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**Rancocas Nature Center is back and looking ahead**



*Susan Buffalino, sanctuary director, right, leads Barbara and Wolf Skacel, left and center, of Moorestown, on a nature walk at the Rancocas Nature Center, Westampton, Jan. 5, 2014. (DAVID M WARREN/Staff Photographer)*



[GALLERY: Rancocas Nature Center is back and looking ahead](#)

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At this time last year, Rich Chichester said, "there was a lot of venom" in the classroom at the Rancocas Nature Center - and it wasn't from the harmless orange corn snake curled up in the corner.

It was from a group of local residents, municipal officials, parents, and volunteers determined to keep the center open after the New Jersey Audubon Society abruptly announced its closure, citing a \$55,000 funding gap.

The Friends of Rancocas Nature Center quickly coalesced, and over the next six months arranged a public-private partnership to take ownership of the center, where children and adults can hike, birdwatch, and track wildlife on 210 acres of state park.

On Sunday, at the Friends' first-anniversary meeting, co-chairs Chichester and Toni Price celebrated the group's successes and discussed what lay ahead with some three dozen supporters.

"We're at the head of the trail. By no means . . . are we out of the woods," Chichester said, addressing a full room. "This is going to be a battle for the next few years, until we generate enough surplus that we can begin to do the long-term developmental things that we need to."

About 60 percent of the center's operating budget is raised through memberships and program fees, primarily the summer day camp, treasurer Dan Ruotolo said. The committee must raise about \$50,000 in 2014 to cover the rest of its costs and \$10,000 to begin saving and investing in new programs and site improvements.

With two paid staffers and some material and program costs, the center's payroll now goes through Burlington County, and facility maintenance goes through Westampton Township.

The center includes walking trails, a small bookstore and museum, a dragonfly garden, and other attractions mostly geared toward children. Organizers hope future programming will broaden its appeal to adults. In addition to donations, the committee in 2014 will need a long-term strategic plan and larger volunteer base.

Chichester and Price said they had recruited committee members with expertise to handle areas such as government partnerships, finance, and engineering.

Ruotolo said he had not seen the center before Chichester called and asked for help.

"I just fell in love with it once I came here," said Ruotolo, a Mount Laurel accountant who also teaches seminars at Rowan University. He enlisted his students' help to arrange the nonprofit applications and set up the committee's financial infrastructure - a win-win, he said, because students rarely get hands-on training with nonprofits.

The committee is also arranging for students at Stockton University to conduct water sampling and other environmental studies on the center's meadows, vernal pools, forests, and trails.

Krista Mucciolo, another committee member, said her biggest short-term goal remained promoting by word of mouth, simply to get new visitors in the door.

"When a kid comes here, not one kid doesn't want to come back," Mucciolo said.

Wolf and Barb Skacel, a recently retired couple from Moorestown, arrived before the meeting for a snowbound hike with center director Susan Buffalino.

"We came here with our kids 30 years ago," Barb Skacel said. The couple said they had read about the center's struggles and came to see if they could help.

"We have some more free time now, so we're trying to see where to devote our energies," Wolf Skacel said. As a former state environmental employee, he said, he wants to find volunteer work that matches his skills.

In 2013, despite a four-month closure, the center drew 11,500 visitors, only slightly below the 2012 figure, Buffalino said.

Another sign that bodes well: the center's day camp was near capacity last summer.

Children who sign up this year might get to help name the corn snake.

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