East Haddam News

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Free weekly

Main Street chase results in arrest

By Barbi Batchelder

A Middletown man is due in court after a chase leading to his arrest for motor vehicle and narcotics violations that began in the East Haddam village area Sunday morning, August 28.

East Haddam Police said they were conducting traffic enforcement patrols on Main Street (Route 82) at about 8:30 a.m., when a vehicle approached an officer at a high rate of speed. Radar registered the vehicle traveling at 45 mph in a posted 25-mph zone.

The officer attempted to stop the vehicle, and reported that the operator appeared to be slowing down to stop just prior to the East Haddam Swing Bridge, but then continued on. The officer then activated his lights and siren. The driver continued to lead police across the bridge, through the Tylerville section of Haddam and then onto Route 9 north.

Jordan Robinson

The pursuit ended at an apartment complex on Summer Hill Road in Middletown.

Police said they discovered marijuana inside the vehicle. The driver, Jordan Robinson, 20, of Plaza Drive, Middletown, was arrested and charged with interfering with an officer, possession of less than 1/2 ounce of marijuana, failure to obey a stop sign, traveling at an unreasonable speed, reckless driving, and failure to carry a driver's license.

Robinson was released on a $500 bond and is set to appear in Middletown Superior Court September 12.

PART FOUR OF A SIX-PART SERIES

Legacy of progress gone sour

Harry Weinstein was one of the few original Moodus Center retailers to move to the new plaza, but he moved just a barebones version of his original soda shop, shown here as it was in the 1960s, into one of the new storefronts. *Photos courtesy of Ken Simon.*

Ray McMullen's Rexall drugstore and Pear's General Merchandise as they looked in the 1960s.

By Ken Simon

The following is part four 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 the Moodus urban renewal project began to fall apart. While efforts to modernize downtown Moodus continued to limp along, residents endured a five-year dispiriting construction mess all over the renewal area. This week we will learn how personalities, financing, non-binding agreements, the town's small size and other setbacks continued to undermine the promised benefits of urban renewal.

Merchants enthusiastic, initially

Charley Bernstein owned four parcels of land in the renewal area and operated the town's hardware store. Bernstein, who died in 1977, was the first selectman from 1961 to 1963. His son, Ron, was the legal counsel for the Redevelopment Agency. Walt Bielot remembers Bernstein's enthusiasm for the project. "Charley thought I was a damn fool for opposing the project. He told me he was planning to put up a building or two in the new area. He was talking about all the free funds available for the project. Well, nothing's free. We found that out."

Sam Pear was another major property owner and longtime merchant in Moodus Center. Pear, who died in 1980, served six terms as first selectman. He had been a downtown Moodus

Continued on page 4

Moodus center

Continued from front page
retailer since the late 1920s and with his brother Joe owned Pear's general dry goods store. Another brother, Albert, owned the meat market and grocery down the block. Pear, who was first selectman when the renewal project was first discussed, had been an early supporter of the plan and had planned to construct a couple of buildings with his brothers in the new plaza.

The old Moodus center merchants acting as the developers of the new shopping plaza under the direction of the Redevelopment Agency seemed like a good idea to many people. After all, they were the ones being displaced and it seemed fair to give them the first shot at the new development. "If these people had moved into the buildings in the plaza using their own dollars," said Charles Wolf Jr., another former first selectman, "it would have worked." But, added Wolf, "when it came right down to it, none of the merchants wanted to commit."

"At that time (in 1966), we businessmen weren't sure what the final project would be," recalled Albert Pear, who died in 1991. "We weren't sure what we would get for our property and our businesses. Nobody wanted to jump into things until we knew exactly where we were going."

As it turned out, where they were going was nowhere. There were at least six major merchants in old Moodus who wanted to relocate in the new plaza: Bernstein's hardware store, Pear's meat/grocery market, Pear's dry goods store, McMullen's drug store, Ray's Food Mart and Axelrod's service station. Although others did relocate – the two barber shops, the pizza shop, the package store, and Weinstein's soda shop – the businessmen who were most likely to develop the plaza and those who offered the most essential services never made it across the street to the designated new center.

"There was a feeling among some people," said one person close to the Redevelopment Agency, "of why should we bail out the merchants who had let the buildings deteriorate in the first place? Some felt that we'd end up in the same situation that we had had."

Personality clashes

One of those people was Mort Gelston, a local dairy farmer and the part-time salaried director of the Redevelopment Agency. Gelston, who died in 2012, had promised the merchants and property owners that they would be able to build their own buildings according to renewal specifications. He now had second thoughts. He was not finding it easy to negotiate with the merchants and later came to think that if they had been allowed to put up their own buildings, "we would have had the same mess as on Main Street."

The negotiations with the merchants ended badly. There had been what Charles Wolf called "personality clashes," and a general deterioration of the relations between Gelston and Sam Pear and some of the other merchants. According to Julian Rosenberg, who served with Gelston on planning and zoning, "It's clear that Mort rubbed the merchants the wrong way. And they rubbed him the wrong way. Rosenberg, a former CIA officer, died in 1989. "According to some people," he said, "Mort was overbearing and arrogant. Some say the merchants were uncooperative."

Whatever it was, in late 1966 Gelston told the merchants that they couldn't construct their own buildings, but that they could invest in the development corporation that was being set up to purchase the shopping center site.

It was then, according to many observers, that the whole project fell apart.

Charley Bernstein decided to retire and withdrew from further activities in the project. Sam Pear, Ray McMullen, and some other merchants and businessmen became the initial investors in the corporation, which was formed in December 1966. Although Pear and McMullen, both in their early sixties, were investors, they had decided not to open their own stores as renters as there would be no future equity through private ownership and rental income.

Pear was elected the corporation's first president in February 1967, just before the urban renewal referendum. In April 1966, the corporation received an architect's estimate of $600,000 to construct the 35,000 square-foot complex envisioned by renewal planners. Armed with the planner's statistics, the renewal plan and the services of Hartford real estate man, Sam Neiditz, the corporation set out to find tenants for the new plaza.

Neiditz had placed "hundreds of stores" in malls and plazas across the state. He remembered that he had his work cut out for him. Although he tried to interest such disparate retailers as Stop & Shop, Friendly's Ice Cream, Ben Franklin variety and Malloves Jewelers to the plaza, he was turned down at every corner. The town was too small, he was told, and to further complicate things, the development corporation and the renewal agency "couldn't get together on rent and whatnot. There were too many generals and not enough soldiers." Neiditz gave up after two years. "I figured I couldn't fight City Hall."

Sam Pear gave up about one year earlier, disappointed at the way things had progressed.

Grocery store chase

None of the successive leaders of the development corporation fared much better than Pear in efforts to find a major tenant. Major grocery chains and specialty stores declined to get involved with the project despite the optimistic projections. Prospective major tenants thought the town was too small, and, as local dentist and corporation director Bert Friedman remembered, "Nobody wanted to rent a store that's not built."

In May 1968, Dan Maus Sr., a local oil dealer, was elected president of the corporation. The lack of progress was becoming a great concern to the renewal agency, as major related construction projects in the renewal area would be held up if the new center couldn't be constructed on time. Somewhat anxiously, the renewal agency restated that it desired the following services in the plaza: a major supermarket, drugstore/newsstand, clothing store, barber/beauty shop, luncheonette, variety store, package store, and a bank.

Finally, in July 1968, things seemed to break the right way. The A&P Supermarket chain, which had rebuffed earlier overtures, became interested in a 12,000 square foot store. This was good news for the project planners, but bad news for Ray Kusmierski and Albert Pear. Kusmierski had been the manager of the First National in old Moodus Center. When First National closed down for lack of business in 1967, Kusmierski took over the store, renaming it Ray's Food Mart. He opened the store only because he wanted "to go across the street" with a 10,000 square foot full-service grocery store. The agency, however, had always wanted a major chain store. When A&P showed an interest, Kusmierski was told that he wasn't wanted. After this rebuff, Kusmierski looked elsewhere. In 1969, he settled on a location in Essex and in 1970 he closed his Moodus store.

Albert Pear also wanted to open a large food store. Told that he would have to rent space in the plaza and that he would be limited to a delicatessen operation, Pear obtained a permit to build a 5,000 square foot grocery store on property he owned adjacent to his house slightly east of the planned plaza. But with the change in zoning regulations and with the prospect of a major store coming in the area, Pear's permit was revoked and construction was denied.

In November 1968, the corporation again met with an architect to discuss building plans incorporating the A&P. It finally appeared as if the project was coming together and it was hoped that construction could begin in the spring of 1969.

In December 1968 the new post office opened for business in its small brick building, the first building to be constructed in the urban renewal area.

On June 11, 1969, five construction bids to build the new center were received by the corporation. They ranged from $670,000 to $790,000 for a 34,000 square-foot facility. The low bid, which amounted to $19.70 a square foot, was deemed by the Redevelopment Agency to be too high to attract local merchants and the A&P. The development corporation started exploring other alternatives, including bringing in outside developers who could bring costs in line with what the town could live with.

Meanwhile, in order to get financing and attract other merchants, it was necessary to get a firm commitment from A&P. Finally, on Nov. 5,

Continued on next page

A street view, Moodus Center, in the late 1960s. *Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.*

Moodus center

Continued from previous page

1969, a "letter of intent" was received from A&P's regional real estate office in Springfield. The short note read, "We intend to recommend to our Company for its consideration and final approval that we occupy the store area reserved for a supermarket to be erected in a shopping center on Route 149 in East Haddam, Connecticut." It was signed by the manager of the lease department in the regional office in Springfield.

Financing not found

Several sources close to the Redevelopment Agency remember that the letter of intent was recognized at the time as something less than legally binding, but nobody wanted to push the matter for fear of losing the long-promised main draw for the center.

With the letter of intent in hand, the corporation sought to interest other merchants in the center and looked for financing of the approximately $325,000 portion of the total $725,000 costs that would need to be financed through commercial bank loans and the sale of stock. They didn't find it. Apparently area banks noted the lack of a legal commitment from A&P and, given tightening money conditions, declined financing.

Things were bogged down once again as the Redevelopment Agency expressed alarm at the delays and confusion. Joe Steinberg, who had become the development corporation's attorney in 1968, had an explanation for all the problems, confusion and delay that bedeviled the development corporation throughout the renewal project: "The project wasn't big enough to afford to hire professional direction. None of the people involved had the ability to give long-term guidance. They cared and were very sincere, but it was too big for the number of people involved and too small to hire professionals." Steinberg, who died in 2014, later became a long-time CT Superior Court judge.

It was essential that a building be built soon: costs were rising and the displaced merchants had been promised a center. At this point, local businessman Jim Matthews volunteered his time to try to help straighten things out. He took the job for the express purpose of getting the building built and that's what he set out to do in the most expeditious way.

In January 1970, the George Field Company submitted plans for the construction of a steel complex at considerable savings. "The basic plans would remain the same," the company promised, "with steel substituted for cinder block." The Redevelopment Agency decided that given the circumstances, this was a satisfactory way to reduce the cost of financing and finally get the darn thing built.

In February 1970, Dr. Bert Friedman opened his professional building on William Palmer Road.

Then the worst case scenario arose. In March 1970, A&P's home office in New York City withdrew their regional office's letter of intent, citing the size of the town as the major factor.

The town's too small

"When A&P pulled out, everything went down the slot," said Charles Wolf. "After they were lost we begged every grocery store around. And everybody said, "The town's too small, the town's too small.""

Things looked bleak. Pressures continued to build on the agency. Construction elsewhere in the area was held up until they could demolish the old center, and they couldn't demolish the old one until the new one was built. Time was running out. The Department of Housing had already extended the project's completion date and costs continued to shoot up.

Many townspeople were getting fed up. The project area had become almost unbearable to area residents. For years, raw earth and rubble had blighted the landscape. The remaining stores in old Moodus Center were depleting their stock.

Charley Bernstein had wanted to move his hardware store to the new plaza, but negotiation failures and personality clashes led him and many other retailers to decide not to relocate to the new plaza as part of the redevelopment project. *Photo courtesy of Ken Simon.*

The buildings there had suddenly seemed to turn much older-looking and desolate.

People were starting to wonder whether the nightmare would ever end. One resident remembers the first time she realized that things weren't working out as planned was when she and her husband almost got caught in a mudslide from what had become known as Mount Hood, the massive pile of dirt on which were later built the Hilltop Lounge (now Hilltop Barbeque) and the professional building that housed Dr. Gourlie's office until his recent move, and Moodus Wheel and Track.

The Redevelopment Agency decided to proceed with the construction of one-half of the plaza building, including the Moodus Savings Bank and committed outlets, in order to avoid further delays. When a suitable supermarket tenant was found, construction would be completed.

Finally, construction starts

In October 1970, in order to get construction going, the Moodus Savings Bank committed $50,000 to the development corporation. The Field Company was authorized to construct the first section of the plaza, a 9,600 square foot steel building with eight stores at a cost of $122,840.

In November 1970, the Moodus Print Shop opened for business behind the shopping center site in a new brick building (now Felciano Plumbing).

Construction was halted while the completion of financing was pursued through the winter and spring. Finally, in July 1971, necessary financing was obtained and the Field Company was able to resume construction. The long-delayed sale of the site to the development corporation was consummated that month.

In October 1971, the Moodus Savings Bank decided that it was going to construct its own building on a site off Palmer Road (now Liberty Bank), apart from the rest of the plaza, another major blow to the renewal plans. "The bank and the development corporation couldn't come to agreement on what it would cost, what the lease was going to be," said former bank president Al Hall, adding, "the development corporation wasn't too well-organized."

In the final weeks of 1971, the metal-sheathed plaza building was ready for occupancy. In January 1972 the first tenants moved in: a bakery, a pizza shop, a clothing store, a package store, a soda shop and a barber shop. (The bakery and clothing store later went out of business to be replaced by an auto parts store and a convenience food store). As corporation attorney Steinberg put it, "The Nathan Hale Plaza had become by definition a series of mom-and-pop stores." Finally, a drug store tenant was found and in June 1972, the Nathan Hale Pharmacy opened for business in the remaining three store-units of the building.

In the following months, old Moodus Center was razed and the reconstruction of area roads was completed. The last three buildings in the renewal area, the Texaco station (where 7-11 is now), the Wheel & Track Center and the Hilltop Lounge (now Hilltop Barbecue) were erected and opened for business.

C'est fini!

In June, 1972 the Redevelopment Agency was disbanded. Its role in the mission to "spur the rebirth of Moodus Center" had been completed. The outcome of the project, however, was nothing like a rebirth.

At the time of original publication in 1982, the renewal area in general and the plaza in specific continued to suffer from uncompleted landscaping and a lack of paving that blighted much of the project area. According to the bylaws of the Redevelopment Agency, no property was supposed to be occupied until it was completed according to strict regulations that had been set up for the area. It was the responsibility of the Redevelopment Agency to see that these regulations were enforced.

And yet the Nathan Hale Plaza shopping center was permitted to open with violations including above-ground oil storage tanks; an exposed rear of the building, showing the tanks and refuse, rather than hidden by a required but unbuilt fence; no paving of the road owned by the development corporation behind the plaza leading to the Moodus Print Shop; and no landscaping or paving between the front of the plaza and Falls Road. The unpaved rear of the parking lot area was designated for the supermarket that was hoped to be obtained later. In addition, none of the other buildings in the renewal area except for Friedman's professional building had paved parking lots as required. No one seemed to know why all these violations were permitted. But the eyesore continued to depress and anger residents already upset over the long-delayed rebuilding and a growing realization of what they had lost.

The renewal regulations stated that once the Redevelopment Agency was disbanded, the town's Board of Selectmen was empowered to enforce any continuing regulations governing the renewal area. As of the writing of this series, it was still in their power to do so. The regulations remained in effect until 1987.

Next week: As the ill-fated redevelopment project dragged on and buildings started to come down and earth was moved, people began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of destroying what they once had. What other revitalization possibilities could they pursue?

To learn more about the author and to read his blog about Moodus history, visit www.simonpure.com and simonpure.blogspot.com.