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August 18, 2016

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Free weekly

Avon man charged in death of East Haddam resident

United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, Deirdre M. Daly, recently announced that Kerry Scanlan, 20, of Avon, was arrested Aug. 9 on a federal criminal complaint charging him with distributing heroin in an overdose death of an 18-year-old East Haddam man earlier this year. The

charge stems from an ongoing statewide initiative targeting narcotics dealers.

According to court documents, on the morning of March 19, Connecticut State Police and emergency medical personnel responded to a residence in East Haddam on the report of an

untimely death. The victim was pronounced dead at the scene.

The investigation revealed that Scanlan arranged and assisted with the purchase of what appears to have been fentanyl-laced heroin from a source in Hartford on March 18. On April 4, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

issued a report listing the victim's cause of death as acute fentanyl intoxication.

This matter is being investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Connecticut State Police and the East Haddam Police Department. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Douglas P. Morabito.

Special election petition update

By Ann Gamble

At the July 20 regular meeting of the Board of Selectmen, Selectmen Susan Link (R) and Ernest Malavasi (D) appointed Emmett J. Lyman (R) first selectman for the town of East Haddam to serve until the Nov. 7, 2017 municipal election. The selectmen chose Lyman after an interview process conducted in executive session. There were four applicants, the selectmen interviewed three: unaffiliated voters Scott W. Jezek, Esq. and Robert R. Smith, and Lyman, a Republican. A collaborative point system was used to choose an appointee. Out of a possible 36 points, Jezek received 26, Smith received 31.5, and Lyman received 33.

"The authority doesn't rest with the selectmen to call a special election to fill a mid-term vacancy. The remaining selectmen are authorized by statute to select someone to fill a vacancy," Town Clerk Deb Denette said, adding that the electorate has the authority to call for a special election.

In all, 11 persons filed petitions to call for a special election with a total of 303 qualified voter signatures as of Aug. 3, two more signatures than required. The names of individuals who submitted petitions are a matter of public record, and, Denette said, include registered Republicans, Democrats and unaffiliated voters.

The selectmen called a meeting for Aug. 12 at Grange Hall to set Dec. 20, 2016 as the date for the special election. The next step is for the Secretary of State to create a special election calendar based on that date which will follow state timing regulations for candidate selection, potential primaries, and

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How a 1967 federal urban renewal project transformed a rural Connecticut town



In the 1960s, some town leaders feared losing business to more modern shopping areas. After a long, costly sales campaign, residents voted in 1967 to destroy the village in order to save it. Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.

Progress gone sour

By Ken Simon

The following is part one of a six-part series by award-winning writer and producer Ken Simon that focuses on a misguided urban renewal project in Moodus and its long-lasting consequences for the small village and its rural town. Simon is the Executive Producer of SimonPure Productions in Moodus, and has worked extensively in newspaper publishing and television production. Simon originally published this series in the since-closed local weekly newspaper, *The Gazette*, in 1982, for which he received the Amos

Tuck/Champion Award for Economic Understanding. He recently updated his text for our readers.

Part 1: The destruction of old Moodus Center

Towns dream, just like people dream. They dream of a spacious shopping plaza to serve local needs; they dream of a rebirth, old business districts made new; they dream of progress and modernization.

East Haddam had such a dream 50 years ago.

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Moodus Center

Continued from front page

How that dream turned into a nightmare makes for a cautionary tale as the town prepares to undertake two major redevelopment projects, the biggest since the botched renewal of old Moodus Center. The two projects are related: renovating the old Nathan Hale-Ray School in Moodus to house town offices and then remaking the heart of East Haddam Village by redeveloping the vacated town property and its environs. For better or worse, these projects will greatly impact the two villages' economies, their character, and sense of place. This time, a new generation of town residents hopes for a better outcome.

When old Moodus Center was torn down some 45 years ago, its replacement was to be a shopping center that was "modern in every way, its design reflecting the ageless good taste of the rural and peaceful surrounding countryside." What area residents got was something quite different. To this day the Nathan Hale Plaza and surrounding area remind longtime residents of promises forsaken and dreams gone bad.

This series was originally published in 1982 in *The Gazette*, a local weekly paper. It was some 20 years after the failed project and Moodus Village then was in bad shape. The project's centerpiece, Nathan Hale Plaza, was nothing like what was promised. It was poorly maintained, with scattered litter, overflowing dumpsters and garbage cans, and a parking lot that was partly a muddy, rutted mess. The old lumberyard was yet to be redeveloped and there were fewer businesses along William Palmer Road.

Fast forward 34 years to today. Things have clearly improved, with more shopping, food and other services available. Nathan Hale Plaza is well-maintained and fully occupied, with six businesses. Across Route 149, the old lumberyard has been redeveloped with nine businesses on site. Four additional businesses and the Post Office border the plaza while the William Palmer Road area hosts 10 service-oriented businesses, medical offices and a bank. Altogether about 30 commercial entities operate in and around the former renewal area. Immediately prior to its being razed, Moodus center supported 20 businesses.

A few years ago, the town made improvements to enhance safety and to foster a greater sense of place. Along with new sidewalks and street lights, a large sign that declares "Moodus Village" and lists area businesses was installed at the intersection of William Palmer Road and Route 149. The retro-cute streetlights and the sidewalks were welcome additions, although pedestrians remain few and far between. The Moodus Village business directory sign is all but unreadable, at least not without slowing down to a dangerous speed on



This 1940s shot of a bustling Moodus business district shows about half of the town's Main Street district on Falls Road, looking east. *Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.*

busy Route 149. The sign is, however, a well-intentioned effort to inform visitors that they are entering the town center.

The physical and economic scars caused by the ill-fated project have thankfully faded in the five decades since the village's "renewal." Today, the Moodus business district is doing pretty well, with most area buildings in good shape. Despite all the improvements, however, the area's architecture, landscape and sense of place remain undistinguished. Sadly, Moodus Center has no pretensions, little charm and no real heart.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The ambitious 1967 renewal plan involved razing the entire 27.5-acre business district – 34 buildings with many dating from the late 19th century. Seventeen private residences, 16 commercial structures were to be torn down, and one home was to be moved. The 20 businesses, 33 families and 3 individuals in the area would be relocated. After demolition and clearance of the land, area roads would be realigned to improve intersections and the agency would then contract to erect a new business district.

By a vote of 751 to 351, East Haddam citizens voted on Feb. 3, 1967, to undertake the \$1.5 million demolition/renovation to "spur the rebirth" of the tiny village. The project's centerpiece was a shopping center that would be "modern in every way, its design reflecting the ageless good taste of the rural and peaceful surrounding countryside."

It was a moment of triumph for the project's sponsors. For three years they had labored hard on the plan, spending \$100,000 to develop it and another \$10,000 to sell it to the townspeople in an aggressive public relations campaign. While

the project faced some early opposition, it was approved largely because substantial government funds were available through the federal urban-renewal program. The town's share of the project was projected to be \$166,827, with the balance paid by federal urban renewal funds and a state grant.

Project supporters promised to reverse the "blighted" area and increase the amount of goods and services available to residents. The referendum was, said then-First Selectman Charles Wolf Jr., "the most important decision that East Haddam has made in its 200-year history."

The sad outcome is that the project failed big time. There is a common realization today among older residents that a unique New England town was persuaded to destroy itself in the name of progress. "They offered us a grand plan," said one resident. "And then we built early aluminum. We didn't realize what we had."

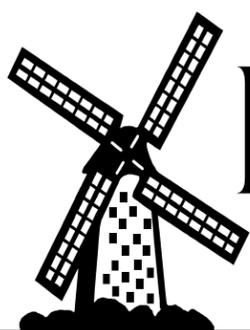
All this was made possible by the federal urban renewal program.

Urban renewal and a bulldoze mentality sweeps the country

Triggered by the Housing Act of 1949, the urban renewal program authorized the federal government to pay municipalities up to three-fourths of the difference between the cost of acquiring and clearing a blighted area, and the price the land brought when sold to a private developer. The developer would then follow a redevelopment plan drawn up by the local renewal agency.

The Act's initial aim was to clear slums, but it soon broadened to finance municipal redevelop-

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Moodus Center

Continued from previous page

opment by authorizing clearance of land for non-residential reuse, and setting up funds for the rehabilitation and conservation of old houses and neighborhoods.

More than 1,500 urban renewal projects were undertaken in some 750 U.S. cities and towns, where the planner's knife carved out new areas to build apartments, office towers, industrial parks, retail complexes and cultural centers. Fueled by tens of billions of federal dollars, this euphoric, master plan view of economic redevelopment met with mixed results and aroused controversy everywhere it was considered. Millions of Americans, mostly urban minorities, were forced to relocate, hundreds of thousands of businesses were forced to close and ill-conceived projects became hundred-million-dollar boondoggles.

Many urban renewal master plans, however, did succeed in stimulating revitalization. Sometimes the master plan failed. Moodus' Nathan Hale Plaza is a legacy of one such failure.

Most observers here agree that what was billed as "progress" turned out to be the exchange of one nuisance with a lot of charm for another nuisance with none. A former Main Street merchant called what happened, "the raping of the town." Mort Gelston, the former director of the project, once its chief cheerleader, labeled the results, "the wrecking of Moodus."

How did we go from "rebirth" to "wrecking?" That is what we intended to unravel in this series. It wasn't easy: many of the key participants in this small-town drama have since died; project records are incomplete and the memories of those interviewed for this series were rubbed by time and perspective.

What is clear is that what started as discussions about parking and traffic problems in the village morphed into a campaign whose main theme was that Moodus Center was a rundown and hazardous area that was impossible to save. Experts, local leaders and town voters concluded that it was necessary to destroy the village in order to save it.

Mills, farms, resorts all contributed to growth

During the late 1800's, Moodus boasted of some 14 twine and cotton mills lining the banks of the modest Moodus River. Mechanicsville, it used to be called, in honor of its industry. It was on the river bank, hard by the mills, that the town's business district developed in response to the growing number of workers settling in the area. In the late 19th century, six merchants were situated in old Moodus Center, within walking distance for the mill workers.

During the early 1900's, area farmers began to take in summer guests eager to enjoy the beautiful countryside and small-town atmosphere. Soon local resorts were attracting 50,000 visitors a year. Several thousand summer residents added to the bustle as they returned year after year to their seasonal cabins and cottages. From the 1920's to the 1950's, Moodus Center grew with the town's vacation industry. By all accounts, those days were the heyday of Moodus.

Downtown Moodus, as it was grandly called, was located at the intersection of Route 151 and Route 149 opposite the village's town green. The Moodus River, more accurately a canal at this point, flowed directly behind the string of 14 Victorian buildings that comprised the main business district. The buildings, located mostly on the north side of the street, encompassed an area about one-eighth mile long with some 20 commercial establishments. The topography of the area was such that the buildings were constructed with their back portions overhanging a deep ravine,

through which the river flowed. In many cases stilts were used rather than normal foundations to support the buildings. Behind the stores, the drop from street level to the canal was 50 feet.

By the early sixties, however, Moodus Center was showing signs of its age. The resort business was in decline and downtown Moodus looked somewhat weary in spots, shopworn and dated. Traffic was sometimes snarled and parking space was at a premium, especially during the peak summer periods. Many residents preferred to do their serious shopping in neighboring towns, which offered a wider range of facilities. The situation in town developed a certain sense of urgency when the river behind the shopping strip began to stink. For years, the town's health director had warned about contamination of the river by raw sewage. Now the stench was awful, especially during the summer months.

Traffic first worry, but soon "blight" became key issue

It was at a June 1961 meeting of the one-year-old Planning and Zoning Board that the subject of Moodus Center first appeared on the public record. Board Chairman Julian Rosenberg suggested that the commission start expanding its activities and that Moodus Center, where it was "commonly accepted that traffic conditions aren't as good as might be desired," would be the likely place to start.

Over the next few months, the question of what to do about improving Moodus Center was discussed among the town leadership. Through the efforts of Rosenberg, and two popular town politicians, local resort owner and state representative Jack Banner and First Selectman and Moodus retailer, Sam Pear, state urban renewal officials were invited to speak to the zoning board.

On Oct. 9, 1962, three experts from the state urban renewal assistance program spoke to the board and its guests, who included Banner and Pear. The officials spoke at length on the urban renewal program and the benefits of a coordinated plan of community development. This "workable plan of development" would be done by professional planners of the town's own choosing, with the U.S. government paying most of the costs. If the study showed that an area was "blighted" and eligible for the urban renewal program, the federal government would pay three-quarters of the cost of such project, with the town and state each paying one-eighth.

At this point, according to the minutes, there was a flurry of questions and comments from those present, "which elicited the information that for such a program to get federal support, it must provide for the razing of those buildings that were designated as substandard." It was then suggested by Banner that "the problem in Moodus Center is only one of parking; the buildings are not in the main substandard, and could be made adequate merely by some concrete shoring operations." The officials responded that under this program federal aid to improve parking conditions was available only in areas that were judged to be in need of redevelopment, which by definition, includes substandard buildings that would need to be demolished.

NEXT WEEK: Now that the scene has been set, be sure to read next week's installment to learn how the townspeople were systematically demoralized about the state of their town center and its dim future, then charmed by images of a rosy future into being gung-ho about the promised progress.

To learn more about the author and to read his blog about Moodus history, visit www.simonpure.com, and <http://simonpure.blogspot.com>.

CERT training given in September

The Citizens Emergency Response Team (CERT) is comprised of local volunteers who have been trained to assist in local emergency and town-wide events. If you have a desire to assist the East Haddam Office of Emergency Management during disasters and town-wide events, please consider joining CERT. CERT members are trained in basic disaster response, first aid and CPR, search and rescue, along with a host of other things. There is no minimum time commitment and all training is free. You will be provided with the basic tools and equipment to accomplish the job.

East Haddam Emergency Management is running an initial CERT training course in September for anyone wishing to join. The course will be held on September 15, 17, and 18 at the East Haddam Fire Co.1. If you are interested please contact one of the Team Leaders, Jiffy, jiffer1102@yahoo.com or Steve, stevedorf@comcast.net for class information.

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Legacy of progress gone sour

How a 1967 federal urban renewal project transformed a rural Connecticut town

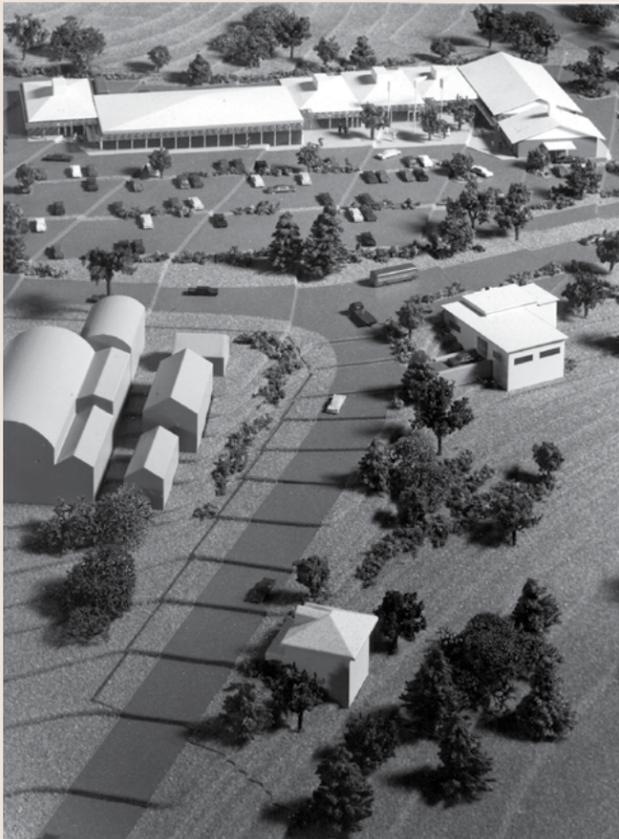
By Ken Simon

The following is part two of a six-part series by award-winning writer and producer Ken Simon that focuses on a misguided urban renewal project in Moodus and its long-lasting consequences for the small village and its rural town. Simon is the Executive Producer of SimonPure Productions in Moodus, and has worked extensively in newspaper publishing and television production. Simon originally published this series in the since-closed local newspaper, *The Gazette*, in 1982, for which he received the Amos Tuck/Champion Award for Economic Understanding. He recently updated his text for our readers.

Last week: In 1961 the newly established East Haddam Planning and Zoning Board started to discuss parking and traffic issues in Moodus Village. Conditions in the historic village were not, according to board minutes, "as good as might be desired." Despite initial misgivings, town officials soon decided to look into "free" federal urban-renewal funds.

The catch was that the urban renewal program heavily favored a bulldoze-and-rebuild mentality.

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This \$4,000 model — \$28,000 in 2016 dollars — of the proposed new Moodus shopping complex helped to convince town residents in 1967 to support demolishing the historic village center. The actual results of the renewal effort made this look like Fantasy Island. The two roads are Falls Rd./Rte. 149 (horizontal road) and Grist Mill Rd. Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.

Sign serves as reminder to license dogs

By Ann Gamble

You may have seen a curious sign pop up on your street that reads in part, "The Animal Control Department Will Conduct a Canvas For All Unlicensed Dogs on This Street," written in all capital letters on a stark white sign that also mentions state statutes. Some residents recently took to Facebook to complain about the inferred long arm of the law, or just to say thanks for the reminder. All of this is what Animal Control Officer Michael Olzacki wants to hear. If people are talking about it, maybe more people will do it.

"It's just a reminder to people to get their dogs licensed," Olzacki said. "I don't want to give anyone a ticket, but I've seen a decline in licensing numbers since I started in 2012," he added. According to the town clerk, only about a third of the estimated dogs in town are licensed as required by the state.

"I'm not here for strong-arm tactics, I want to start the conversation," Olzacki said. In order for dogs to be licensed by the town, they have to have been vaccinated against rabies. Making sure that dogs are vaccinated is one way to make families and pets safer. Another good reason for licensing a dog is in case it ever gets

Continued on page 4

Drought conditions continue to hit local businesses

By David Holahan

Southeastern Connecticut is enduring a moderate drought and local businesses along with residents are coping in various ways.

This area is not the only portion of the country facing significant rainfall deficits, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor website, <http://drought-monitor.unl.edu/>, which is produced through a partnership between the

National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the USDA, and NOAA. Many areas of the country are in various stages of drought. A small portion of northern CT is even experiencing severe drought conditions.

Nancy Mackinnon of Ballek's Garden Center said that the water deficit for this area dates back to last summer when there was a "silent drought," a rainfall shortage that was masked

by periodic bouts of light rain. "We started the winter in a deficit and then warmer than normal weather meant that plants needed more water even before spring arrived," she said. "By the middle of July we were down 11 inches of rain from what we normally should have received in the past six months."

She added that Ballek's tells its clients that different plants react differently to the shortage and that they should check plants in pots several

times a day. "You can actually overwater plants in these conditions," she said. "Plants need a balance of oxygen and water in their soil – without oxygen they can't pick up water. We check our plants three times a day. You also have to check the soil below the surface. We don't just turn on the sprinkler and think everything will be all right."

If there is an upside, she pointed out that some plants thrive in the dry

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Moodus Center

Continued from front page

Project funding was only available to "blighted" areas. How the initial traffic issues grew into a declaration that Moodus was a slum not worth preserving -- and how town residents were persuaded to approve the town's "renewal" -- is the topic of this week's installment.

Town center modernization touted to improve culture, progress

After more discussion, those present agreed that the program was worth looking into on a step-by-step basis. They also decided to enlist the support of the town's businessmen and professionals for the program.

Over the following months, urban renewal and redevelopment became the main topic of conversation on Main Street. Many people agreed that something should be done and that this was a chance to get it done at little cost. "We didn't have the choice but to do the project," recalled Charles Wolf Jr., first selectman from 1966 to 1970. "Everybody wanted to spend someone else's money. When the federal government came down here, they really painted a rosy picture of what would happen. And we figured that it was our money anyway. If we didn't take it, somebody else would."

The lure of something for nothing and the prospect of a vastly improved shopping district proved a powerful combination. The town's leadership started lining up in a bipartisan effort to support the project. Moodus businesspeople, though skeptical at the time, were reassured that the program would mean increased sales. They were also promised preference in relocating to the new center. Commercial property owners in the renewal area were told they would receive fair market value for their obsolete buildings and be able to participate in developing the beautiful new center. Everybody, it was emphasized, would benefit.

On Sept. 19, 1963, the first public hearing was held. A second hearing was held on Feb. 11, 1964. About 150 people came to each meeting. Minutes of the hearings are incomplete, but the presentation was apparently persuasive. It was explained to questioning residents that they would approve all steps of the project's planning in a step-by-step process. The hearings ended with the attendees in "considerable agreement that East Haddam should look into redevelopment."

Plans were formulated by the zoning board to establish a local renewal agency. On July 30, 1964, the creation of a five-member East Haddam Redevelopment Agency was approved by voice vote at a special town meeting.

The new agency immediately contracted with the New Haven consulting firm of Raymond and



The town's renewal consultants found that most of the buildings in Moodus Village were substandard. One reason is that structures in the business district rested on tall foundations built of wood or cinder block along the bank of the Moodus River. *Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.*

May, specialists in urban renewal projects, for help in preparing its application for planning funds. Preliminary maps were drawn up and basic data collected.

On Oct. 28, 1964, the Workable Program for Community Development, the first requirement in applying for urban renewal funds was completed by Raymond and May. It emphasized the importance of the retail center in Moodus and stressed the need to modernize the area to compete with commercial development in outlying areas. The modernization of Moodus Center, the plan stated, would help develop a better community, which would in turn foster economic and cultural growth.

Area deemed blighted and not worthy of rehabilitation

Ninety days later, the renewal agency and its consultants completed the application for surveying and planning funds. It found that the proposed project area was indeed blighted. In order to qualify as a blighted area eligible for renewal, a minimum 20 percent of the buildings within the area had to be of substandard construction, warranting clearance.

No problem. The consultants found that 52 percent of the 33 buildings in the area were structurally substandard and in need of clearance. Forty-one percent had minor deficiencies that could possibly be rehabilitated if the plan warranted. Seven percent were found to be standard. Although the actual survey of buildings is missing, an examination of the criteria used to judge the buildings and recollections of townspeople suggests that the "substandard" buildings were judged to be so mostly because many had steep wooden

or cinderblock foundations situated on the bank of the Moodus River.

In addition, the application found that the proposed project area had several environmental deficiencies: overcrowding of structures due to severe topography; buildings inadequately converted for new use; a poor mix of residential and commercial use; severe traffic hazards due to steep inclines and acutely angled intersections; inadequate parking facilities; deficient curbs and sidewalks; and a polluted brook, "whose odor contributes to the unsanitary and unhealthy atmosphere which prevails in much of the project area."

In the three and one-half years since the issues of traffic and parking were brought up at a planning and zoning meeting, the area had, according to the application, taken on the hopeless atmosphere of a slum. On December 2, 1964, the Redevelopment Agency issued its first resolution: "The proposed urban renewal area is a slum, blighted, deteriorated, or deteriorating area appropriate for an urban renewal project."

The survey and planning application was approved at a town meeting and submitted to the Federal Housing and Home Financing Agency (HHFA) in January 1965. The application was approved in September and HHFA advanced \$106,163 to finance the preparation of a detailed urban renewal plan.

Selling razing and rebuilding morphed into pitch for progress

Raymond and May began work on the plan in October 1965. Buildings were inspected, residents and businesspeople in the area were surveyed and topography drainage and market studies were undertaken.

During this time, the members of the agency, its consultants and the 10-member Citizen's Advisory Committee began an all-out campaign to sell the project to townspeople in anticipation of the February 1967 referendum, then about a year away.

A model of how the area would look after renewal was commissioned and brochures were mailed to all residents, as was a series of six newsletters. The committee mailed a string of more than 50 press releases to area newspapers that repeatedly projected project benefits: progress and modernization at little cost to local taxpayers. The most important component of this sales effort was the series of open meetings held with all the civic, religious and social organizations in town.

A Jan. 15, 1966 story in the Middletown Press reported one typical presentation, this one at the St. Bridget's Ladies Guild.

The first agency member to speak was the Rev. Eugene Solega, the local Roman Catholic priest. Talking about the harmful effects of deterioration, Solega pointed to the success of Constitution

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Moodus Center

Continued from previous page

Plaza in Hartford, built in an area, “that previously resembled a little Bowery.” Such communities, said Solega, “contribute to moral decay, family breakdown, delinquency and crime.” It was a theme that would be repeated by Solega at every opportunity, including project-related pulpit moralizing during religious services. Former project director Mort Gelston credited Solega’s efforts as a key factor in convincing townspeople of the proposed renewal project’s worth. Solega later resigned from the Agency when he was transferred to Old Saybrook by his superiors, who were concerned about his local politicking.

Choice for townspeople became progress or further deterioration

Other agency members, according to the Press article, compared the lack of progress in Moodus to the redevelopment going on elsewhere and the depressive effect this had on property values and future development. Members emphasized that studies showed that nothing could be done with the present center due to the limiting topography and that to best plan for future growth a new center should be built. They further stressed that the local business people would be given preference in the new development and that all but one merchant in the present center had indicated an interest in relocating. After Old Moodus Center was razed, the area would then be beautified with landscaping and planting and a park would be established in open public land.

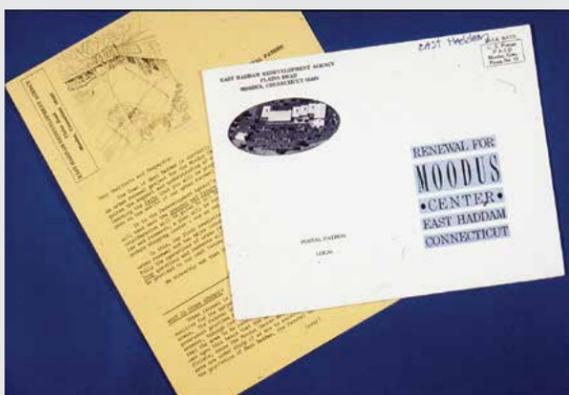
When the project came up for a vote, concluded the agency representatives, the townspeople would have a choice between the revitalization of the entire community, or continued depreciation of the already obsolete section, with a corresponding decrease in values throughout the town.

A \$4,000 model was key to acceptance by voters

Perhaps the single most powerful factor in convincing the townspeople of the project’s value was the three-dimensional scale model that appealingly showed the project area after renewal. The full-color, four-foot-by-five-foot model cost \$4,000 (\$28,000 in 2016 dollars) and portrayed an appealing center with lots of landscaping and a modern, small community feel about it.

The model was on continuous display throughout the town. “It looked like Venice, Florida,” said Don Klinck, owner of an East Haddam insurance agency. “When you saw that model and how beautiful it looked, it was hard to be opposed to the project.”

To augment the appeal of what was promised color slides of a successful urban renewal proj-



The 18-month campaign to sell the renewal project to residents included a brochure, six newsletters, 50 press releases and town meeting presentations. Opposition was muted and residents voted for the project by a two-to-one vote. *Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.*

ect in Washington, Connecticut were part of the agency’s presentation. That community of 2,600 had erected an impressive, Colonial style complex after their old shopping facilities had been destroyed in a flood. Thirteen stores were located in the attractive plaza, which resembled the agency’s scale model.

In October, 1966, the town submitted to the HHFA Part One of the application, the renewal plan and relocation program. The sales campaign now moved into its final stages.

An eight-page, illustrated brochure was distributed to all residents detailing parts of the program and itemizing what East Haddam would receive for its estimated \$166,827 share of the project cost:

- Elimination of blight and hazardous conditions.
- Nearly \$2 million in public and private improvements, \$964,000 in federal and state grants and an estimated \$1 million in new, private construction.
- Opportunity for new growth and new business for merchants due to the modernized facilities, good traffic circulation and adequate parking.
- Increased shopping facilities for residents, providing additional goods and services.
- Open land for public use as a park.
- A substantial increase in the town’s Grand List of taxable property.

Opposition was scarce as the project gained momentum

The message had been made clear to the community. The present business center was inadequate, couldn’t expand and would continue to deteriorate. Through urban renewal funding, a modern shopping center could be built at minimal cost to the town, benefiting residents with increased services and the town with higher tax revenues.

Few people questioned any of this. As area weekly New Era columnist Bernie Brennan, a resident of the renewal area, wrote, “This urban renewal project has some pretty good backing. It

has the federal government behind it. That’s good enough for me and the next guy.”

Bob Kulpa, a local real estate agent and an early critic of the project, recalled the feeling of most townspeople at the time: “The normal person was a believer. They believed the model. They assumed that the government was going to follow through. What the government took away, it would give back. We assumed it was some great power.”

It was a thoroughly persuasive pitch. And for those people who didn’t think that the project would be a panacea for all the real or imagined ills of Moodus, speaking up was to oppose the forces of progress, modernization, patriotism and expert authority, altogether an awesome combination. Many people who had second thoughts on the need for the project or what was planned were intimidated.

“At the time, my husband and I were against demolishing Moodus,” recalled Martha Monte, a town librarian, “But the model looked so good and everyone at the meeting was so gung-ho. So we didn’t speak up.”

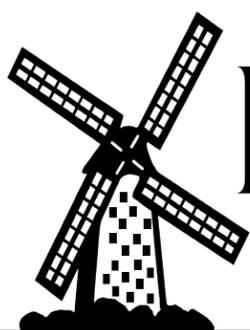
On Jan. 19, 1967, the last public hearing prior to the referendum was held, with 150 residents in attendance. The slides were shown, the model displayed and the array of benefits once again laid out in detail. It was projected that the taxes generated from the redeveloped area could be \$20,000 a year rather than the \$7,000 then received from property owners. Project boosters also indicated that the center would contain a post office, bank, supermarket, hardware store, drug store, clothing store, paint shop and restaurant. Once more, townspeople were promised a public park, improved traffic conditions, elimination of Moodus River contamination and a revitalized economy. It was, as one resident put it, “a real rosy picture.”

On Feb. 3, 1967, the townspeople approved the project by a two-to-one vote. Just six days later HHFA notified project director Mort Gelston that the project was approved and that \$770,000 of the federal share was being reserved pending receipt and approval of Part Two of the application, which were the legal commitments and other necessary paperwork. On March 17, 1967, the state committed to its share. Six months later, the local agency completed Part Two and submitted it. Approval was granted on Sept. 22, 1967.

The Redevelopment Agency was now ready to begin the execution phase of the project. It began to make preparations for the acquisition of properties, clearance and site preparation, relocation and redevelopment.

It was then that things started to fall apart.

Next week: Town leaders pushed it, residents voted for it and outside funds were paying for most of it. So what could go wrong? Plenty. Next week we trace the demise of the grand redevelopment promises, broken promise by broken promise.



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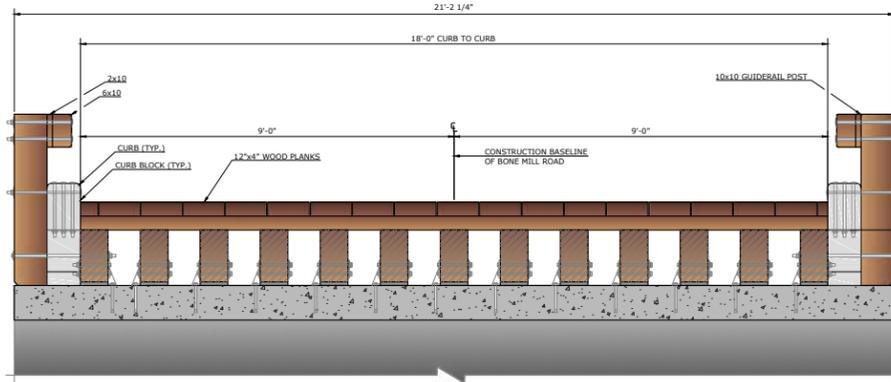
Residents get first look at new Hadlyme bridge design

By Humphrey Tyler

About 30 residents of the Hadlyme area gathered at the East Haddam Grange Hall on Wednesday evening to get the first public viewing of the town's proposed wooden bridge for the Bone Mill Road crossing over Hungerford Brook.

John A. Wengell, an associate at the Newington engineering firm WMC, showed renderings of the proposed new bridge, which would be constructed primarily of wood and is intended to replace the current bridge that was closed because it was declared unsafe.

Hadlyme residents have been pressing town officials for a wooden



Elevation drawing of the proposed new bridge for Bone Mill Road. Photo courtesy of WMC Consulting Engineers.

bridge replacement because it is in an historic district and can be seen from two of the area's oldest buildings, the

Hadlyme Congregational Church and the North School.

If approved, Wengell said he ex-

pected the new bridge to be installed and opened sometime in 2017, and will be guaranteed by the manufacturer to last for 20 years. It will cost \$535,000, he said, of which the town will pay \$281,000 and the state will be responsible for \$254,000.

The new 15-foot span will use existing concrete abutments, Wengell said, and will have a wooden deck that will be widened to 18 feet (to meet the requirement that it be two cars wide), and 27-inch steel-backed wooden side guide rails.

He said the creek bed will not be disturbed during construction and temporary storm runoff barriers will be used to prevent sedimentation of the stream.

PART THREE OF A SIX-PART SERIES

Legacy of progress gone sour



Some of the nicest buildings in the business district started to come down. It was then that townspeople began to have second thoughts about their approval of the project. Photos courtesy of Ken Simon.

How a 1967 federal urban renewal project transformed a rural Connecticut town

By Ken Simon

The following is part three of a six-part series by award-winning writer and producer Ken Simon that focuses on a misguided urban renewal project in Moodus and its long-lasting consequences for the small village and its rural town. Simon is the Executive Producer of SimonPure Productions in Moodus, and has worked extensively in newspaper publishing and television production. Simon

originally published this series in the since-closed local newspaper, *The Gazette*, in 1982, for which he received the Amos Tuck/Champion Award for Economic Understanding. He recently updated his text for our readers.

Last week we saw how Moodus residents were systematically sold a bill of goods using a swanky model of town center perfection and the lure of state and federal funds to pay most of the cost. The price of modernization was to deem the current town center blighted, and consent to the razing and rebuilding of downtown Moodus. As the project rolled on, opposition was scarce. The voices of the few naysayers were squelched. This week we will see

Continued on page 4

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Moodus center

Continued from front page

how the glittering promises of urban renewal were broken one by one.

Part 3: urban renewal flops

Once the project was approved by voters, reality collided with what was promised. This article reports on what happened during the execution phase of the project when the federally funded grand plans for a bigger and better Moodus collided with the cold realities of the marketplace.

On Feb. 3, 1967, the residents and taxpayers of East Haddam voted to authorize the undertaking of a \$1.5 million East Haddam Renewal Project (In 2016 dollars: \$10.7 million). For three years the residents had been told repeatedly by community leaders that Moodus Center was inadequate and outmoded.

It was time for drastic action, said project boosters, and urban renewal was just the panacea for Moodus's problems. With the federal and state governments footing seven-eighths of the cost, and with the expert help of professional planners, urban renewal would give Moodus a new lease on life. With redevelopment, went the official litany, would come a beautiful, modern town center with greatly increased shopping facilities, more business revenue and a general upgrade of the area.

The February referendum was a vote of confidence in the crystal-ball promises presented by the renewal advocates. Today, many townspeople feel that if Moodus was in critical shape (and most now question whether it was), and if urban renewal was the emergency surgery designed to save it, then the operation was botched and the patient almost died on the operating table in a spasm of pain and shock.

Was it malpractice? Or were there conditions beyond the control of those in charge?

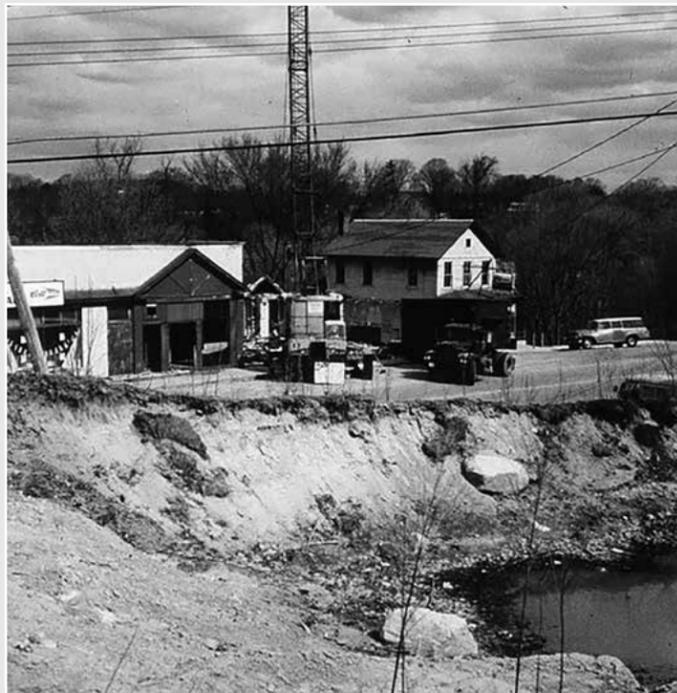
Controversy was no stranger to urban renewal. Many projects across the country were riddled by scandals involving favoritism, graft, skyrocketing costs and misuse of power. Even the many projects carried out competently were the subject of hot debate as urban renewal required by definition the involuntary displacement of generally low-income residents and small businesses as well as the forced taking of private property and its subsequent resale to other private interests.

What went wrong

In Moodus, the failure of urban renewal to deliver the promised goods wasn't due to any criminal activity. Rather the failure here included whether urban renewal was appropriate for a tiny village section like Moodus: in 1964 the town consisted

of some 4,000 residents with about half living in Moodus. Apart from the renewal mismatch, the project was forced to deal with problems ranging from inept leadership and feuding local factions, to a sagging economy and the unexpectedly hard realities of the retail marketplace. Town leaders also failed to involve the majority of the old Moodus merchants in the new project, which greatly affected project viability.

But following the town referendum none of that mattered as it was with high hopes that the



Demolition and construction disrupted the renewal area for more than five depressing years. Abandoned and half-demolished buildings, construction pits, huge conduits, massive piles of dirt for regrading, and traffic impacts made the renewal project into a nightmare for residents.

members of the Redevelopment Agency began the execution phase of the project. The execution of the renewal plan consisted of five stages: property acquisition, relocation of site occupants, demolition of existing structures and site clearance, site preparation, and finally the sale of the "improved" land for re-use. None of these activities went quite as planned; some resulted in heavy cost overruns; one – the disposition of land for re-use – sealed the project's fate. Let's take a look at these phases and what transpired.

Phase 1: property acquisition and eminent domain

In April 1967, the 31 properties to be acquired were appraised by two independent real estate brokers. After an on-site inspection of the properties and concurrence by a Housing and Home Finance (HHFA) representative in June, negotiations with property owners were begun. On Oct. 18, 1967, the first four properties were acquired by direct purchase. Two and one-half years later, on May 1, 1970, the land acquisition program was

finally completed.

Of the 31 parcels included in the project, 18 were acquired by direct purchase and 13 by virtue of eminent domain proceedings. The nine property owners who contested the offering price on their parcels were awarded an average increase of 32 percent more by Superior Court in Middletown than had been originally offered. In each case, the court decided in favor of the property owner, awarding increases totaling \$113,309. These awards raised the acquisition costs of the program to \$662,758, about \$80,000 more than the agency had expected to pay.

Phase 2: relocation of site occupants

Seventeen families, four individuals, and 22 businesses occupied the structures to be razed. The relocation program was completed in January 1972 when the last remaining businesses in the old center relocated to the new shopping area. The total cost of the relocation program, paid for in entirety by the federal government, was \$124,000.

Phase 3: demolition and site clearance

By the spring of 1969 all structures on the south side of Falls Road, where the new commercial area was to be, had been demolished. It wasn't until the spring of 1972, however, that the last remaining buildings in the old center could be demolished due to the delay in constructing the new center. This was a particularly heartbreaking time for residents, who had to endure the old center, now looking forlorn, in ghostly mode, awaiting full demolition. Altogether, 17 private residences and 16 commercial structures were demolished at a cost of about \$40,000.

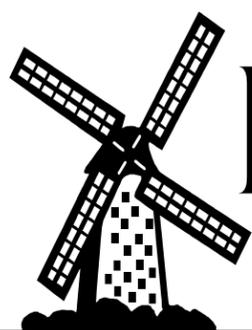
Phase 4: site preparation

This phase of the project included the reconstruction of the North Moodus Road and Saw Mill Road intersections with Falls Road, the construction of William Palmer Road and some access roads, the reconstruction of the old Main Street portion of Falls Road, the installation of a Moodus River culvert and site drainage facilities and extensive re-grading of all the re-use parcels. This was yet another hugely disruptive phase and an ugly, long construction project.

Three-year delay on building the new plaza

Due to the extensive delays encountered elsewhere in the project – the condemnation proceedings, unexpected litigation, and most importantly, the more than three-year delay in constructing the shopping plaza – the site and road improvements,

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Moodus center

Continued from previous page

which were originally expected to be completed by the summer of 1969, were not finished until spring 1972. Meanwhile, hefty increases in the costs of labor and materials pushed the cost of these improvements from the originally budgeted \$166,000 to about \$400,000, a 240 percent increase. All of the site and road improvement contracts were awarded to Hood & Smith, a local contracting firm.

This additional cost, along with the higher cost of acquisition and the increased interest expense necessitated that the Redevelopment Agency ask the town to approve another \$42,000 in January 1972 as the town's share of the additional \$350,000 needed to complete the project. That request was approved at a town meeting.

Phase 5: disposition of land for re-use

After "improving" and re-grading the project land, the re-use parcels were sold to private parties through negotiation or bid. As in land acquisition, two independent appraisals of the resale value of each parcel were made and then approved by HHFA. The chosen developers would then construct their own buildings according to renewal plan specifications and under the direction of the renewal agency.

It was this phase of the plan, specifically the disposition of the shopping center site, that was most responsible for the unrealized promises of redevelopment. Project planners projected \$1 million in new private development in the project area (\$7.1 million in 2016 dollars). Final private development was a tiny fraction of that.

One of the basic assumptions on which the redevelopment plan was based was that the town was an appropriate one for the drastic action of an urban renewal program and that it was big enough to justify the creation of a bigger shopping facility than that which existed in Moodus Center. It was a controversial proposition. What had started as discussion about a parking problem in Moodus Center had turned into a project that neatly conformed with urban renewal regulations and the "major draw" philosophy was central to the renewal plan.

Planning firm had doubts

One source of initial skepticism came from the project's planning consultants, the New Haven based firm of Raymond & May. According to Jim Gibbons, a project planner with the UConn Extension Service, who was then employed by the consultants, there had been some initial concern within the planner's office on the suitability of the urban renewal program for an area as small as Moodus.



In 1967 the Moodus Center business district was emptied of its stores, offices and residences in preparation for demolition.

"Raymond & May was almost reluctant to get involved because of the size of the town," remembered Gibbons, who did not himself work on the East Haddam project. "Urban renewal was really designed for urban areas. But after the townspeople got behind it, there was the feeling that the project would be unique and exciting, the first small town in the state to participate."

The firm, which had previously been retained by the town to do a comprehensive plan of development for the town's planning and zoning board, was hired to prepare the \$100,000 urban renewal plan.

"It was a time when every town assumed it was going to boom," said Gibbons. In East Haddam, after a slow population decline from the 1890's through 1930, the trend reversed and population started to increase slowly, picking up speed due to in-migration and the baby boom that started in the late forties. In the 1950-to-1960 period, the population had increased from 2,554 to 3,637, an impressive 42-percent growth rate. By 1964, the population had reached 4,000, with about half residing in the Moodus area.

"Economic consultants tended back then to do straight-line projections based on past rates of growth," explained Gibbons. "We now know that this is not the way to go. That was pre-pill and with different economic conditions than we have now. Now we look at other factors to arrive at a more realistic analysis."

But back then, it was straight-line. As a result, the comprehensive planning proposals done by Raymond & May provided some startling population projections. To some they were a joke. To others, it was all the proof they needed that it was time to do some serious planning for the future.

34,000 East Haddam residents

"East Haddam's ultimate population," claimed the study, "is estimated at 34,000 persons." Although the planners noted that it was doubtful that this ultimate figure would ever be reached, certainly not before the beginning of the 21st century, the population was expected to double by 1972, to

about 9,000 people. That was not to be: East Haddam's population was 5,621 in 1982 at the time this article was first published. Today it's 9,126, based on the 2010 census. The CT Economic Resource Center projects a 0.5% population increase to 9,467 by 2020. Given the sorry state of homebuilding, even this modest increase seems a bit optimistic.

The 1967 wildly off-base projection of rapid growth and the misguided theory that the town could regain its share of the retail business lost to neighboring towns were the basis on which the marketability assumptions were established.

"The key to the project's success was its marketability," noted Gibbons, "and the understanding that the present merchants would move in with some additional merchants attracted from the outside."

At first, the town's leading merchants were solidly behind the project with most of them planning to relocate to the new shopping area. "We all needed larger and nicer stores," remembered Albert Pear, a longtime Main Street merchant who died in 1991. And the money angle wasn't bad either. The property owners would be paid at fair market value for their property and, they were promised by the agency, they would be given first opportunity along with the merchants to develop the new center using inexpensive federal funds. It sounded like a good deal. But things soon changed.

"They didn't let Charley Bernstein build his store the way he wanted," recalled Walter Bielot, who ran a small grocery store for years on Route 149 (behind where a vacant, blighted convenience store location now stands). "They didn't let Sam (Pear) build his store the way he wanted," said Bielot, who died in 2007. "They didn't let Ray (Kusmierski) build his store the way he wanted. The project as presented looked fantastic. But the merchants were sold a bill of goods."

Ray McMullen owned the Rexall drug store on Main Street for 37 years, until he closed down in 1971. He died in 1993. "I had every intention of going into the new plaza," McMullen said. "I thought I'd go up there, put up the building, run the business for a while, then sell it and retire with an income from the rent of the store."

Next week: As the project began to fall apart and the trail of broken promises lengthened, efforts at modernization continued to limp along as residents endured a five-year dispiriting construction mess. Next week we will learn how personalities, financing, non-binding agreements and other setbacks continued to undermine the promised benefits of renewal.

To learn more about the author and to read his blog about Moodus history, visit www.simonpure.com and <http://simonpure.blogspot.com>.



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Free weekly

Main Street chase results in arrest

By Barbi Batchelder

A Middletown man is due in court after a chase leading to his arrest for motor vehicle and narcotics violations that began in the East Haddam village area Sunday morning, August 28.

East Haddam Police said they were conducting traffic enforcement patrols on Main Street (Route 82) at about 8:30 a.m., when a vehicle approached an officer at a high rate of speed. Radar registered the vehicle traveling at 45 mph in a posted 25-mph zone.

The officer attempted to stop the vehicle, and reported that the operator appeared to be slowing down to stop just prior to the East Haddam Swing Bridge, but then continued on. The officer then activated his lights and siren. The driver continued to lead police across the bridge, through the



Jordan Robinson

Tylerville section of Haddam and then onto Route 9 north.

The pursuit ended at an apartment complex on Summer Hill Road in Middletown.

Police said they discovered marijuana inside the vehicle. The driver, Jordan Robinson, 20, of Plaza Drive, Middletown, was arrested and charged with interfering with an officer, possession of less than 1/2 ounce of marijuana, failure to obey a stop sign, traveling at an unreasonable speed, reckless driving, and failure to carry a driver's license.

Robinson was released on a \$500 bond and is set to appear in Middletown Superior Court September 12.

PART FOUR OF A SIX-PART SERIES

Legacy of progress gone sour

By Ken Simon



Harry Weinstein was one of the few original Moodus Center retailers to move to the new plaza, but he moved just a barebones version of his original soda shop, shown here as it was in the 1960s, into one of the new storefronts. Photos courtesy of Ken Simon.



Ray McMullen's Rexall drugstore and Pear's General Merchandise as they looked in the 1960s.

The following is part four of a six-part series by award-winning writer and producer Ken Simon that focuses on a misguided urban renewal project in Moodus and its long-lasting consequences for the small village and its rural town. Simon is the Executive Producer of SimonPure Productions in Moodus, and has worked extensively in newspaper publishing and television production. Simon originally published this series in the since-closed local newspaper, *The Gazette*, in 1982, for which he received the Amos Tuck/Champion Award for Economic Understanding. He recently updated his text for our readers.

Last week we saw how the Moodus urban renewal project began to fall apart. While efforts to modernize downtown Moodus continued to limp along, residents endured a five-year dispiriting construction mess all over the renewal area. This week we will learn how personalities, financing, non-binding agreements, the town's small size and other setbacks continued to undermine the promised benefits of urban renewal.

Merchants enthusiastic, initially

Charley Bernstein owned four parcels of land in the renewal area and operated the town's hardware store. Bernstein, who died in 1977, was the first selectman from 1961 to 1963. His son, Ron, was the legal counsel for the Redevelopment Agency. Walt Bielot remembers Bernstein's enthusiasm for the project. "Charley thought I was a damn fool for opposing the project. He told me he was planning to put up a building or two in the new area. He was talking about all the free funds available for the project. Well, nothing's free. We found that out."

Sam Pear was another major property owner and longtime merchant in Moodus Center. Pear, who died in 1980, served six terms as first selectman. He had been a downtown Moodus

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Moodus center

Continued from front page

retailer since the late 1920s and with his brother Joe owned Pear's general dry goods store. Another brother, Albert, owned the meat market and grocery down the block. Pear, who was first selectman when the renewal project was first discussed, had been an early supporter of the plan and had planned to construct a couple of buildings with his brothers in the new plaza.

The old Moodus center merchants acting as the developers of the new shopping plaza under the direction of the Redevelopment Agency seemed like a good idea to many people. After all, they were the ones being displaced and it seemed fair to give them the first shot at the new development. "If these people had moved into the buildings in the plaza using their own dollars," said Charles Wolf Jr., another former first selectman, "it would have worked." But, added Wolf, "when it came right down to it, none of the merchants wanted to commit."

"At that time (in 1966), we businessmen weren't sure what the final project would be," recalled Albert Pear, who died in 1991. "We weren't sure what we would get for our property and our businesses. Nobody wanted to jump into things until we knew exactly where we were going."

As it turned out, where they were going was nowhere. There were at least six major merchants in old Moodus who wanted to relocate in the new plaza: Bernstein's hardware store, Pear's meat/grocery market, Pear's dry goods store, McMullen's drug store, Ray's Food Mart and Axelrod's service station. Although others did relocate – the two barber shops, the pizza shop, the package store, and Weinstein's soda shop – the businessmen who were most likely to develop the plaza and those who offered the most essential services never made it across the street to the designated new center.

"There was a feeling among some people," said one person close to the Redevelopment Agency, "of why should we bail out the merchants who had let the buildings deteriorate in the first place? Some felt that we'd end up in the same situation that we had had."

Personality clashes

One of those people was Mort Gelston, a local dairy farmer and the part-time salaried director of the Redevelopment Agency. Gelston, who died in 2012, had promised the merchants and property owners that they would be able to build their own buildings according to renewal specifications. He now had second thoughts. He was not finding it easy to negotiate with the merchants and later came to think that if they had been allowed to put up their own buildings, "we would have had the same mess as on Main Street."

The negotiations with the merchants ended badly. There had been what Charles Wolf called

"personality clashes," and a general deterioration of the relations between Gelston and Sam Pear and some of the other merchants. According to Julian Rosenberg, who served with Gelston on planning and zoning, "It's clear that Mort rubbed the merchants the wrong way. And they rubbed him the wrong way. Rosenberg, a former CIA officer, died in 1989. "According to some people," he said, "Mort was overbearing and arrogant. Some say the merchants were uncooperative."

Whatever it was, in late 1966 Gelston told the merchants that they couldn't construct their own buildings, but that they could invest in the development corporation that was being set up to purchase the shopping center site.

It was then, according to many observers, that the whole project fell apart.

Charley Bernstein decided to retire and withdrew from further activities in the project. Sam Pear, Ray McMullen, and some other merchants and businessmen became the initial investors in the corporation, which was formed in December 1966. Although Pear and McMullen, both in their early sixties, were investors, they had decided not to open their own stores as renters as there would be no future equity through private ownership and rental income.

Pear was elected the corporation's first president in February 1967, just before the urban renewal referendum. In April 1966, the corporation received an architect's estimate of \$600,000 to construct the 35,000 square-foot complex envisioned by renewal planners. Armed with the planner's statistics, the renewal plan and the services of Hartford real estate man, Sam Neiditz, the corporation set out to find tenants for the new plaza.

Neiditz had placed "hundreds of stores" in malls and plazas across the state. He remembered that he had his work cut out for him. Although he tried to interest such disparate retailers as Stop & Shop, Friendly's Ice Cream, Ben Franklin variety and Malloves Jewelers to the plaza, he was turned down at every corner. The town was too small, he was told, and to further complicate things, the development corporation and the renewal agency "couldn't get together on rent and whatnot. There were too many generals and not enough soldiers." Neiditz gave up after two years. "I figured I couldn't fight City Hall."

Sam Pear gave up about one year earlier, disappointed at the way things had progressed.

Grocery store chase

None of the successive leaders of the development corporation fared much better than Pear in efforts to find a major tenant. Major grocery chains and specialty stores declined to get involved with the project despite the optimistic projections. Prospective major tenants thought the town was too small, and, as local dentist and corporation director Bert Friedman remembered, "Nobody wanted to rent a store that's not built."

In May 1968, Dan Maus Sr., a local oil dealer, was elected president of the corporation. The lack of progress was becoming a great concern to the renewal agency, as major related construction projects in the renewal area would be held up if the new center couldn't be constructed on time. Somewhat anxiously, the renewal agency restated that it desired the following services in the plaza: a major supermarket, drugstore/newsstand, clothing store, barber/beauty shop, luncheonette, variety store, package store, and a bank.

Finally, in July 1968, things seemed to break the right way. The A&P Supermarket chain, which had rebuffed earlier overtures, became interested in a 12,000 square foot store. This was good news for the project planners, but bad news for Ray Kusmierski and Albert Pear. Kusmierski had been the manager of the First National in old Moodus Center. When First National closed down for lack of business in 1967, Kusmierski took over the store, renaming it Ray's Food Mart. He opened the store only because he wanted "to go across the street" with a 10,000 square foot full-service grocery store. The agency, however, had always wanted a major chain store. When A&P showed an interest, Kusmierski was told that he wasn't wanted. After this rebuff, Kusmierski looked elsewhere. In 1969, he settled on a location in Essex and in 1970 he closed his Moodus store.

Albert Pear also wanted to open a large food store. Told that he would have to rent space in the plaza and that he would be limited to a delicatessen operation, Pear obtained a permit to build a 5,000 square foot grocery store on property he owned adjacent to his house slightly east of the planned plaza. But with the change in zoning regulations and with the prospect of a major store coming in the area, Pear's permit was revoked and construction was denied.

In November 1968, the corporation again met with an architect to discuss building plans incorporating the A&P. It finally appeared as if the project was coming together and it was hoped that construction could begin in the spring of 1969.

In December 1968 the new post office opened for business in its small brick building, the first building to be constructed in the urban renewal area.

On June 11, 1969, five construction bids to build the new center were received by the corporation. They ranged from \$670,000 to \$790,000 for a 34,000 square-foot facility. The low bid, which amounted to \$19.70 a square foot, was deemed by the Redevelopment Agency to be too high to attract local merchants and the A&P. The development corporation started exploring other alternatives, including bringing in outside developers who could bring costs in line with what the town could live with.

Meanwhile, in order to get financing and attract other merchants, it was necessary to get a firm commitment from A&P. Finally, on Nov. 5,

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A street view, Moodus Center, in the late 1960s. Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.

Moodus center

Continued from previous page

1969, a "letter of intent" was received from A&P's regional real estate office in Springfield. The short note read, "We intend to recommend to our Company for its consideration and final approval that we occupy the store area reserved for a supermarket to be erected in a shopping center on Route 149 in East Haddam, Connecticut." It was signed by the manager of the lease department in the regional office in Springfield.

Financing not found

Several sources close to the Redevelopment Agency remember that the letter of intent was recognized at the time as something less than legally binding, but nobody wanted to push the matter for fear of losing the long-promised main draw for the center.

With the letter of intent in hand, the corporation sought to interest other merchants in the center and looked for financing of the approximately \$325,000 portion of the total \$725,000 costs that would need to be financed through commercial bank loans and the sale of stock. They didn't find it. Apparently area banks noted the lack of a legal commitment from A&P and, given tightening money conditions, declined financing.

Things were bogged down once again as the Redevelopment Agency expressed alarm at the delays and confusion. Joe Steinberg, who had become the development corporation's attorney in 1968, had an explanation for all the problems, confusion and delay that bedeviled the development corporation throughout the renewal project: "The project wasn't big enough to afford to hire professional direction. None of the people involved had the ability to give long-term guidance. They cared and were very sincere, but it was too big for the number of people involved and too small to hire professionals." Steinberg, who died in 2014, later became a long-time CT Superior Court judge.

It was essential that a building be built soon: costs were rising and the displaced merchants had been promised a center. At this point, local businessman Jim Matthews volunteered his time to try to help straighten things out. He took the job for the express purpose of getting the building built and that's what he set out to do in the most expeditious way.

In January 1970, the George Field Company submitted plans for the construction of a steel complex at considerable savings. "The basic plans would remain the same," the company promised, "with steel substituted for cinder block." The Redevelopment Agency decided that given the circumstances, this was a satisfactory way to reduce the cost of financing and finally get the darn thing built.

In February 1970, Dr. Bert Friedman opened his professional building on William Palmer Road.

Then the worst case scenario arose. In March 1970, A&P's home office in New York City withdrew their regional office's letter of intent, citing the size of the town as the major factor.

The town's too small

"When A&P pulled out, everything went down the slot," said Charles Wolf. "After they were lost we begged every grocery store around. And everybody said, 'The town's too small, the town's too small.'"

Things looked bleak. Pressures continued to build on the agency. Construction elsewhere in the area was held up until they could demolish the old center, and they couldn't demolish the old one until the new one was built. Time was running out. The Department of Housing had already extended the project's completion date and costs continued to shoot up.

Many townspeople were getting fed up. The project area had become almost unbearable to area residents. For years, raw earth and rubble had blighted the landscape. The remaining stores in old Moodus Center were depleting their stock.



Charley Bernstein had wanted to move his hardware store to the new plaza, but negotiation failures and personality clashes led him and many other retailers to decide not to relocate to the new plaza as part of the redevelopment project. *Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.*

The buildings there had suddenly seemed to turn much older-looking and desolate.

People were starting to wonder whether the nightmare would ever end. One resident remembers the first time she realized that things weren't working out as planned was when she and her husband almost got caught in a mudslide from what had become known as Mount Hood, the massive pile of dirt on which were later built the Hilltop Lounge (now Hilltop Barbeque) and the professional building that housed Dr. Gourlie's office until his recent move, and Moodus Wheel and Track.

The Redevelopment Agency decided to proceed with the construction of one-half of the plaza building, including the Moodus Savings Bank and committed outlets, in order to avoid further delays. When a suitable supermarket tenant was found, construction would be completed.

Finally, construction starts

In October 1970, in order to get construction going, the Moodus Savings Bank committed \$50,000 to the development corporation. The Field Company was authorized to construct the first section of the plaza, a 9,600 square foot steel building with eight stores at a cost of \$122,840.

In November 1970, the Moodus Print Shop opened for business behind the shopping center site in a new brick building (now Felciano Plumbing).

Construction was halted while the completion of financing was pursued through the winter and spring. Finally, in July 1971, necessary financing was obtained and the Field Company was able to resume construction. The long-delayed sale of the site to the development corporation was consummated that month.

In October 1971, the Moodus Savings Bank decided that it was going to construct its own building on a site off Palmer Road (now Liberty Bank), apart from the rest of the plaza, another major blow to the renewal plans. "The bank and the development corporation couldn't come to agreement on what it would cost, what the lease was going to be," said former bank president Al Hall, adding, "the development corporation wasn't too well-organized."

In the final weeks of 1971, the metal-sheathed plaza building was ready for occupancy. In January 1972 the first tenants moved in: a bakery, a pizza shop, a clothing store, a package store, a soda shop and a barber shop. (The bakery and clothing store later went out of business to be replaced by an auto parts store and a convenience food store). As corporation attorney Steinberg put it, "The Nathan Hale Plaza had become by definition a series of mom-and-pop stores." Finally, a drug store tenant was found and in June 1972, the Nathan Hale Pharmacy opened for business in the remaining three store-units of the building.

In the following months, old Moodus Center was razed and the reconstruction of area roads was completed. The last three buildings in the renewal area, the Texaco station (where 7-11 is now), the Wheel & Track Center and the Hilltop Lounge (now Hilltop Barbecue) were erected and opened for business.

C'est fini!

In June, 1972 the Redevelopment Agency was disbanded. Its role in the mission to "spur the rebirth of Moodus Center" had been completed. The outcome of the project, however, was nothing like a rebirth.

At the time of original publication in 1982, the renewal area in general and the plaza in specific continued to suffer from uncompleted landscaping and a lack of paving that blighted much of the project area. According to the bylaws of the Redevelopment Agency, no property was supposed to be occupied until it was completed according to strict regulations that had been set up for the area. It was the responsibility of the Redevelopment Agency to see that these regulations were enforced.

And yet the Nathan Hale Plaza shopping center was permitted to open with violations including above-ground oil storage tanks; an exposed rear of the building, showing the tanks and refuse, rather than hidden by a required but unbuilt fence; no paving of the road owned by the development corporation behind the plaza leading to the Moodus Print Shop; and no landscaping or paving between the front of the plaza and Falls Road. The unpaved rear of the parking lot area was designated for the supermarket that was hoped to be obtained later. In addition, none of the other buildings in the renewal area except for Friedman's professional building had paved parking lots as required. No one seemed to know why all these violations were permitted. But the eyesore continued to depress and anger residents already upset over the long-delayed rebuilding and a growing realization of what they had lost.

The renewal regulations stated that once the Redevelopment Agency was disbanded, the town's Board of Selectmen was empowered to enforce any continuing regulations governing the renewal area. As of the writing of this series, it was still in their power to do so. The regulations remained in effect until 1987.

Next week: As the ill-fated redevelopment project dragged on and buildings started to come down and earth was moved, people began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of destroying what they once had. What other revitalization possibilities could they pursue?

To learn more about the author and to read his blog about Moodus history, visit www.simonpure.com and simonpure.blogspot.com.

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AN INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER COVERING MOODUS, LAKE HAYWARD, HADLYME AND EAST HADDAM

September 15, 2016

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PART FIVE OF A SIX-PART SERIES

The stone Smegal building was one of the 33 buildings demolished as part of the renewal project. Half of the 33 structures demolished were not deemed blighted, but had to be demolished because they were in the redevelopment area. *Photos courtesy of Ken Simon.*



This architecturally attractive house, owned by the Brennans, was cited by the official project appraiser as having some “functional obsolescence” because one of the four bedrooms on the second floor did not have a closet.

Legacy of progress gone sour

How a 1967 federal urban renewal project transformed a rural Connecticut town

By Ken Simon

The following is part five of a six-part series by award-winning writer and producer Ken Simon that focuses on a misguided urban renewal project in Moodus and its long-lasting consequences for the small village and its rural town. Simon is the Executive Producer of SimonPure Productions in Moodus, and has worked extensively in newspaper publishing and television production. Simon originally published this series in the since-closed local newspaper, The Gazette, in 1982, for which he received the Amos Tuck/Champion Award for Economic Understanding. He recently updated his text for our readers.

Last week we read about how personalities, financing, non-binding agreements and other setbacks continued to undermine the promised benefits of urban renewal. This week's installment looks at alternatives to federal urban renewal, and how a nearby town in a similar state of disrepair embraced and enhanced its historical charm to become economically viable in the modern world.

Could old Moodus Center have been restored?

As Moodus Center was being demolished, residents began to have second thoughts.

The first building to be razed for the Moodus renewal project was the former Bernie Brennan residence. Once the rectory of St. Bridget's Church, the 70-year-old house was an architectural gem, boasting beautiful Gothic windows

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Republicans back Lyman; primary likely

By Ann Gamble

During the Sept. 6 caucus of town-registered Republican voters, East Haddam Republicans endorsed First Selectman Emmett J. Lyman as their special election candidate for the office of first selectman. Additional Republican candidates may file paperwork and petitions by Sept. 21, in which case a Republican primary will take place on Oct. 25. Republican Todd Gelston has filed initial paperwork and is circulating petitions for signatures.

“I'm incredibly grateful, it was a wonderful experience, everyone put a lot of work into it and it turned out great for me,” Lyman said of the caucus, adding “My expectation is that there will be a primary. It's legal, it's the process and it's how we do it.” He also expressed the need to work together for the betterment of the town, regardless of the special election's outcome.

Lyman was appointed first selectman at the July 20 regular meeting of the Board of Selectmen, by Selectmen Susan Link (R) and Ernest Malavasi (D), to serve until the Nov. 7, 2017 municipal election. Following his appointment, 11 persons filed petitions with a total of 303 qualified voter signatures calling for a special election. According to Town Clerk Debra Denette, the signatures include those of registered Republicans, Democrats and unaffiliated voters.

Lyman admitted to a bit of confusion about the reasoning behind the call for an off-cycle election. “By the time the process is complete there will only be about 10 months before the municipal election, and about half of that will be a learning process for someone new,” he said.

Lyman, a former multi-term East Haddam selectman, came out of retirement to fill the first selectman position vacated by Mark Walter as of July 1. “This is about a 50-hour per week job,” he said, adding, “I have never had a more challenging, demanding and rewarding position as this.”

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Moodus center

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and door frames. When wealthy local resident Raymond Schmitt salvaged parts of the house for use in his Johnsonville restoration, more townspeople had second thoughts about the wisdom of destroying the old mill town of Moodus. By then, however, it was too late to stop.

To be sure, not all the buildings in the renewal area were as delightful as the Brennan house. For the most part, however, they were typical of the type of structure now prized by towns like Chester. Local residents remember those buildings and the unique small-town flavor of old Moodus and many cringe at what happened. "It hurts," said one person who was closely associated with the renewal project. "Especially when you see what a place like Chester is doing. It takes time and a guy like Dave Joslow, who puts his dollars on the table, hires experts and rehabilitates."

Chester learned from Moodus

"What happened in Moodus saved towns like Chester from a similar fate," said David Joslow, a Chester businessman who rehabilitated many buildings in his town. "We learned from your experience."

Joslow, who died in 1995, remembered that Chester was as "threadbare" as Moodus. Today downtown Chester buildings are in pristine condition, the houses and yards well-kept and business conditions bullish with visitors from all over.

"Lots of people in Chester wanted to do the same thing as what was tried in Moodus," Joslow said. "I tried like hell to stop it." Joslow's first project was a dilapidated barn, which he converted into attractive office space. That was the first of many renovation projects in town. "People basically don't have lots of imagination," he said. "You have to fix up a building or two to make people see what an asset they have. You have to have private investment."

Ironically, while preparations were being made for the destruction of Moodus, just four miles away in the village of East Haddam there was a more organic type of "redevelopment" taking place. After the Goodspeed Opera House was renovated in 1963, saved by a spirited fundraising and consciousness-raising campaign, the surrounding area started to transform as residents began prettying up their once shabby houses and grounds. New stores were established. It was an early expression of the values that could have saved old Moodus center. Unfortunately, it happened too late to have an effect on the renewal project.

Once the town opted for urban renewal funds, fixing up the town was no longer a viable solution. "With the influx of federal dollars, you had to play their game," explains Jim Gibbons, an urban planner with the UConn Extension Service in Haddam. "In order to accomplish smaller goals, you had to follow federal regulations and guidelines. At the time of the Moodus project, urban renewal was oriented to demolition. To many critics of the program at the time, the correct title was 'urban disruption.' As an outsider, I think this was part of the problem with the Moodus project: it disrupted the neighborhood."

Around the time of the Moodus project, federal planners shifted the emphasis to rehabilitation. "If the Moodus project had happened later," said Gibbons, "it might have kept the merchants in business and the residents in place. In retrospect, it would have been an ideal project for rehabilitation."

There are some people, however, who still remember the town as "ugly and dangerous" and about to "fall into the river." They maintain that the project was the correct solution, that it was necessary to eliminate the blight and give the town a fresh start.



Urban renewal rules required demolition of all 33 commercial and residential buildings within the project area, including the Axelrod house pictured here. Photos courtesy of Ken Simon.



The Shea house was one of the 33 structures demolished in the name of progress.

Moodus's sewage problem

"I think that the people who are doing the crabbing about redevelopment have forgotten what the place looked like," said former first selectman Charles Wolf Jr. "If they could go back and remember what it smelled like on a hot August day – It just wasn't good."

The sewage problem was a strong in-your-face factor in fostering the passage of the urban renewal plan. The record, however, clearly shows that the situation would have been correctable without requiring the wholesale demolition of the town. In 1967, a survey by a state sanitary engineer had found the Moodus River to be contaminated in 21 areas. According to town records, only four of these points were within the renewal area. The other 17 were corrected by summer of 1968. If rehabilitation had been opted for, it would have been possible, those involved with the project now admit, to have installed a communal septic system to bring the buildings up-to-code.

The newly enacted sanitary code could have been used as an enforcement tool and low-interest loans or a grant could have financed the project. Still another alternative was the installation of a full-blown sewer system. At that time, the federal Economic Development Administration, the Farmers Home Administration and HUD all gave grants and loans to establish such systems.

"There should have been more concern with the individual structures and not so much concern with the sewage," concluded Jim Gibbons. "You can engineer anything"

In hindsight, it's clear that project guidelines deeply affected the perception of the problems and

the possible solutions. "The line between something structurally safe or something needing demolition was left to the local surveyors," noted Jim Gibbons. "In many cases, it was not an ironclad form. The goal of the program then was demolition and the creation of marketable parcels of land, which in many cases necessitated clearance of structures incompatible with re-use. One of the guidelines of the program was that a certain percentage of the structures had to have major structural deficiencies. You put yourself in a corner."

Was Moodus a slum?

Although the survey taken to judge the condition of the buildings within the renewal area is missing from project records, a careful reading of the real estate appraisals done for each piece of property in the project shows that for the most part the structures were far from the slum buildings that were described on the renewal application. The appraisers rated most of the primary structures in "fair" to "good" condition. Additionally, the photographs attached to each appraisal picture buildings that in most cases would today be good candidates for rehabilitation.

"The buildings in Moodus were very similar to those in Chester -- some built on stilt foundations, some close together," said David Joslow. "If you stringently interpret the state's building and fire codes, you can justify ripping down any building that was built more than five years ago. People can use that to justify anything. They use administrative regulations to get their own way."

Local resident Sam Rogow, an early opponent of the project, put it this way: "You don't rip down your house if it needs repairs. You repair it."

"We lived here day-in and day-out," said Joe Pear, who with his brother Sam owned the general store in old Moodus. "We didn't realize what we had. People from out of the area always thought we had a quaint town. "You only realize what you have when you see what others have. What we have now is nothing."

NEXT WEEK: The final installment to the story of a 1967 urban renewal project that leveled and remade old Moodus Center. After years of planning, a persuasive PR campaign and numerous town meetings, voters approved the project. Once townspeople saw how the ill-fated project turned out, however, many who previously supported the project came to regret the loss of their old mill town. What could Moodus have been if the town had taken a path other than urban renewal?

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September 22, 2016

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Gelston forces primary vote on Oct. 25

By David Holahan

Todd H. Gelston has filed the necessary paperwork to force a Republican primary on Tuesday, October 25, against Emmett Lyman to be the Republican Party nominee for first selectman. Lyman was endorsed at a September 6 caucus of town-registered Republican voters. The winner of the primary would be listed on the ballot as the Republican candidate for first selectman in a December 20th special election. The Democrats did not put forward a candidate.

Lyman was appointed first selectman at the July 20 regular meeting of the Board of Selectmen, by

selectmen Susan Link (R) and Ernest Malavasi (D), to fill the vacancy created when former First Selectman Mark Walter resigned effective July 1. Barring a challenge, Lyman would have served as East Haddam's first selectman until the regular municipal election of Nov. 7, 2017.

Following the primary, a special election for first selectman will be held on Tuesday, Dec. 20—by law, even if there is the only candidate on the ballot.

But Lyman and Gelston could also hedge their bets by applying with the Secretary of State to run as petitioning candidate on Dec. 20. The deadline for this

action is October 11. Petitioning would guarantee their place on the ballot even if they lost the primary. Gelston would not rule that step in or out. "I have to think about that," he said. "My first priority is to win the primary,"

Gelston ran for first selectman in 2015 as a write-in candidate and finished third with 487 votes.

He said that he is running again to bring long-range vision to town government. "The town has got huge potential," Gelston said. "East Haddam stands out because of its natural resources as well as the

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After the destruction of old Moodus Center was decreed by a town vote, the late R.T. Sweeney, an East Haddam artist, painted several portraits of the historic business district. This painting depicts the eastern half of the center. Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.

LAST OF A
SIX-PART SERIES

Legacy of progress gone sour

By Ken Simon

The following is the last installment of a six-part series by award-winning writer and producer Ken Simon that focuses on a misguided urban renewal project in Moodus and its long-lasting consequences for the small village and its rural town. Simon is the Executive Producer of SimonPure Productions in Moodus, and has worked extensively in newspaper publishing and television production. Simon originally published this series in the since-closed local newspaper, The Gazette, in 1982, for which

he received the Amos Tuck/Champion Award for Economic Understanding. He recently updated his text for our readers.

This installment caps the story of how this misguided 1967 urban renewal project brought the historic Moodus business district and surrounding residences to the ground. Townspeople, who had approved the project after years of planning, PR campaigns and public meetings, were promised a modern replacement, a shiny new village center.

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Moodus center

Continued from front page

Sadly, when the project stumbled to its conclusion, many former supporters were appalled at the outcome.

The destruction of old Moodus was driven by the then-popular bulldozer mentality that destroyed neighborhoods in cities and towns across the country. In Moodus, the ill-advised attempt decimated the heart and unique character of the old mill village.

Not long after East Haddam signed up for bringing the village down, redevelopment planning took on a more selective approach. Wholesale levelling went out of fashion; historic preservation and authenticity became important elements of a more enlightened approach. The Moodus project was the victim of incredibly poor timing.

Longtime residents still miss old Moodus and speculate on what the business district could have become with a more selective approach.

Might have been

"I thought at the time that we should have taken what we had and made it into a nice community," said Joe Pear, who for decades co-owned the town's general merchandise store with his brother Sam. "Each merchant would have had more pride and competition would increase."

Ray McMullen, who was the town's druggist for 37 years, agreed with Pear. "I don't think the town quite realized what was taking place. I think that given a chance, Charley Bernstein, Sam Pear and the others might have fixed up the town rather than what happened. It was a homey town."

Most people agreed with Pear and McMullen. Given enough time and what's happened in surrounding communities, it's likely that the area would have eventually improved by private initiative, either by the then-present or future homeowners and businesspeople. "As the merchants get older, they sell their businesses and buildings one by one. You just go from one generation to the next," said Jim Gibbons, an urban planner whose firm worked on the Moodus project.

"In hindsight, rehabilitation and selective demolition to provide for off-street parking was the way to go," Gibbons continued. "More selective demolition might have saved the area. It might have kept the merchants in business a little longer and they would have had a chance to pass their businesses on to new blood. A lot would have been accomplished through the use of painting, landscaping, coordinated signing and necessary road improvements. It would have been more in keeping with what has since happened in the town," Gibbons said, referring to the Goodspeed



The western half of old Moodus Center depicted in a painting by East Haddam artist R.T. Sweeney. Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.

Opera House rehabilitation and the resurgence of East Haddam village. "This would have been preferable to praying that those people once tossed out of their stores and homes would remain," he said. "What you basically did was to say, 'We're going to get rid of you.'"

"I just wish that the project had taken place a few years later," Gibbons continued. "when the philosophy of preservation was prominent and when the feeling that every town was going to boom wasn't so strong. Maybe in retrospect, we could have seen what private enterprise would have done. Maybe urban renewal wasn't the way to go in Moodus. Maybe the state could have been persuaded to make some road improvements and so on."

It's clear that the extensive road improvements that were made for the project were ill-advised. More modest road and site improvements would have helped to preserve village character. "If you provided some off-street parking and relieved some congestion, perhaps the road system wasn't so bad," said Gibbons. "What you ended up with was a highway. There are some planners who feel that congestion helps to make an area successful. Look at the Goodspeed area. That certainly isn't an ideal traffic pattern, but it works."

"We have lots of people in Chester that say Chester isn't viable, that there's not enough parking," noted David Joslow, who was the major catalyst for that town's successful rehabilitation. "Well, I'm a city boy and this parking situation doesn't seem bad to me," Joslow said. "I don't mind walking a block or two. You don't need a thruway through town."

Other options for Moodus

There clearly were other options besides urban renewal available to the town around that time. It was a time of lavish spending at the federal level. A guidebook published by the Independent Bankers Association of America in the early seventies

listed nearly 1,000 programs at the federal level to spur rural development. In addition, Connecticut had its own more modest urban renewal program where the state and the town split the cost fifty-fifty. There were still other alternatives to wholesale destruction: Special zoning regulations combined with low-interest loans could have spurred the fixing up of the area under a less ambitious renewal program. Also, the town could have opted for special tax assessments or bonding to finance off-street parking or road improvements.

The renewal of Moodus was a case of unfortunate timing, a result of the myopic view of "progress" that was popular at the time but later fell out of favor. Many townspeople now agree with Walter Bielot, who once owned a small grocery store adjacent to the renewal area. "In hindsight, it would have been beneficial to fix up old Moodus Center and redevelop across the street. We would have had both the old and the new."

"A rehabilitated Moodus Center that retained neighborhood characteristics and preserved unique structures would have been very compatible with the Goodspeed area," Gibbons said. "People attending the Goodspeed would be drawn to the area. But it was too early to predict this."

The old mill village is gone forever. What took its place is, in the view of many residents, a poor substitute. "What's valuable to people are things that add to the quality of life," said Joslow. "A sense of community, human scale, sidewalks, trees, these are what's attractive to people. Anyone can have a strip shopping plaza. What you did in Moodus was to disperse the town. That's very sad."

"It's a shame," said longtime town resident Peg Sievers, "that the children of today don't even know what we had - that this town existed."

To learn more about the author and to read his blog about Moodus history, visit www.simonpure.com and <http://simonpure.blogspot.com>.

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