

NORTHFIELD

Town Meeting voters approve Schell Bridge requirements, reject short-term rental tax

By ZACK DELUCA
Staff Writer

NORTHFIELD — The 148 voters in attendance at Annual Town Meeting approved 36 of the 37 articles on Monday, which included giving their blessing to move forward with legal requirements for the Schell Bridge reconstruction project, and vetoing an excise tax on short-term rental properties.

Held in the Pioneer Valley Regional School gymnasium, residents swiftly approved the majority of articles in under an hour and a half.

Approval of Articles 31 and 32 were required to continue the Schell Bridge reconstruction project, and were met with applause when passed. With voter approval of these articles, the project should be on track to reach a 100 percent design stage this fall, with construction aimed to start in spring 2022.

Resident Nancy Ames spoke in support of the Schell Bridge project on Monday. Ames referenced the town's first fully accessible hiking trail, the Gunnery Sgt. Jeffrey S. Ames Accessible Nature Trail at Alderbrook Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary, which is named after her son. She said the accessible trail is used nearly every day, and that she is confident the new pedestrian bridge and the small associated park will be just as well used by Northfield residents and visitors from neighboring communities.

"If we've learned nothing else over these last 14 months, we've learned that people are hungry for ways to get outside that are local, that are accessible, that are close by and safe," Ames said before residents cast their vote. "We came together as a town to support the building of the nature trail, and I sincerely hope we can come together once again to build a new bridge that will allow us to enjoy a walking and biking route over the Connecticut River once again."

In the Schell Bridge design, the eastern access point includes a small, accessible park area with benches. The arch of the existing bridge will be used for the entrance to the small park area. Each side will have a small parking area with a turnaround loop. Upon completion, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) will own and maintain the new recreational bridge as a dawn to dusk facility.

Funding for the \$22 million Schell Bridge reconstruction project, through federal and state programs, includes demolition of the deteriorated Schell Bridge, relieving the town of current liability. By law, Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) improvement projects require a town to vote to give the Selectboard the right to acquire rights-of-way needed for the project, as voiced in Article 31. It also requires the town to pay for required expenses, such as deed revi-

sions and filings with the state.

Resident Shirley Keech referred to Articles 31 and 32 as the "final two pieces in an amazing puzzle" that people have been working on for years. The Friends of Schell Bridge group was formed in 2004, and it was in 2013 that the Selectboard unanimously approved a MassDOT proposal to replace the Schell Bridge with a pedestrian bridge.

"To me, this bridge really represents a link between Northfield's past and the present," Keech said. "Not just a link between the east side and the west side, but a real acknowledgement of an important piece of Northfield's history."

The only article to fail Monday was Article 36, which would have imposed a "Local Option Room Occupancy Excise" of 6 percent on short-term rentals in excess of 90 days annually. Centennial House Bed and Breakfast co-owner Joan Stoia spoke against the article because of the impact it would have on her business after a year of reduced earnings due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I wanted to explain that as the only legitimate (bed and breakfast) in the town, this affects one business that has lost 73 percent of its revenue and yet had to pay 100 percent of its expenses during COVID," Stoia said. "What this does, it's not pennies, it raises the total tax on one of our rooms to \$27."

Selectboard member Bar-



STAFF PHOTO/ZACK DELUCA

Northfield Annual Town Meeting voters approved 36 of the 37 articles on the warrant on Monday in Pioneer Valley Regional School's gymnasium.

bala "Bee" Jacque noted that The Moody Center is currently working to renovate Revell and Holton halls into an inn on its campus.

Resident Patter Field said The Moody Center properties likely won't be operational within the year, and proposed the article be voted down and brought back to next year's Annual Town Meeting.

"That way we will not penalize Centennial House now, but we can gather revenue when more places open up that we would like to gather

revenue from," Field proposed.

In other business, voters

approved the Finance Committee's fiscal year 2022 omnibus budget recommendation of about \$8.7 million, which includes nearly \$4.7 million for the Pioneer Valley Regional School District assessment and \$461,831 for the Franklin County Technical School assessment.

Additionally, voters gave their blessing to spending \$270,000 on a new truck and \$200,000 on a new loader for the Highway Department. Another \$200,000 was approved for engineering, drainage and road improvements on Old Wendell Road.

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