

East Haddam News

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

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."

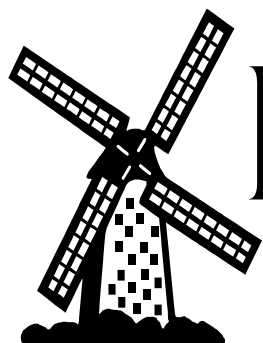
All this was made possible by the federal urban renewal program.

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.

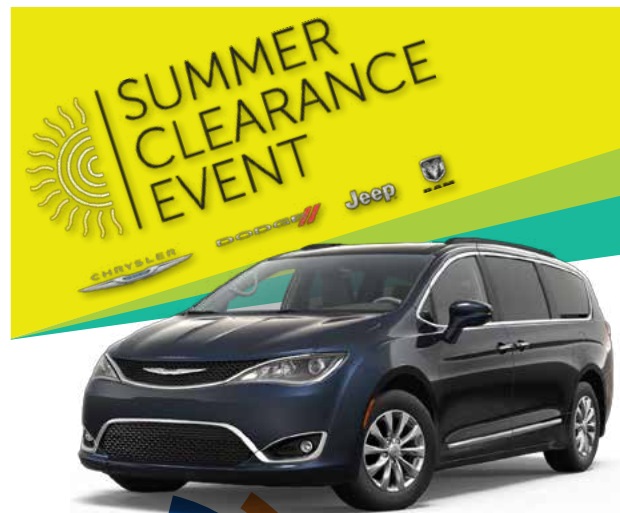
NEXT WEEK: Now that the scene has been set, be sure to read next week's installment to learn how the townspeople were systematically demoralized about the state of their town center and its dim future, then charmed by images of a rosy future into being gung-ho about the promised progress.

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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