

Northfield's Schell Bridge construction at 'a precipice moment'

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NORTHFIELD — The Friends of Schell Bridge reflected on hardships and triumphs, including a possible grant announcement expected later this month, on the path to making the goal of a pedestrian bridge over the Connecticut River a reality during the group's annual meeting on Saturday.

"When you start a bridge project, it takes 20 years," Friends of Schell Bridge Treasurer Jerry Wagener told those gathered at The Brewery at Four Star Farms. "We worked from 2004 to 2016, when MassDOT approved our bridge. That's less than 20 years — we have succeeded."

The proposed project consists of the complete replacement of Schell Bridge, which carries East Northfield Road over the Connecticut River and has been closed since 1985 because it deteriorated beyond being safe to use. The existing bridge will be replaced with a pedestrian and bicycle bridge. Construction has been estimated to take up to three years once work begins.

The state Department of Transportation's plans to reconstruct the bridge were put on pause in February, however, when bids came in almost twice as high as expected. Carrie Lavalley, deputy administrator and chief engineer with MassDOT's Highway Division, sent a letter to Northfield Town Administrator Andrea Llamas in the beginning of this year explaining construction bids were too expensive at the time. The department's estimated construction cost was approximately \$25 million and the lowest bid received was slightly more than \$40 million. Other bids were as high as more than \$50 million.

State Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, shared her efforts to make the dream of a new Schell Bridge come true, and congratulated the Friends of Schell Bridge on the progress achieved thus far.

“Your advocacy has been unmatched,” Comerford told meeting attendees. “Thanks to your efforts, the delegation has supported MassDOT in moving the pace forward.”

She explained that the efforts of the Friends of Schell Bridge have made elected legislators, including U.S. Sen. Ed Markey, advocate at all levels to make the bridge happen.

“Very recently when the bid came in higher, we worked with Congressman (Jim) McGovern,” Comerford added, noting that Northfield “can’t have a better advocate” than McGovern.

Comerford also noted that the Baker-Polito administration is supportive of the idea, but now that the Healey-Driscoll administration will take over soon, the Friends of Schell Bridge will need to work with the new governor to convince her of the need for a new Schell Bridge.

When Comerford was elected in 2018 to serve the Hampshire, Franklin and Worcester District, she said it was clear that the Schell Bridge was a “beloved project” for the community and the Selectboard. Comerford said she considers the bridge to be the solution to regional problems that Franklin County faces. The county is suffering from declining population, but she said having a pedestrian bridge linking the east and west parts of Northfield will increase quality of life, increase tourism and be a major step in the economic development in the area.

The next step for the Schell Bridge is the project possibly receiving a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Comerford said she expects to hear if the town received the grant at some point this month. Attendees of the Northfield 350th anniversary parade in 2023 will also get to see a model of the proposed bridge, Wagener’s handiwork, being pulled on a trailer.

“We are at a precipice moment,” Comerford said, “but I want you to know we are focused pretty intently on trying to bring this home.”

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