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for HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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BY:

September 18, 2006

Town of Northfield
The Honorable Selectboard
69 Main Street
Northfield, MA 01360

RE: Schell Memorial Bridge, Northfield, Massachusetts

Dear Honorable Members of the Selectboard:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Friends of Schell Bridge to strongly urge for the Schell Memorial Bridge's preservation and restoration. The National Trust is a private nonprofit organization chartered by Congress in 1949 to lead the private historic preservation movement in this country. With nearly 270,000 members, including over 11,000 in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the National Trust provides leadership, education, advocacy and resources to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize our communities.

Constructed in 1903, the Schell Memorial Bridge is the third oldest of five known Pennsylvania-type steel truss bridges in Massachusetts, and of these five, thought to be a unique variation. At 515 feet long, it is a three-span cantilever truss bridge. Significantly, however, the bridge functions as a continuous truss under live load, but under deadload it works as a simple truss span with cantilevered ends. The bridge was designed by noted engineer Edward S. Shaw, and constructed by the New England Structural Company and by masons Ellis & Buswell. In 1990, the Schell Memorial Bridge was selected for documentation by the Historic American Building Survey/ Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER). This distinction marks it as among the most significant bridges in the nation. Also of note are the unusual and striking Gothic Revival decorative elements, particularly at each portal. As stated in the HABS/HAER documentation, Mr. Schell donated an additional \$6,000 to the bridge project so that it might be of a design worthy to be a memorial to his parents. In addition to its engineering and architectural significance, the Schell Bridge is also important for its connection with Northfield's social history. It is my understanding that the Massachusetts Historical Commission has formally determined the Schell Bridge eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places based on the structure's multiple layers of significance. Such a listing would be an honor and may open the door to funding opportunities.

Communities across the state and the region have successfully rehabilitated historic bridges for both a return to vehicular traffic and for recreational use. Based on its engineering and social

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significance, and for its structural integrity according to the 2004 engineering study, it appears that the Schell Bridge in Northfield would make an ideal candidate for rehabilitation and re-opening. A rehabilitated bridge would once again connect the two sides of Northfield, could provide important rapid emergency vehicle access between both sides of town, and be part of a tri-state network of recreational trails. Cultural and heritage tourism is growing by leaps and bounds, and with the Schell Bridge as a key component of a regional trail network, Northfield is poised to benefit economically. Heritage tourism studies have found that heritage and cultural travelers spend 30% more as compared with the general traveling public in each of the communities they visit.

Bridges are literally gateways to our communities. Not far from Northfield is another Shaw-designed bridge—the Shelburne Falls Bridge, which connects Buckland and Shelburne Falls. Few of the people who cross it and admire it every day are probably aware of the great efforts to save that bridge, and far fewer could imagine either town without it. Although the Schell Bridge is not on Main Street in Northfield, if opened, it would be a primary link between Northfield and the West side of town, and is easily a local landmark as recognizable as the Shelburne Falls Bridge. In nearby Gill, a small truss bridge near the French King Bridge has been restored and converted for recreational use, with great success.

I encourage the town of Northfield to treat the Schell Memorial Bridge as the treasure it is, and allow for its restoration and reuse. Very often, the rehabilitation of a steel truss bridge costs significantly less than a new replacement bridge. For example, a 1998 survey of 62 steel truss bridges in Vermont revealed that in 60 of those instances, the rehab cost was nearly half the cost of a new bridge. Furthermore, for bridges that are owned by towns or non-profits, there are grant funds available for restoration. If the Schell Memorial Bridge were to be listed as a National Historic Landmark, it would be eligible for Save America's Treasures funding—through grants and legislative earmarks. If Northfield were a Community Preservation Act town, matching funds would be available from the state for preservation projects. Northfield may also want to apply for Preserve America designation, as Preserve America Communities are eligible to apply for matching grants that support preservation and heritage tourism projects. The National Trust also has grant programs designed to help communities plan for preservation projects in their communities. Included with this letter are some informational brochures that describe some of the funding opportunities through the National Trust. Bridges that are part of a heritage and recreational network have access to additional funding sources, such as through Tourism Cares.

Feel free to contact me if you have questions or would like information on any of the grant programs I've mentioned in this letter. Please give the Schell Memorial Bridge a chance at its next 100 years. It is a structure of striking architectural and engineering beauty, elegance, and functionality. Its restoration and re-opening would be a credit to the town and a welcome addition for residents, tourists, and for bridge and outdoor enthusiasts alike.

Sincerely yours,



Rebecca A. Williams
Field Representative

Enclosures