

East Haddam News

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

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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?