

## **“Our Highway Deficiencies”**

**In 1957, Governor Joseph Johnson promised the citizens of southwestern Vermont that, in return for the support of area legislators for construction of the state’s portion of the Interstate Highway System, the state would either rebuild or relocate the region’s main north-south highway, Route 7. It would be built, Johnson promised, “to standards comparable with the interstate system.” In the two decades that followed, while the road remained essentially unimproved, the question of what to do with Route 7 became a topic of bitter dispute in the region. Supporters of a new road hoped that the conversion of Route 7 to a divided, four-lane, limited-access highway would stimulate the region’s economy, especially as the area became ever more dependent on tourism and second-home ownership. Gradually, however, detractors of a new road saw it as potentially an existential threat to the way of life enjoyed by the region’s residents. The conflict over Route 7 pitted different kinds of southwestern Vermonters, and different kinds of southwestern Vermont towns, against each other. The question of what to do with Route 7 has significance far beyond its region: the conflict over it embodied the tensions that pervaded life in Vermont in the second half of the twentieth century, as Vermonters throughout the state wrestled with the competing allures of progress and development on the one hand, and preservation and tradition on the other. In this presentation, NVU history professor Paul Searls will discuss how the debate over what to do with southwestern Vermont’s major roads between the 1950s and the 1990s is, in many ways, a metaphor for the transition Vermont as a whole underwent in those decades. A discussion will follow in which audience members are encouraged to share their memories and feelings about the history of the area’s major roads, and the evolution of southwestern Vermont as a whole.**