

Annual Report of the Rustic Ridge Association

Town of Northfield Representative

August 2015

“ A pipeline? Through Northfield?? And a compressor station, too!? Where did this all come from??”
you ask.

As I report to you about the goings-on in Northfield since last August, I would be remiss to acknowledge right off the bat the lumberings of the corporate and federal elephants in town – Kinder Morgan Company, its subsidiary Tennessee Gas Pipeline Company, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (spat out as FERC), and how Northfield is dealing with them. As before, I will also cover Northfield’s overall business climate, as well as updates about the Master Plan implementation, the Northfield Campus and the Schell Bridge.

Pipeline

A year ago, the prospect of a pipeline traversing communities across the Northern Tier of Massachusetts carrying up to 2.2 BILLION cubic feet of fracked gas under tremendous pressures from the shale oil fields of Pennsylvania to the huge gas depot in Dracut, Massachusetts – and probably to markets overseas – was a blip on Northfield’s radar, prompted by a small article buried in *The Greenfield Recorder* from early in 2014. Placards emerged and concerned citizens began meeting and organizing courses of resistance; I made mention of it in last year’s report. But it wasn’t until late summer, into the fall, and bursting into 2015 that the impacts of such a project began to sound Paul Revere-like alarms across the community – indeed, across the region, the Commonwealth, and the country. Although Northfield has concerned itself with other matters, the pipeline – its inefficiencies, its inequities, its over-reaching, its greed, its horrendous environmental, geologic, and economic impacts (perhaps my personal feelings are creeping in?) – is, or should be, on everyone’s lips. Factual and emotional information abounds about the proposed 412-mile Northeast Energy Direct pipeline (www.nofrackedgasinmass.org, <https://plan4ne.wordpress.com>, and www.MassPlan.org among others); just type “Northeast Energy Direct” or “Pipeline Awareness for the Northeast” into your favorite search engine (yes, the verb “google” has crept into our vernacular). I urge you to check out these sources, as it is not the intention to detail all the issues here. But the issues hang like a climatic inversion, creeping into conversations in committees, on Mim’s porch, at the Pool, the Creamie, Coffee Hours after church, and porches and patios around Town. At last May’s Town Meeting, Northfield soundly approved a non-binding “No Pipeline” vote, handing the Selectboard its sentiments and allowing them to act for the Town accordingly as it works with the Franklin Regional Council of Governments in *their* response and resistance to the project. At that same meeting, funds were approved for legal counsel to negotiate the

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best possible mitigations from Kinder Morgan/Tennessee Gas, should the pipeline come through. Exactly where Northfield is *officially* coming down on the project has really yet to be seen. Other affected towns along the route in Massachusetts and New Hampshire have rallied around one or more of the various health, life quality, environmental, conservation and constitutional issues in their opposition to the pipeline. Indeed, I think Kinder Morgan is a bit stymied by all the ruckus, thank goodness. My sense is that official Northfield is taking a moderate view and course of action. There are plenty of vocal and active citizens and groups working to keep the information flowing and the opposition pressure on. It's just that no *one* issue seems to have emerged around which the Town can focus its opposition, although a recent presentation (Wednesday, 7/15, at TCC) about the huge compression station sited for Gulf Road has some very compelling rallying points. For sure, the specter of eminent domain hovers through people's thoughts, and perhaps those of business owner's as well... And, naturally, not everyone is opposed to the project. Hearing and reports are due this fall, winter and next spring; informed public input is vital. This is much bigger than just Northfield.

Northfield's Business Climate

My image of business spark plugs from last year needs to be modified: they haven't all fired evenly or to their greatest potential. Since this time last year, Northfield has lost 3 businesses and the potential for a 4th. Two were in the Green Trees Gallery alone – the Dala Bird Gift Shop, and Northfield Coffee and Books. Steve and Cathy Malsch closed Fairview Gardens in late winter, sending gardeners scurrying to other sources for their vegetables and annuals. And Northfield Mount Hermon made it difficult for the Silverthorne Theater Company to be in summer residence at the Rhodes Art Center. This season's three performances, including as world premiere, were in the Sloan Theater at Greenfield Community College. A variety of reasons can be cited for the loss of these businesses, among them the continued dormancy of the Northfield Campus. More on that later. Let's be fair, however, and cite some spark plugs that are firing away, fueled in part by the energies of the Northfield Area Tourism and Business Association – NATABA – but also by the fruition of planned development and the efforts of the Town's new administrator:

- Shelby Snow has made the Pool and Golf Course a lively recreational asset since purchasing the property last year;
- The Northfield Trails Association has run popular hikes all year 'round, in all sorts of weather, highlighting Northfield's natural beauty and recreational resources;

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- Road races on Thursdays through the summer have a strong following from around the region, especially when the Farmer's Market is close by and the ever-popular Northfield Creamie is just down the street;
- The Great River Challenge will return this fall, promising to be bigger than last year's inaugural event;
- AMTRAK fulfilled its promised inauguration of service from Springfield through Northampton and Greenfield on its way to Brattleboro and north, bringing high hopes for further development of regional transportation;
- The Franklin Regional Council of Governments is actively pursuing the development of biking trails through the region, including Northfield (look for the new signage...);
- The C. S. Lewis Study Center is quietly bringing workshops, poetry readings, and music to their corner of Northfield;
- The Northfield Senior Center has continued to provide vibrant and relevant programs to the Town at large;
- And if there were a single individual encouraging many of these developments, it would be our new Town Administrator Brian Noble who helps keep our Selectboard focused and Town Departments humming.

A few new initiatives are emerging in Town:

- The Snows are moving along with their plans for a B & B in the former Dickerson House "Blink Bonnie" on Hotel Road by the Golf Course;
- The Green Trees Gallery space is now under Corinne Burnham's entrepreneurial eye. She has hosted a Bridal Expo, and has plans for the space to be a meeting and catering facility;
- The former Coffee and Books space looks like it will become a wine boutique... Stay tuned for that!
- And we're still looking for a gas station to come to town!

On balance, then, Northfield is holding its own, still poised for improved, focused economic growth, helped along by the 2014 Master Plan.

Northfield's Master Plan

Last August, I mentioned that the first focus of implementing the new Master Plan was to be the overhaul of seriously outdated Zoning By-Laws, and this has been the case. Serious work with consultants has gone into reviewing what's on the books (not much!) and what is needed (a lot!) to help Northfield realize its economic, cultural, recreational and historical potential while retaining its rural

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character and appeal. Some of this work stands to strengthen Northfield's opposition to the pipeline, but it also will guide the process of re-occupying the Northfield Campus, among other needed directions. It is a process not to be rushed, and the fall into early 2016 will see more public review and input toward a final code, perhaps by this time next year. Another tangible outcome of the Master Plan was the creation of a Community Parks Committee, which, after finding its footing late in 2014, is pulling together all the wish-lists for this community asset, looking at land acquisition, and formulating a Request for Proposals. You can imagine that the Friends of Schell Bridge organization is interested in this process and is collaborating with the Parks Committee's efforts... Other elements of implementing the Master Plan over time are under the watchful eye of Town Administrator Brian Noble, the NATABA group, the Northfield Historical Society and the Friends of Schell Bridge, the Conservation Commission, and the Recreation Commission, among others. The Master Plan continues to be a focal point as discussions of Northfield's development continue.

Northfield Campus

An as-yet unknown factor in that development is the continued vacancy of the Northfield Campus. One wonders what the intentions of the National Christian Foundation really are for that campus that has so much potential. Several organizations have expressed more than passing interest in the property, but NCF doesn't seem to be responsive. One very public event scheduled for Sage Chapel – a presentation of Noel and Betty Stookey's interfaith "One Light, Many Candles" – was quashed by NCF over security concerns. (Personal aside: With a middle name of "Christian," NCF was not thinking what a draw that event would have been, possibly leading to more interest in occupying the space!) The current thinking – uncorroborated, however – is that a consortium of occupants will cobble together a workable plan to run and fill the campus. The benefits of having *any* occupant are manifold, but, sadly, the longer buildings remain empty, the challenge of bringing them back on-line and filling them increases.

One very positive development has emerged, however, mentioned last year. Recall that Northfield Mount Hermon, The Trust for Public Land, and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (the DCR) inked a proposal for the DCR to purchase 1600-plus acres of forest land up the mountain from the central campus. This year, there has also been active discussion about including the field across from the campus (where the siren tower stands) in the purchase. That parcel, by the way, is close to the Schell Bridge and being eyed by the Park Committee and Friends of Schell Bridge as a potential recreation area. The purchase process has some slow-turning wheels; funding the purchase missed a key deadline this past June, but the intention is still very present. We'll have to see what 2015-2016 brings on this front.

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Schell Bridge

Sprinkled through this report have been references to the Schell Bridge. It, too, remains dormant, but there has been activity! As you remember, last year came the announcement by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) that it will design and build a replacement pedestrian/bikeway bridge, hopefully incorporating design elements or actual parts of the original bridge. Demolition avoided – CHECK! New news is that late last August, the DCR announced that it would take ownership of the bridge once it was completed in 2020! Liability to the Town avoided – CHECK!! The Friends of Schell Bridge hosted a Selectboard meeting last October that was dubbed a summit among all the local, regional, and state government officials and stakeholders that have brought this project to this point of success – the Selectboard, FRCOG, MassDOT, DCR, Rep. Paul Mark, and Sen. Stan Rosenberg. The Senator – a key force in the whole life of the project (and now President of the Massachusetts State Senate) – MC'd the gathering, attended by well over 100 Townsfolk. MassDOT announced the first outcome of the summit going forward: a Preliminary Engineering Study will come out sometime this fall with cost estimates and design ideas that will inform the RFP process and eventual construction.

“Northfield Strong”

That is a good place to stop – on an upbeat note, a new bridge to look forward to. Issues remain, yes, and concerns sometimes overshadow positive developments. This pipeline thing, along with its compressor, and the continued vacancy of the Northfield Campus are weights on Northfield's shoulders, but not crushing. We have good Town leaders and a functioning Town government; an involved citizenry; solid schools here in Northfield, at NMH in neighboring Gill and down the street at Redemption Christian Academy; and engaged Church congregations with new leadership (you'll get to hear Julie Olmsted here on Sunday). Working together, with the Master Plan remaining as a strong beacon, we all will guide Northfield into its future.

Thank you for the privilege of serving you.

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