

Legacy of progress gone sour

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

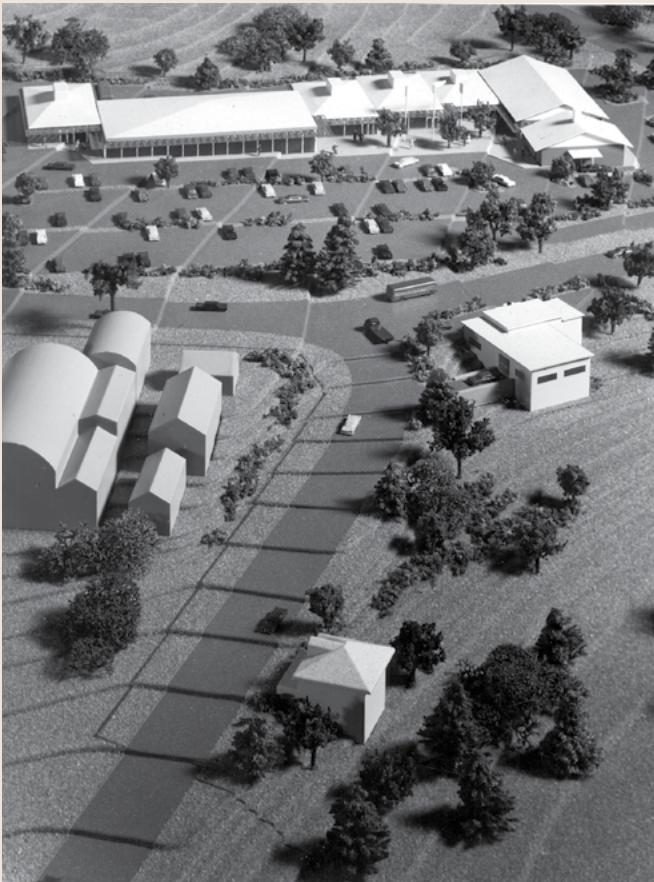
By Ken Simon

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 Canvass 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

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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

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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.

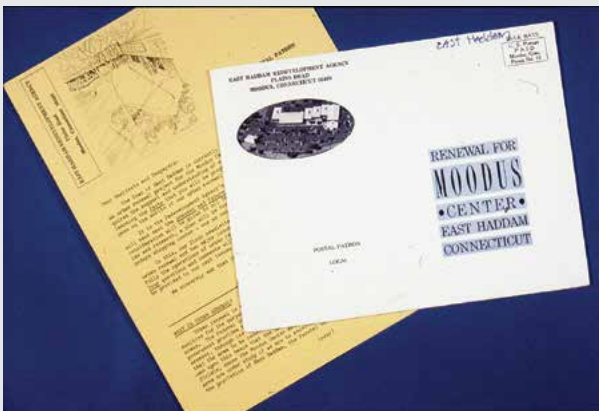
When the project came up for a vote, concluded the agency representatives, the townspeople would have a choice between the revitalization of the entire community, or continued depreciation of the already obsolete section, with a corresponding decrease in values throughout the town.

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.”

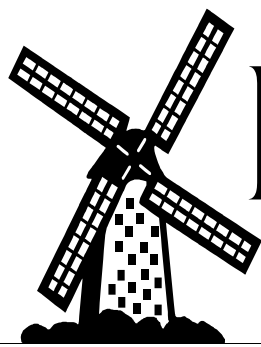
On Jan. 19, 1967, the last public hearing prior to the referendum was held, with 150 residents in attendance. The slides were shown, the model displayed and the array of benefits once again laid out in detail. It was projected that the taxes generated from the redeveloped area could be \$20,000 a year 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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