

## PRESS RELEASE

### Bridge of Flowers Committee Shelburne Falls Fire District July 12, 2023

#### Contacts:

- Jan Morin for the Shelburne Falls Fire District:  
[info@shelburnefallsfiredistrict.org](mailto:info@shelburnefallsfiredistrict.org)/413.625.6392
- Virginia Ray for the Bridge of Flowers Committee: [ginnypray@gmail.com](mailto:ginnypray@gmail.com)/413.522.5046

#### **Bridge of Flowers to close in late October for extensive repairs**

*The project will secure public water infrastructure, preserve the structural life of the span, and improve the experience of walking the garden bridge*

**SHELBURNE FALLS** — The Bridge of Flowers will close as usual in late October, but this time it will not reopen until major and much-needed repairs have been made, thanks to a \$2.28 million state infrastructure grant.

The Shelburne Falls Fire District (SFFD), the independent governmental entity that owns the bridge and provides fire, ambulance, and public water service for the village, has made the decision to proceed with the project with full support of the Bridge of Flowers Committee, which oversees the bridge garden, and help from the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, after an engineering study revealed issues needing attention.

“The Shelburne Falls Fire District appreciates the investment the Commonwealth is making to extend the life of the Bridge of Flowers and to strengthen the village public water system,” said SFFD Commission Chair Ron Dobosz. “This project is essential to the sustainability of our Village’s public water infrastructure.”

The iconic arched bridge across the Deerfield River, beloved by the community, is also a major economic driver for village tourism, drawing thousands of visitors from across the world each season.

However, it also serves a crucial infrastructure need: carrying the only water main that provides potable water to Buckland residents.

#### **Structural deterioration**

In 2020, Tighe & Bond, Inc. engineers were hired to complete a structural assessment of the bridge.

The assessment was made to review cracking on the north side wall and took into consideration the extreme flooding during Tropical Storm Irene in 2011 and the fact that major improvements were last made 40 years ago, in 1983.

The study recommended addressing cracks and stabilizing the spandrel wall on the northeast side of the bridge. It was also noted that some tie-rods that support walls on the northeast area of the bridge are failing or may have already failed.

While the bridge is not in imminent danger, it has been deemed advisable to address these problems now to preserve the structural integrity of this important water infrastructure and to do so before the already enormous project becomes even more costly.

### **Scheduling**

The nature of this project requires the bridge to be closed. The start date and duration of the project as well as planting removal and return are being finalized now to determine the most cost-effective way to make needed repairs within the budget and in the most expedient manner.

Decision-makers have looked at every possible timeframe to execute such a major project, fully realizing the impact the bridge has on the local economy to bring visitors to the village as well as the pleasure it affords residents — in addition to carrying the vital water main line.

Their deliberations have resulted in the decision that the most cost-effective way to complete needed repairs is to close the bridge for an extended period, likely to include the full 2024 growing season.

Winter construction is highly weather-dependent and would require tenting and heating to be sure concrete and other applied material cure properly. Overall, winter construction is longer, more expensive, and riskier. Moreover, the heavy equipment required for the job cannot easily be moved in and out seasonally, were the work to be staggered.

In 2022, after Tighe & Bond updated its 2020 work estimate, the District applied for and was awarded a \$2.28 million grant from the Commonwealth's MassWorks infrastructure program to address structural repairs and install a new water main.

The district has retained Tighe & Bond to complete project design and engineering, which is underway, and a more specific schedule will likely be made public in late-summer/early fall. A public information session will be scheduled for August/September.

“While we regret having to close our beautiful garden bridge for a season, we realize the importance of the structural work to ensure the viability of the Bridge of Flowers for another 94 years,” said Bridge of Flowers Committee Chair Annette Szpila. “We also know what a lot of work by many the successful completion of this work will entail and are grateful to our gardeners and volunteers who are ready to do what needs to be done.”

## **The work**

The 115-year-old former trolley bridge once carried goods between the Buckland rail yard and Colrain — apples, hides, lumber, and more from Colrain, and raw cotton to be finished to Colrain. It was closed in 1927 with the advent of motorized vehicles that transformed the transport issue.

In 1929, an initiative to transform the bridge itself into a public garden was undertaken by the Shelburne Falls Area Women’s Club, the umbrella organization of the Bridge of Flowers Committee.

Since then, the bridge has been maintained by dedicated Committee volunteers of the Blossom Brigade who assist the equally dedicated paid head gardener and assistant gardener.

Among the myriad tasks to be accomplished are removing all plantings and soil from the bridge. Trees, shrubs, perennials, and bulbs will need temporary or permanent homes. A few trees deemed by engineers to be too large to be returned to the garden will likely be donated to the new pocket park at Bridge Street and Deerfield Avenue. Other plants will be housed on nearby farms and in local gardens.

In addition to moving all live material, other familiar objects must be removed and replaced. Lamp posts, kiosks, fencing, lighting, memorials, most benches, and the pathway and flag pole will be removed.

“We are in process of finding temporary homes for many of the plantings as we look to move everything on the bridge to safe and appropriate locations for the duration of the project,” Szpila said. “The good news is that this will be an opportunity to upgrade fencing, lighting, and the pathway — projects we have long been considering.”

Every effort is being made to choose replacement elements with the historical nature of the bridge in mind. For example, rubber edging now on the path may be replaced by old trolley tracking.

Some of the heavy work to remove soil and large plantings will be done by professional landscapers, but volunteers will remove bulbs and perennials, as was done in 1983 when the bridge was last repaired.

## **Minimizing impact and looking ahead**

Those who labor on the bridge are taking the long view of the project while also taking care of short-term needs.

“Ever since we understood that the bridge repair project would include removing everything from the bridge, we've been making lists and planning,” said Head Gardener Carol DeLorenzo. “We have a different strategy with regard to managing plants this season. For example, after blooming, we are digging up many of the bulbs and spring ephemerals, such as daffodils, allium, trillium, dodecatheon and hepatica, before the plants go dormant and we lose track of where they are. Some of the shrubs will be pruned back harder than usual and partially root-pruned as well in preparation for the fall relocation.

“While we won't save every single posy, we have many specimens and hope to send them home to be planted and looked after by our volunteers — much like what happened when the bridge was repaired in 1983. We're also reviewing sites where we can store a majority of our bridge perennials, shrubs, and trees. It's definitely a huge job to remove a garden across a river and then rebuild it, but it's a challenge we're up to. Despite the hard work, we think it will be fun and invigorating as well.”

“While it's a daunting task, we are confident that we will successfully relocate all that we need to move,” said Szpila. “In addition to the needed structural repairs, when we reopen the bridge, you'll see new railings, pathways, and lighting, and a few more wonderful surprises, so we're focused on the end result: a safer, more structurally sound, more beautiful bridge.”

Understanding that the village economy was greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the bridge was closed, the Committee, as well as local arts organizations and businesses, are planning numerous events and activities to help keep local residents and visitors engaged.

The Bridge of Flowers Committee is planning a first-ever art show and sale Oct. 14-15 at the Shelburne-Buckland Community Center.

In the spring, the Committee hopes to offer tours of local “hidden gardens.”

“We plan to host garden tours and more next year while the bridge work is being accomplished to continue to celebrate our local gardens,” Szpila said. “We are most grateful for your support and understanding as we take needed steps to move our iconic bridge to a bright future.”

“We're looking forward to the end prize and making a kind of horticultural magic that will bring the entire bridge a fresh bloom in 2025,” DeLorenzo added.

“But until we close in October, there's plenty to enjoy and we hope you'll take time to stop and smell the flowers.”

*A public information session will be held in August or September to share more details about the project and answer questions. The final project schedule is anticipated to be released in late summer/early fall 2023.*

*Project information and periodic updates will be posted online at [www.shelburnefallsfiredistrict.org/news/](http://www.shelburnefallsfiredistrict.org/news/) and [bridgeofflowersmass.org](http://bridgeofflowersmass.org). Updates will also be shared with the village business community and available for Buckland and Shelburne town e-newsletters.*