

# **Savoy's culvert funding conundrum**

## **Or**

# **How can \$1,000,000 not be enough?**

**Marie Saucier, Town of Savoy Select Board Member**  
**April 21, 2025**

Living in Savoy is both a privilege and a challenge. Nestled in Northern Berkshire County, Massachusetts, this small town spans 23,040 acres atop the Hoosac Mountain Range at an average elevation of 1,837 feet. Over half of the land—12,198 acres—is state-owned (2024 data), with significant conservation restrictions on private property. Savoy is home to several state forests and wildlife management areas, including Savoy Mountain State Forest, Savoy Wildlife Management Area, portions of the Mohawk Trail State Forest, Kenneth Dubuque Memorial State Forest, and Windsor State Forests. It also serves as the headwaters to brooks and rivers feeding into the nationally recognized Wild & Scenic Westfield River, Deerfield and Hoosic watersheds.

Despite its natural beauty, Savoy faces substantial financial struggles. With a population of roughly 650, the town operates on a modest 2024 budget of \$2.1 million—of which \$1.12 million funds the school system, leaving just \$976,000 for municipal services. Our aging population grapples with the challenge of staying in their homes, while younger generations continue to migrate elsewhere—a story familiar to many rural communities.

The town's efforts to comply with ever-changing regulations from state agencies and the legislature are a constant struggle. Operating with limited resources, Savoy relies on its volunteer Select Board members, who work tirelessly to keep the town running despite the absence of professional administrative staff.

This backdrop sets the stage for a surprising twist: the award of a \$1,000,000 MASS WORKS 2023 Grant to replace two stream crossing culverts on Chapel Road. While this might seem like a win for our community, it has led to a greater financial conundrum.

The grant was awarded under the Small-Town Road Assistance Program (STRAP) to replace crossings over the Chickley River and Tilton Brook. These waterways, designated as Critical Cold-Water Fisheries, have severe barriers for migratory fish—a passability score of zero and 0.01, respectively. The town applied for years before securing the grant, and engineering documents for the crossings date back as far as 2005.

As of April 21, the town has withdrawn the Tilton Brook crossing from the grant and requested an extension to the June 30, 2025, deadline for completion. Permitting delays have slowed progress, with the engineering team working alongside the Savoy Conservation Commission, Mass DEP, and the Army Corps. Meanwhile, the projected cost for the Chickley River project has soared to \$1.395 million—far exceeding the grant's budget.

This leaves Savoy in a precarious position: how does a small town with an annual municipal budget of \$976,000 find an additional \$400,000? Despite outreach efforts to our legislative delegation and additional alternative grant programs—such as funding from the Department of Environmental Restoration—the challenges persist. Additional grants, such as the (DER) would require 100% compliance with stringent stream crossing standards, tight deadlines that do not line up with our newly projected timelines, and more quarterly reporting and reimbursement requests. With limited staffing, the burden of tracking, reporting, and reimbursement submissions falls heavily on volunteers, some of whom already contribute 20-40 hours a month.

Further complicating matters is the lack of bidders in these remote hill towns, making it unwise to open the project for bids without confirmed funding. Savoy's leadership hesitates to risk frustrating potential contractors by withdrawing the project after bids are submitted, which could harm future endeavors.

Exploring the Chickley River provides additional context. Its headwaters originate deep within Savoy State Forest, flowing for miles through state, private, and town-owned lands. In fact, 69% of the river's length within Savoy lies on state land, while the town is responsible for just a fraction—a road crossing spanning 0.01 miles. The river then flows through Hawley and ultimately into the Deerfield River.

In fairness, the state does provide Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) funds annually. For 2024, this amounted to \$132,179—or approximately \$11 per acre. Alternatively, Savoy could consider using Chapter 90 funds to address the crossing, but even combining Chapter 90 funds with the Fair Share apportionment, the total allocation of \$325,615 falls short of covering the project's projected costs. Meanwhile, residents grow increasingly concerned about the state of the town's roads.

This situation begs the question how do we abide by updated stream crossing standards and keep our citizens in their homes? With 54 stream crossings in Savoy, each potentially costing \$1million to replace, how can our town thrive—or even survive? And this is without addressing bridge issues.

At this point, there are no easy answers. Savoy risks losing the \$1 million grant altogether if no solutions are found. If anyone out there has suggestions—or funds to contribute—please direct them to the Town of Savoy with a note for the Chapel Road Project. As a community, we are trying our best, but we desperately need increased state funding to support rural areas like Savoy and many other small towns here in the Berkshires.

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Upstream view at Chapel Road Chickley River Crossing



View from the downstream side of the crossing.