place.”

Hughes noted that three of the five winners are students.

“It truly was an amazing response,” Hughes said. “All of us — the staff and board — were in awe of what we received. It made our role as judges wonderful fun, but also extremely difficult.”

Hughes extended a special thanks to the teachers who brought this project into their classrooms and encouraged their students to participate. Earth Conservancy is exploring ways to feature additional submitted works in future projects.

All 62 artworks can be



Submitted Photo

First Place: ‘Wildflowers from Dust’ by Teall Vosburg, Mehoopany (digital collage)

viewed at [www.earthconservancy.org](http://www.earthconservancy.org).

### The winners

- First Place: Teall Vosburg, Mehoopany, “Wildflowers from Dust” (digital collage)
- Second Place: Addison Sipler, Harveys Lake, “Progression” (watercolor)
- Third Place: Ashley Fedak, Larksville, “Reclaiming Pennsylvania” (watercolor)
- Third Place: Jaycee Chicales, Ebervale, “Rebirth” (watercolor)
- Third Place: Clara Merrick, Washington, D.C. “Pennsylvania Blooming” (gouache)

Terry Ostrowski, Earth Conservancy president/CEO, said the organization’s officials were grateful to everyone who shared their time and creativity on the project.

“I have to admit, I was surprised by the response to this contest — both the number of entries and the talent we saw,” Ostrowski said. “Earth Conservancy has always worked with schools and community groups to tell the story of our area’s coal mining past and the restoration work happening today, but this was the first time we invited people to interpret that story through art. The submissions were so impressive. It was very difficult to narrow it down to a single winner.”

“This digital collage reflects my belief that native plants are quiet agents of repair after industrial impact. The land remembers how to heal and restore beauty when we allow it,” Vosburg, the first-place winner, said.

“I’m so happy I got to participate because mining heritage is such an important part of our region’s identity. I’m proud to honor the history and landscapes that shape our community,” Sipler, the second-place winner, said.

“My entry recognizes Pennsylvania’s rich mining history and its commitment to restoring the landscape to a healthy and safe condition. Everyone — people and pollinators alike — benefits from this important work,” Fedak, a third-place winner, said.

“I really liked the conservation message the contest promoted and enjoyed trying to convey it through my artwork. For my piece, I wanted to combine the coal/strip-mining history of the region with the revitalization of nature,” Merrick, a third-place winner, said.

### About Earth Conservancy

Earth Conservancy is a nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the impacts of pre-regulatory anthracite coal mining in northeastern Pennsylvania.

In 1994, Earth Conservancy purchased nearly 16,500 acres of land from the bankrupt Blue Coal Corporation, much of which had been ignored, seen only as permanent eyesores and reminders of the past. Earth Conservancy saw them differently — as an opportunity for transformation and growth.

Since then, the organization has reclaimed more than 2,000 acres, restored damaged streams, and preserved over 9,300 acres for trails, parks, wildlife habitat, and recreation.

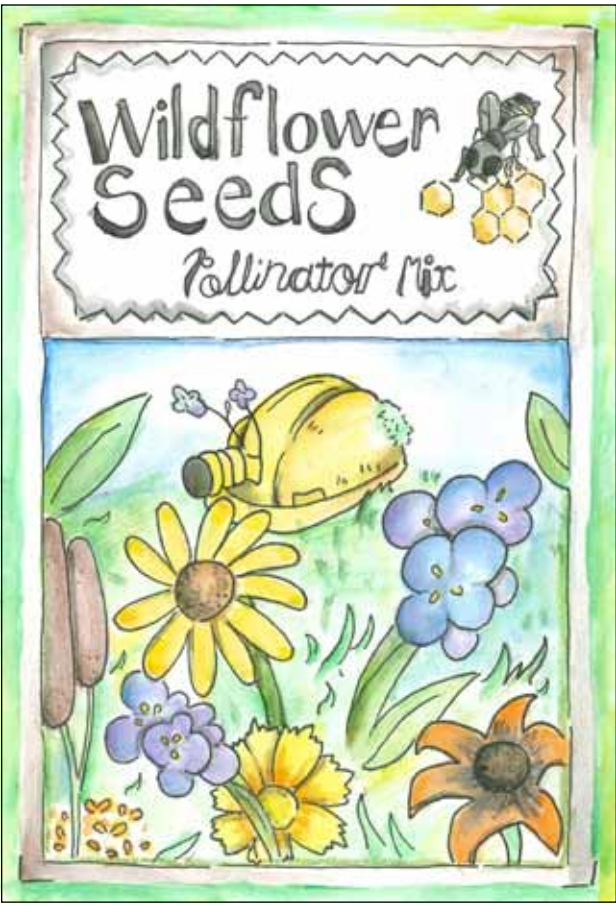
Alongside these efforts, Earth Conservancy has developed comprehensive land-use plans, built acid-mine drainage treatment systems, operated a large-scale composting facility, and led environmental education initiatives that connect people with the land and its history.

These projects trace back to Earth Conservancy’s overarching plan, seeking a more livable community now, while clearing the way for positive, progressive change for future generations.



Submitted Photo

Third Place: ‘Reclaiming Pennsylvania’ by Ashley Fedak, Larksville (watercolor)



Submitted Photo

Third Place: ‘Rebirth’ by Jaycee Chicales, Ebervale (watercolor)



Submitted Photo

Third Place: ‘Pennsylvania Blooming’ by Clara Merrick, Washington, D.C. (gouache)

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