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The year that Raybo came to Willimantic

Shortly before urban renewal bulldozers began flattening the Thread City's historic center in the early 1970s, several plans emerged to redevelop the doomed area located between Jackson, Union, Valley and Temple streets.

In the summer of 1971, a company named Raybo Inc. announced that it would like to develop a 260,000-square-foot parcel located between Broad and Church streets. On the evening of June 30, the company's representatives held a meeting at the Willimantic Motor Inn to announce their plans and brought along architectural drawings of a proposed shopping and business center.

Only 20 people attended and to Raybo's chagrin, this small gathering did not include the Redevelopment Agency's executive commissioners and members or its director, Betty Lou Williams, all of whom were invited. Nor did the audience include many of the local businessmen whom the planned demolition would displace.

Undeterred by the empty chairs, Raybo Vice President Raymond Schneider stood to make his presentation. He announced that his firm would like to construct a 120,000 square foot, two story building to house displaced storekeepers on the first floor and professionals on the second floor. Schneider also revealed Raybo's plans to build a 330-car parking lot adjacent to the new structure. He believed that this shopping center would accommodate all those businessmen removed by Williams' bulldozers, stressing that there would be only 35,000 square feet of commercial space available elsewhere in the redevelopment district.



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Raybo's plans differed greatly from those suggested by Williams. She believed that one or two large businesses, surrounded by smaller satellite stores, should develop the district and that an association of local business people should plan this rather than a company like Raybo. In response, Schneider believed that a single larger building would not only accommodate all local businessmen, but would also possibly attract a major department store. He believed that local business people who had carried the burden of taxation would receive the first opportunities in Raybo's new building.

Rental space in the proposed shopping would range from \$3 to \$4.50 a square foot. The structure would have a vinyl floor finish, a wall finish, proper amperage, air conditioning and regular lighting and bathroom facilities for each tenant.

After Schneider's presentation, members of the audience addressed questions to Schneider, Raybo President Robert Welsh and to financial director Thomas Welsh. Schneider told the owner of a three-chair barber shop, who needed 480 square feet of space, that his rent in the new building would be \$160 a month. He also told a woman who was interested in opening a 4,000 square foot gift shop that she would pay about a \$1,000 a month.

The Raybo panel acknowledged that the biggest challenge facing the businessmen, who would have to relocate, was to stay in business during demolition. However, if the redevelopment agency approved its plan, they would dovetail operations so that the businesses spread over Temple, Union, Center and Broad streets would not have to close up or put inventories into storage.

Schneider asked local people to

support Raybo and give them support at the municipal level. However, he admitted that he was disappointed at the turnout, as he had invited all the 65 businessmen destined for displacement, along with all the members of the Common Council, the mayor and Williams and her staff.

Some officials did attend, including Mayor Alfred H. Noel, Alderman Nathan Mandell, Common Council President Richard Boyden and representatives of the Savings Institute, Willimantic Trust Co. and the Knights of Columbus.

Almost 34 years later, a glance at the "major parcel" reveals that Raybo's plans never came to fruition.



From left: Raymond Schneider, Thomas Welsh, Alfred Noel and Robert Welsh discuss Raybo's redevelopment plans at the Willimantic Motor Inn in these photographs from 1971. The plans never materialized for downtown Willimantic. They also differed from the redevelopment agency's proposals.