

# Northfield residents plead for state to reopen bridge

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NORTHFIELD — State officials have said replacement of the Schell Bridge over the Connecticut River here is not a high priority, but no one in state government has to drive a 14-mile round trip to get a pizza.

That's one facet of the plight 25 west Northfield residents took to selectmen last night on behalf of the 55 to 60 homes and businesses they say are "cut off and alienated" from the rest of town because the bridge is closed.

If a plumber comes from the center of town, via Route 10 and Route 142, people get charged the extra 14-mile round trip.

Even Massachusetts Lottery outlets in town are affected. Vermont residents used to cross the bridge to play the Lottery. Now they go to Bernardston.

"I'd even become a Democrat if that would help get money to replace the bridge, and that's a real

concession," said west Northfield resident Susan Ahearn, in reference to Northfield being a heavily Republican town.

Northfield is the only town in Massachusetts cut in half by the Connecticut River, making it, according to one woman, "a unique problem which the state ought to understand."

The town-owned bridge built in 1903 by a wealthy industrialist could be rated at only 10 tons even with \$1.1-million in repairs, and would cost \$300,000 to demolish it.

Although there is a downstream highway bridge on Route 10 connecting the two sections of town, residents contend they are in jeopardy because fire trucks, ambulances, police, and even evacuation in case of an accident at the nearby Vernon, Vt., nuclear plant, are delayed by the extra seven-mile run to reach west Northfield.

Moreover, they claim, if the main road in from Route 10 is cut off, as happened earlier this year by a fire,

the only way out is via Vernon or Guilford, Vt.

Last night, citizens again appealed to selectmen to aggressively seek state aid to reopen the bridge with \$1 million in repairs, or to build a new bridge at a cost of \$4 million.

The appeal came after state DPW Commissioner Robert Tierney announced release of \$30 million more in local aid funds that can be used as direct grants for capital improvements to local highway and bridge projects.

However, a beleaguered Chairman of Selectmen Robert Johnston sought to explain the money is being distributed statewide, rather than in a few large grants. The town's share is going to be about \$48,000, he said, "and won't go very far."

West Northfield residents, however, were irritated that selectmen's reply to Tierney listing priority projects in town, listed the Schell Bridge replacement at the bottom of the list, and then only as an economic development project.