

Gold-ribbon Panel Discusses the Schell

At the Friends of Schell Bridge annual meeting September 26, 2013, a panel comprising state and local officials as well as bridge experts discussed the ramifications of the proposal to replace Schell Bridge with a new hiking/biking bridge patterned as much as practical after the Schell. About 50 attendees were treated to an excellent panel discussion and were able to ask questions.

The panel was superbly moderated by John Mullin, Professor of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, Associate Director of the Center for Economic Development, and former dean of the Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts.

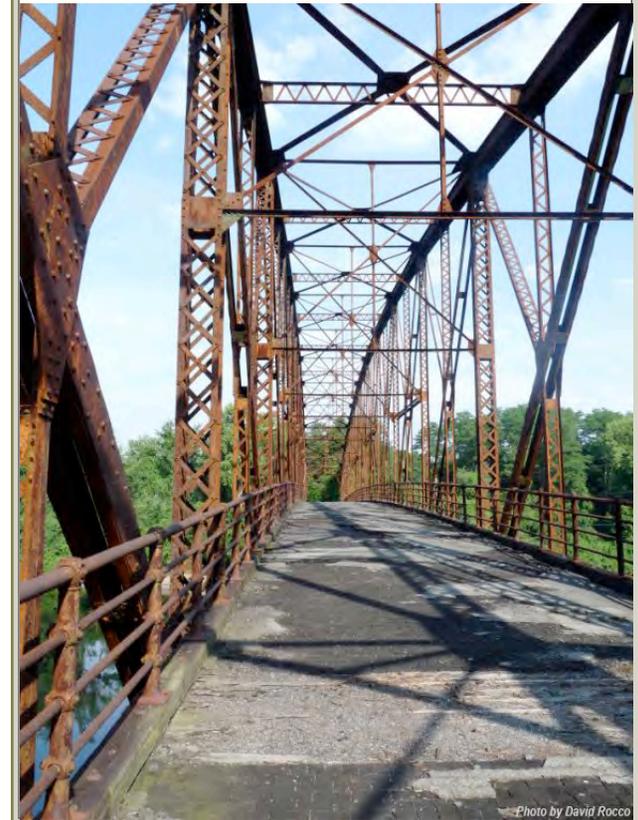
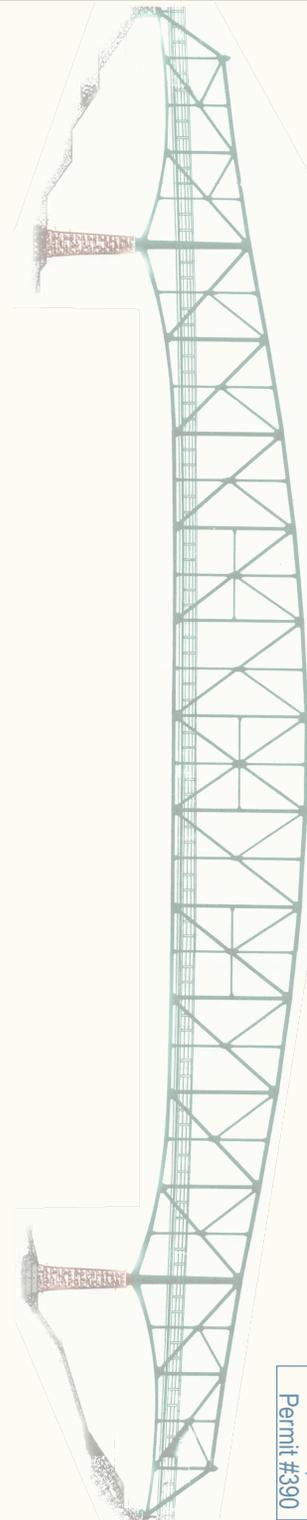


Photo by David Rocco

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Vision: A beautifully-restored historic bridge across the Connecticut River that serves both as a premier recreational link for a network of hiking and biking trails in the tri-state region and as a centerpiece for a series of linked riverfront parks for Northfield and area residents.

One questioner wondered if the replacement bridge could be used for emergencies – ambulance, evacuation, etc. Maureen pointed out that it would be strong enough (codes require that) and that it would be wide enough for cars, and probably an ambulance. It was pointed out by others that some towns, when it is time to replace emergency vehicles, choose models that will fit across recreational bridges.

Another questioner asked if we could be snookered and the demolition take place and then the replacement not done (because funds run out, or something). Both Jack and Paul pointed out that the funds would be approved for the replacement bridge, with the removal of the current bridge being incidental to building the new one on the same piers.

John had promised to end the evening “five minutes early” so wrapped up with a question for both the panel and the audience as to the main “take aways” from the night’s discussion. The main “take aways”:

- ▶ **Ownership** The question of who owns the new bridge is unresolved and we need to get DCR involved as soon as possible.
- ▶ **Maintenance** Use maintenance-free materials in the replacement and start planning now for obtaining funds for maintenance.
- ▶ **Economic Benefit** The new bridge will benefit the town and region economically (see, for example, the 2011 Economic Impact Report); bike tours/races might even earn enough to cover maintenance costs.

Friends of Schell Bridge stands ready to help in any way possible toward successful completion of this project, and will continue to work closely with the selectboard in this regard.



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Stan Rosenberg Carl Goldknopf Jack Spanbauer Maureen Mullaney

The other panelists: Senator Stanley Rosenberg, majority leader of the MA senate; Representative Paul Mark, Northfield's representative in the MA legislature; Jack Spanbauer, chair of the Northfield selectboard; Maureen Mullaney, head of transportation planning at the Franklin Regional Council of Governments; Carl Goldknopf, head of GV Engineering in Keene, NH; Peter Talmage, engineer and former professor of Energy Efficiency at Greenfield Community College.

John first asked Stan to review the proposal, which Stan did very well and succinctly. He pointed out that after MassDOT conceived this option of replacing Schell Bridge with a biking/pedestrian bridge (ala the Keene North Bridge, patterned after the Schell), using federal funds, it had 60 days to submit the funding proposal. Stan complimented everyone for promptly submitting the necessary approvals, and MassDOT was able to meet the deadline.

Stan indicated the replacement project will cost about \$5,000,000, 80% of which will come from a federal program and 20% from the state. MassDOT will do the replacement,

Peter Talmage John Mullin Paul Mark

but won't own the bridge; he thinks the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) could be a possible owner.

Stan also thought the replacement bridge could have the same style/looks as the current Schell, that the bridge would tie together a tri-state bikeway, and that there could be parks at one or both ends with memorabilia from the existing Schell. The park(s) would be a wonderful facility for individuals of all interests and abilities (shall we gather at the river?).

Paul concurred with Stan's comments, emphasized the need to address the open questions of ownership, operation, and maintenance, and said Northfield was about to "turn a corner"; he thanked everyone for "hanging in there" to achieve this goal.

Jack then said that the Northfield Selectboard was strongly in favor of the project, that he hopes DCR will be interested in owning the bridge, and noted that in recent conversations with MassDOT that MassDOT is optimistic that the project will fly. Jack also noted that Northfield will benefit from a tri-state bike path.

Maureen indicated that a role of the FRCOG would be to coordinate the funding of the project and work with VT and NH on the tri-state bikeway and tie it into the Franklin County bikeway. Maureen also indicated that the FRCOG would be willing to work with DCR regarding ownership of the bridge.

Peter recalled biking across the Schell in 1963 when he was a student at Mt Hermon. He emphasized the economic benefit to the town that the new bridge would bring, in part due to sponsoring bike tours and races, as well as improving the town's image.

Carl took the view that it was an unusual (positive) opportunity for the town to own such a bridge. If the proper materials are used (perhaps a bit more expensive than the "cheapest" route) maintenance costs could be quite modest - limited mostly to deck maintenance. Carl suggested that savings for maintenance begin immediately and not be deferred "until needed", and that federal funds are available for maintenance of such public recreational facilities. Maureen pointed out that the recently-built canal-side bridge (built by MassDOT, owned by DCR) on the Franklin Bikeway has very modest maintenance costs.

In subsequent discussions Jack and Stan emphasized that we need to talk with MassDOT about the town's role and to review this evening's discussion; Jack thinks this proposal is a "wonderful compromise" between demolition and (sure to be expensive) restoration.

At different times John asked the audience what they thought of "half a loaf". One person expressed preference for restoration of the current Schell, but there seemed to be general agreement (including that one person) that the proposed bike/pedestrian bridge was better than demolition of the Schell without replacement.