



January 14, 2010

Monkton moves to save salamanders

By Candace Page, Free Press Staff Writer

When Monkton Selectman John Phillips first heard of a plan to build salamander crossings under the Monkton-Vergennes road he thought, "Are you kidding me?"

Other Monkton residents had a similar reaction to what seemed like an unlikely idea. But, like Phillips, the town has become a convert to the idea of creating Vermont's first highway retrofit to protect wildlife.

"The more we studied it, the more sense it made," Phillips said Wednesday.

Tonight, residents will gather to hear the results of a \$25,000 planning grant to design 10 special culverts under the road. They will be briefed on the town's application for \$225,000 in federal funds to build the first two crossings.

Every spring, passing cars squash thousands of salamanders and frogs as they try to migrate from uplands southeast of the busy road to a big wetland northwest of the highway.

The migration has become a cause celebre in this part of Addison County, with residents forming nightly bucket brigades to ferry the creatures across the highway -- an unsafe activity because of heavy traffic on the road.

Four species found here are considered to be of conservation concern in Vermont, and one, the blue-spotted salamander, is found in unusual numbers. As many as 1,000 dead salamanders and frogs have been found on the road in a single night.

"This place is unique," herpetologist Jim Andrews said Wednesday. "There are unusual species here. There's great diversity and huge numbers. And there's high mortality. That's the clincher. There's so much traffic that we've seen 30, 40, 50 percent mortality."

Chris Slesar, chairman of the town Conservation Commission, has led the campaign for the wildlife crossings. He said if nothing is done, some of the salamander populations will not survive.

"We would have stood by and watched an important part of our biodiversity blink out," he said.

Critter-friendly passage

If the town wins a grant, crews would install special oversized culverts in two migratory hotspots near the Huizenga swamp in West Monkton.

The boxlike concrete underpasses would be topped by permeable pavement that lets moisture seep through. They would have amphibian-friendly dirt floors with enough large rocks to let the creatures hide from predators.

"We don't want to build a buffet for raccoons," Andrews said.

The salamanders would be herded toward the culverts by low retaining walls.

The culverts will be large enough for use by small mammals, including bobcats, which also try to cross the road near the swamp.

Traffic on the Monkton-Vergennes road has increased in recent years, residents say, as the road has become a shortcut from U.S. 7 in Vergennes to Interstate 89 and Taft Corners in Williston.

Salamanders winter in the rocky uplands above the highway, but must reach the wetlands in order to reproduce. The females lay their eggs in water and the young spend a month or two as water creatures before taking to the land. Adults and young must go back across the highway before winter.

Survival of Monkton's blue-spotted salamanders is of particular concern, Andrews said, because they are not widespread in Vermont. Adults don't reach sexual maturity for several years, and then lay fewer eggs than some other amphibians.

"Blue-spotted salamanders can live longer than some deer, but it is not so certain that they will be able to replace themselves," Andrews said. The more spring migrations a salamander survives, the more likely they will be to produce some young.

Newborn salamanders provide a service to humans, he said, because they devour mosquito and blackfly larvae in the wetland.

Fighting for funds

Competition for funding is likely to be fierce. Like other states, Vermont receives federal transportation money every year that must be set aside for enhancement projects such as bike paths, landscape improvement and wildlife crossings. The money cannot be spent on traditional highway projects like paving or bridge repair.

Monkton must provide 20 percent, or \$56,400 of the total \$282,000 project cost. The match will come in the form of private grants and donated consulting services. No local tax money would be spent, Phillips said.

Vermont will have more than \$3 million to spend on transportation enhancements in 2010, program coordinator Curtis Johnson said Wednesday, but has received \$8.8 million in applications. He described the Monkton application as "competitive." Grants will be announced in March.

Slesar said his commission knew it was unlikely to win funding for all 10 wildlife culverts, so chose to apply for the first two on their priority list.

"We're trying to be realistic," he said. "One culvert would make an appreciable difference. Two culverts would be tremendous."

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