

'River Town' Struggling to Preserve a Bridge to Its Past



PHOTO COURTESY FRIENDS OF SCHELL BRIDGE

The Schell Memorial Bridge in Northfield was built in 1902 and has been awaiting demolition since its closure in 1987.

FOR 20 YEARS, THE SCHELL MEMORIAL Bridge in Northfield has straddled the Connecticut River in silence.

Built in 1903 by Francis E. Schell, a wealthy capitalist from New York, the Pennsylvania truss bridge was condemned in 1987 after funds ran out to maintain it. The 515-foot-long bridge, detailed in Gothic Revival elements, still stands primarily because the town doesn't have the funds for demolition.

In 2003, the bridge was named one of the 10 most-endangered historic sites in the state by Preservation Mass, a historic preservation-advocacy organization. Soon after, the Friends of Schell Bridge organized to save the bridge and to encourage rehabilitation efforts for pedestrian and bicycle use.

Northfield is one of many towns along the Connecticut River in western

Massachusetts, but is the only one that has developed on both banks of the river.

"We are a river town," said Jennifer Tufts, executive director of Friends of Schell Bridge. "Right now there are very few places where people can get down to the river. We hope that the Schell Bridge can be saved for not only its historic value and beauty, but so people can really get down to the river and experience it."

Saving the deteriorated bridge would not just be for historic preservation efforts and a way to draw people to the river, but also would provide a means to strengthen greenways and bike paths in the region, according to Tufts. If restored, the bridge also would act as an emergency route if a disaster should occur, she said.

The Friends of Schell Bridge have hopes for a tri-state bikeway, as Northfield borders New Hampshire and Vermont. Both

states have bike-path systems that could be linked via Northfield and the Schell Bridge to other parts of western Massachusetts.

The cost to rehabilitate the bridge for pedestrian use was estimated at \$6 million by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, a Watertown-based engineering and consulting firm.

The state said it would cost up to \$25 million for rehabilitation of the bridge or \$1 million to demolish it as long as all goes smoothly, according to Tufts. The nonprofit organization is attempting to heighten publicity regarding the bridge

and its benefits to the community, she said, because the group is trying to raise money to prevent demolition.

Friends of Schell Bridge does not own the landmark, but with a petition to save the bridge signed by 1,400 residents and the aid of National Trust for Historic Preservation, efforts are strong and looking good, said Maureen Spaulding, member of Friends of Schell Bridge. The bridge has deteriorated since Northfield's highway department welded steel barriers to each side of the bridge in 1987.

The town has lost other pieces of its history over the years. The Northfield Mount Hermon School shuttered in 2004 and the "flavor of the community" changed slightly, according to Kim Farmer, owner of Mims Market on Main Street. The collegiate flair that was here has gone, she explained. The school consolidated its operations on the

former Mount Hermon School for Boys campus in neighboring Gill.

There is not a lot of business in this small New England town, said Farmer, her only competition being another small market, Northfield Food Mart on Northfield Road.

"We both want to survive," she said. "They do meats and produce, and I try and be a little more fun with what I sell."

The opening of Northfield Mountain in 1972 added another dimension to the town. The mountain is a series of hills and a reservoir that covers a pumped-storage hydroelectric plant located several hundred feet below the surface. The cavern is longer than a football field and higher than a 10-story building.

The man-made, 300-acre upper reservoir is 800 feet above the river and capable of storing 5.6 billion gallons of water, according to the FirstLight Power Resources' Web site, the company that owns the facility.

To comply with its federal licensing, the facility offers the public an array of recreational activities, from cross-country skiing in the winter along 26-miles of trails to riverboat cruises in the summer aboard Quinnetukut II. ■

Just the Facts:

Year incorporated:

As a town: 1723

Total area:

35.37 square miles

Population:

3,034

Density:

88 per square mile

Tax Rates:

Residential: \$12.90

Commercial: \$12.90

Public school enrollment:

593

Total number of housing units:

1,291