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

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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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