

# A vision for Northfield

## Tying NMH campus, Schell Bridge

**T**here is no time like the present for the citizens of Northfield to look back, regroup, and to look forward to the opportunities now available to the community. On Nov. 4, the nation voted to take a new direction. Working people, young and old (more than a thousand) showed up at Northfield Town Hall, spilling out into Main Street, to express themselves and, to the amazement of those of us who have been working hard on environmental, historic preservation and local governmental issues, Northfield passed the Community Preservation Act. It was a tipping point for Northfield, one could say. Voters recognized the need for "change" and that included adopting a creative financing idea in the CPA.

There were a number of town organizations and committees that worked to pass the CPA, including the Greater Northfield Watershed Association representing "change" and a 21st-century vision for Northfield, a community that has been struggling with serious financial problems and the overhanging problem of a "Northfield Mount Hermon Ghost Campus."

The question facing the GNWA and Friends of the Schell Bridge (FSOB) is how to move forward effectively with a progressive vision for this historic community on shoe-string budgets. That has called for depending on the impressive ability of a part-time executive director to get program grants with little or no operational funding for her modest salary and administrative expenses.

The achievements to date are impressive. A rejuvenated and lovely King Phillips Hill, overlooking the Connecticut River; a highly effective annual effort by the Stream Teams to identify problems and opportunities for each of the six tributaries to the river and a festive and fun Arts

### Nathan Tufts My Turn



Festival, which drew large participation from the town and surrounding communities, just to mention the main programs. We need to tap into each citizen's personal creativity to help two dedicated organizations continue to move us forward.

I'm writing this because readers come to Northfield occasionally or seasonally and want an update on what's happening — and not happening — in town. In addition to the active progressive organizations like FOSB and GNWA, there are other organizations with great concern for the future of the town, including Northfield Kiwanis, Northfield Historical Society, Friends of Dickinson Library and many others. The Board of Selectmen, Open Space Committee, Planning Board and other town boards and committees have also been concerned about the future of Northfield.

Here's the VISION as written in the FOSB Strategic Plan: Combine the two organizations (and add other community organizations) under one umbrella called "The Northfield Conservancy," which would work as a partner with town government. We all have asked NMH to basically donate or bargain sale the 118 acres Mill Brook, mostly wetland and historic mill sites — a natural greenway leading down to the river from the golf course. We have told selectmen that this vision can be accomplished with zero tax dollars, with management under a privately funded Northfield Conservancy.

For the school, it is really a "no-brainer" — making a community park where any development is already out of the question. The

school has not said "no," but typically, has taken no positive action. Environmentally sensitive development should be considered based on the golf course, including some homes on the edge and, perhaps, another inn/restaurant.

The unsold NMH campus is slowly and inexorably becoming an untenable liability and the school trustees have not tapped into the power of the community itself to interact or have input which might be incredibly valuable to both parties ... if a truly working relationship could be established. We don't have all the answers, but the future of this central asset, with the amenities and incredibly beautiful landscape, not to mention the housing and institutional infrastructure, must be part of the "vision" for the community in the decades ahead.

There are many thousands of alumnae who attended NMH who have expressed interest and concern over the fate of Dwight L. Moody's school and birthplace, with its rich history. It would be appropriate to somehow tap into their support. Restoration of the Schell Bridge, or short of fulfilling that dream, a convenient seasonal crossing with a park on each side to enhance tourism and tap into the huge potential of a bikeway and the great river would be "uniting," not dividing, the only town in the watershed incorporated on both banks, so rich in Native American and colonial history.

There are other specific opportunities to make Northfield a better place to live and work we need not detail here. Feedback and suggestions on the way forward are welcome. Nothing more, nor less, than a positive and economically viable future for Northfield is at stake. It's the "vision thing" that is now energizing the nation and can "lift" the town into the 21st century.

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