

Salamander crossing in Monkton wins \$150,000 grant



Written by

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Unwitting motorists squashed nearly 100 salamanders, spring peepers and wood frogs Tuesday night on a single stretch of Vergennes Road in Monkton, but help for the migrating amphibians is on the way.

The Monkton Conservation Commission announced Thursday that it has won a \$150,000 state grant to install at least one, possibly two, culverts under the road so at least some amphibians, reptiles and small mammals can safely pass between uplands southeast of the road and an important swamp northwest of the crossing.

When completed in 2011, the project will be the first wildlife-crossing retrofit of a Vermont highway.

“We are absolutely thrilled,” said Chris Slesar, chairman of the conservation commission. “We understood that funds were limited, and competition would be fierce. I couldn’t be happier.”

Jim Andrews, the state’s leading reptile and amphibian expert, has described the crossing at Huizenga Swamp as “one of the most important of the known amphibian crossings in the state.” A large number of species try to cross the road. Some, including the blue-spotted salamander, are among the state’s most unusual.

A group of Monkton residents has monitored the swampside road crossing for nine springs, documenting the number of amphibian survivors and victims.

“Quite often, we find it is 50-50,” said Steve Parren, a Monkton resident and wildlife biologist who has collected the data.

Salamanders are particularly susceptible to becoming roadkill because they winter in upland areas but must reach lowland swamps to spawn in the spring. Often, those two habitats are separated by roads.

Teams of volunteers turn out on some back roads around the state on warm, wet spring nights to ferry migrating salamanders to safety. Vergennes Road is too busy to be

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safe for a phalanx of volunteers, so the Conservation Commission proposed to add culverts under the road.

“When people think about wildlife and highways, they think of white-tail deer and smashed cars. That is very, very serious, but just because small critters don’t cause accidents doesn’t mean they aren’t important to the ecosystem. I commend Vermont for recognizing this,” said Trish White, director of the Habitat and Highways program at Defenders of Wildlife in Washington, D.C.

The award came from \$3.8 million in federal funds the state is required to spend on transportation enhancement projects — typically bike and pedestrian paths, landscaping and the like. This is the first time the program has awarded money for a wildlife crossing.

The Monkton Conservation Commission had applied for \$225,000, which is enough, with private matching funds, to install the two highest-priority culverts. Parren said he is hopeful residents can raise enough private funds to meet the two-culvert goal.

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