

Bridge closure length unknown

by Alex Nuti-de Biasi

RYEGATE—It does not sound like a town-owned bridge over the Wells River will reopen anytime soon.

The bridge on Creamery Road in South Ryegate was closed last month.

According to a listserv post at the time by Ryegate Selectboard member Regina Hazel, the bridge, which spans the Wells River, was inspected by the state and found to be

unsafe.

The east end of Creamery Road between the bridge and Scott Highway/Route 302 is "closed indefinitely." Creamery Road west of the bridge between the river and South Ryegate village remains open and the only way for motorists to access the east end of Creamery Road including Darling's Auto and Quint Road.

According to the Vermont Agency of Transportation, the town-owned bridge, which is 100 feet in length, was built in 1929.

It's not the first time access has been severed.

Though the bridge survived Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, the flooded Wells River washed out a section of Creamery Road between the bridge and Route 302. The

See Bridge on page A6

• Bridge

continued from page A1

roadway remained closed for nearly two months in the storm's aftermath.

According to *Journal Opinion* reporting at the time, the state was eyeing a full bridge replacement within three years.

A state-funded phase 1 study of the bridge was conducted in 2014, said Ryegate Selectboard member Andy Smith during a board meeting on Nov. 24.

And then nothing. The town's attempts to secure state assistance for the phase 2 bridge replacement were turned down, Smith said.

"The funding stream for town highway structures ... has slowed," acknowledged Northeastern Vermont Development Association Senior Transportation Planner Doug Morton. Ryegate is a member of the NVDA regional planning commission.

"It's obviously been an issue in terms of finding funding," he added during Monday's meeting.

Like many other town-owned bridges around Vermont, state officials inspect the span every two years.

During an Oct. 17, 2023 inspection, the Vermont Agency of Transportation found the bridge to be in "fair condition," but noted that

"deterioration is progressing."

"[M]ost likely next inspection structure may be warranted to downgrade to ... rating poor," the report stated.

Morton said the VTrans town highway bridge program has not told the town whether there is any financial assistance available for the bridge replacement.

"They have no solid answers at this point," he said.

Although there is no firm estimate, officials at Monday's meeting used \$1.1 million as a possible price point for the project. In 2011, one local businessowner told the *JO* that the bridge replacement would cost \$800,000.

Ryegate's total municipal operating budget for 2024 is under \$1.4 million.

Morton said Ryegate's representatives in Montpelier will likely hold little sway with VTrans. He advised that the town should start saving with a goal of 10-20% of the project cost matching a potential state grant.

Still, there is no guarantee that the town will be willing to set funding aside for the project. Even then, it could be several years before it's available.

"You're looking at significant match money that

would take several years to budget," Morton said. "The point is that it's going to be some time. People need to adjust to this reality."

Smith said the selectboard should poll residents at town meeting in March whether they want town officials to pursue the bridge's replacement. Morton agreed.

"I think towns are up against some very challenging fiscal dynamics," he said. "Be creative. What does the community want to support? That's the discussion."

There are at least two other bridges in South Ryegate, according to discussion. That may play into the state's thinking on how soon, if at all, the bridge on Creamery Road will be replaced.

The bridge is located near Creamery Road's intersection with Quint Road and it was built two years after the devastating 1927 flood wiped out bridges across Vermont.

"The Quint bridge was opened to traffic on Saturday morning," wrote a columnist for the *Groton Times* in the Oct. 4, 1929 edition. "It certainly is a joy to the travelling public to use this nice bit of thoroughfare in place of the temporary bridge used since the flood."