



The 1970s meant redevelopment in Willimantic. Here are several views of blocks that were demolished during the decade.

RENEWAL

Redevelopment: Out with the old didn't always mean in with the new

The central business district urban renewal project dramatically changed the appearance of downtown Willimantic.

On June 13, 1966, the Willimantic Redevelopment Agency was established. In May 1971, the city voters approved a \$931,000 bond issue that secured the \$11 million-plus renewal and rehabilitation of 37 acres. The project was bounded on the west by Bank Street, on the east by Milk Street and by Valley Street on the north and the railroad right-of-way on the south. Within those boundaries lived 291 families and 28 individuals. The district also included 171 businesses.

Betty Lou Williams, who had headed up Rockville's urban renewal project, was hired as the executive director of the Redevelopment Agency in 1969. At that time, rehabilitation was not the main thrust of urban renewal projects around the country; it was demolition. Years later, rehabilitation gained higher priority and more buildings were saved in urban renewal projects.

The official survey of the area showed that many buildings were in bad shape and that the blighted areas would continue to deteriorate. But many critics of the project, then and now, decry the fact that not much effort was made to preserve those buildings worthy of being saved.

Before-and-after pictures of those buildings that were rehabilitated in Willimantic urban renewal show dramatic examples of

transformation such as that of the old Willimantic Trust-Jordan hardware building. An impressive list of new buildings were built in the project area including the present Liberty Bank, Clark's Restaurant (now the Lily Pad), the Potpourri Enterprises building and the WILI's studios at 720 Main St. The Windham County courthouse, Willimantic's fire-police complex and John Honan Terrace were all built as part of the urban renewal process.

The 1971 designation of the then derelict 1826 Jillson House to the National Register of Historic Places saved the building and ensured its restoration in the urban renewal project. In addition, more than \$1 million was spent on new sidewalks, streets, sewers, widening Main Street and the addition of much-needed parking lots and lighting.

A section of Union Street and three streets running between Union and Valley streets — Temple, Center and Broad streets — were abolished to improve traffic flow and to create a major commercial parcel for a retail shopping center. The opening of East Brook Mall in 1975 had a chilling effect on hopes for a developer and tenants for the commercial parcel. A cinema was built on the western side of the lot in 1978, but the 10-acre parcel remains undeveloped today.

A referendum in 1987 favored keeping the parcel open and available for community use. As 1999 ended, a group of local

businessmen have suggested the construction of an events center on the site as a way of attracting people to Willimantic and had presented plans for an attractive building there.

The 1970s redevelopment project was not without controversy. There was a charge that the chairman of the Redevelopment Agency stood to profit from the agency's acquisition of a Main Street block he bought while serving on the agency. *the Chronicle* won a lawsuit forcing the agency to disclose the appraisals and sale prices of the property in question. Another controversy was the feud between William's agency and the Willimantic Housing Authority when the latter at first refused to implement a \$1.6 million low-income housing project which was eventually built on lower Jackson Street.

By the summer of 1976, only the 1864 Union Block and the 1879 Hurley-Grant building remained on the south side of Main Street, east of the footbridge. But despite a community effort to save these two historic buildings, they were ripped down in October 1976. Williams resigned in 1979.

Some 20 years after the event, people are still recalling the historic center of the city, developed by Allen Lincoln during the 1860s. The historic heart of Willimantic — Broad, Center and Temple streets — are gone, but are certainly not forgotten as Willimantic enters the new century.