

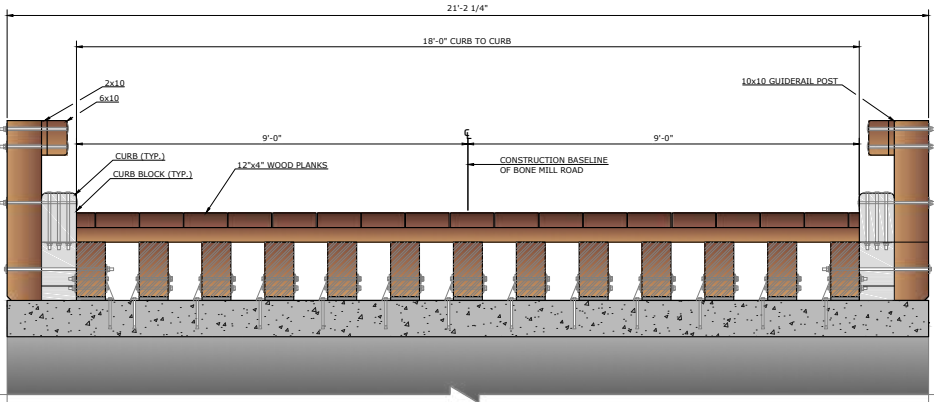
Residents get first look at new Hadlyme bridge design

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

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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?

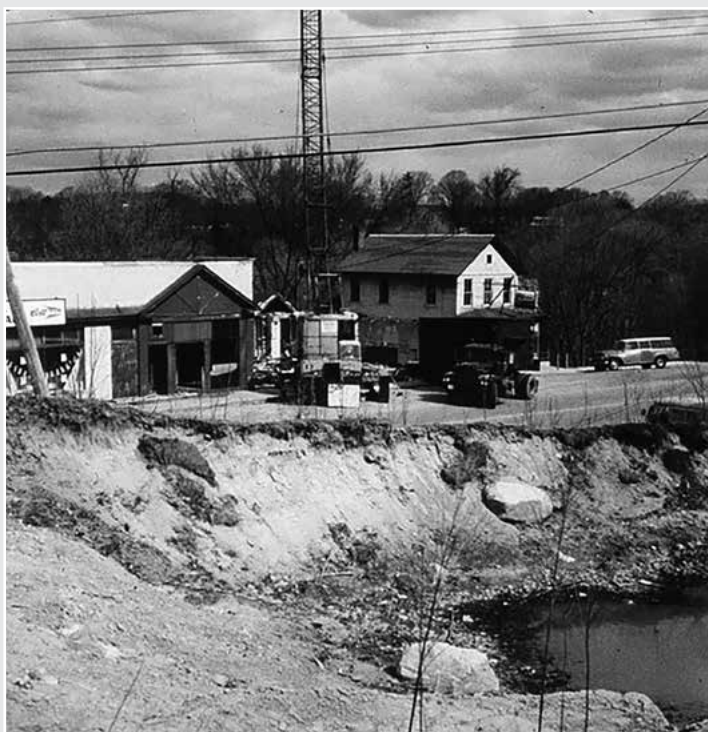
Controversy was no stranger to urban renewal. Many projects across the country were riddled by scandals involving favoritism, graft, skyrocketing costs and misuse of power. Even the many projects carried out competently were the subject of hot debate as urban renewal required by definition the involuntary 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.

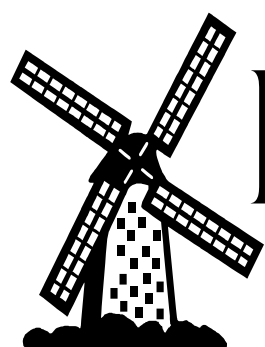
Phase 4: site preparation

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

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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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