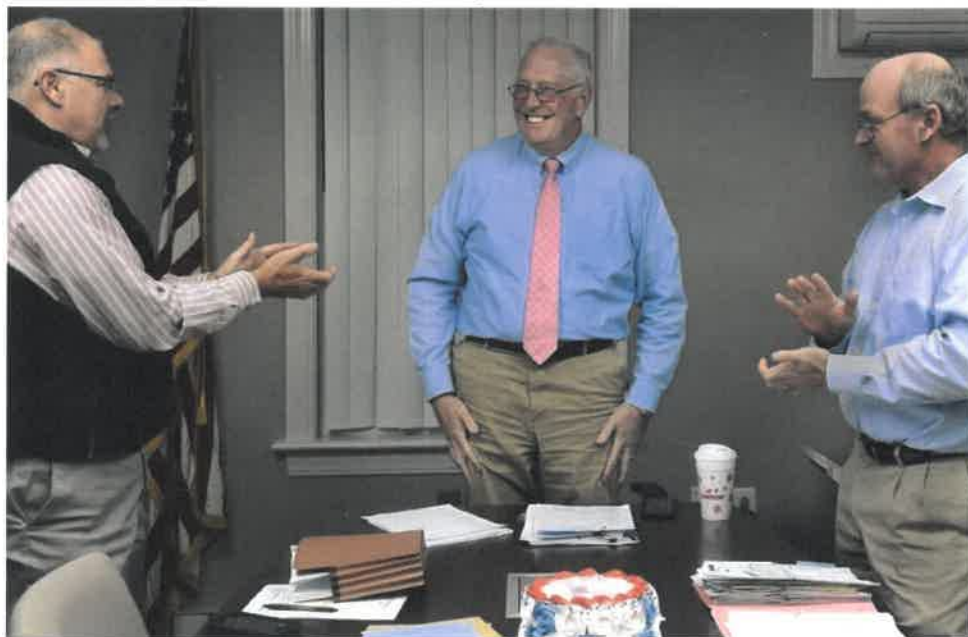


Congdon reflects on 24 years at Preston's helm




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Preston First Selectman Bob Congdon, center, receives a standing ovation Thursday, Nov. 14, 2019, from Selectmen Michael Sinko, left, and Lynwood Crary and others in attendance before the start of Congdon's last Board of Selectmen meeting. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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Preston — When Republican Robert Congdon was elected first selectman in 1995, Democratic Selectman Gerald Grabarek was on the losing end of a 2-1 partisan vote on a long-forgotten issue.

"I can see how this is going to go," Grabarek said at that meeting, fearing two years of partisan politics.

"And it didn't turn out that way at all," Grabarek said last week. "Most of the time, we agreed on everything."

With "mixed emotions," Congdon, 71, retires Monday after 24 years as the town's first selectman. New Democratic First Selectwoman Sandra Allyn-Gauthier, endorsed by Republican Congdon, takes office Tuesday.

Congdon's final meeting Thursday started and ended with a standing ovation by the overflow audience that spilled into the Town Hall hallway. There was even a "thank you" cake.

Fire Chief Tom Casey thanked Congdon for ushering in the changeover several years ago from the all-volunteer fire system to a combination of paid and volunteer coverage, with Casey as the paid chief.

"Bob, you recognized the problem and created the system we have," Casey said. "I'm forever in your debt."

A retirement party for Congdon on Friday at Maple Lane Farms is sold out with a waiting list.

Departing Selectman Mike Sinko, who served with Congdon for 10 years, called Congdon's combined business and government experience "a perfect mix" for the town.

Not always a winner by landslide

Congdon has survived razor-thin election margins and had years with no opponent. He tried to retire in 2017, but stayed after no one wanted to run. He was elected state representative in 2002, but called it a waste of time, some days driving three times to Hartford and back, and didn't run again.

He credited strong support from his family for his longevity in office. He and his wife, Linda, a Preston school nurse, have three children, Eric, 39, of Hebron, Becky Paquette, 38, and Gregory, 36, both of Canterbury. They have seven grandchildren, ages 3 to 9. In what could be a retirement preview, he and Linda took grandsons Andrew, 4, and Henry, 8, golfing last Monday.

Linda Congdon said she is "very proud" of the job her husband did. More than the major issues, she recalled one that mattered to just one panicked resident, who called to say he had accidentally thrown his medication in the trash.

Congdon tracked down the truck, called Willimantic Waste Co. and they retrieved the medication.

"Through so much of what has gone on, he has always had the best interest of the town of Preston in mind and also the region," Linda Congdon said.

Congdon has never based political allegiances or friendships on party labels. He "buted heads" with former Republican Gov. John Rowland — calling him "a Republican in registration only" — for big spending habits while ignoring Norwich Hospital.

"I've been a Republican all my life, but I'm getting beat up this election, because I have a Democrat's sign on my lawn," Congdon said, referring to his support of Allyn-Gauthier and Grabarek.

Democrat Timothy Bowles came close to beating Congdon, losing by 67 votes in 2009 and by 17 votes in 2011. Bowles sat as the minority party selectman for four years and recalled only one party-line split vote.

"I appreciate the fact that we are not partisan," Bowles said. "We did not recognize partisan titles. Serving with him on the board, I just have an awful lot of respect for Bob. He has led the town through some big changes."

Congdon drawn to big issues

Congdon, a U.S. Army veteran, owned a trucking company transporting electronic goods when First Selectman Parke Spicer retired in 1995.

Two big issues propelled Congdon to run for Spicer's seat — the gripping fear that the Mashantucket Pequot tribe wanted to annex half the town and the closure of Norwich Hospital. Congdon said last week he couldn't have imagined in 1995 that it would be "less daunting" to resolve the bitter annexation fight than to clean and redevelop the former hospital property.

In 1995, the tribe was voicing big expansion plans with the success of Foxwoods Casino. Maps circulating had the tribe wanting 40 percent to 50 percent of Preston, North Stonington and Ledyard. Congdon, North Stonington First Selectman Nick Mullane and Ledyard Mayor Wes Johnson bonded quickly.

"The three of us traveled all over," Congdon said. "Maine, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., California. They were just starting tribal gaming."

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and Congress ended up setting rules that annexed land had to be owned by the tribe, essential to tribal economic development and its cultural expansion, Congdon said.

"Through us working together, (tribal relations) became less acrimonious," Congdon said. "That issue has not raised its head in a long time."

Norwich Hospital was downsizing rapidly in 1995 and closed a year later. Congdon said it was clear that the state planned to close the doors and not look back. The region became excited briefly when Pfizer showed interest in the property, but that fizzled quickly. The state's marketing efforts floundered.

Congdon supported the plan to move Three Rivers Community College there, but that was thwarted by Norwich political leaders.

In 2003, along came Utopia Studios Ltd. More salesman than developer, Utopia head Joseph Gentile captivated political and business leaders with a vision of creating a \$1 billion Disney-style theme park and movie studio at Norwich Hospital.

He never explained where the money would come from, but Gentile garnered fierce support among influential labor unions throughout the state. Preston and Utopia negotiated a proposed deal with 28 mandated conditions.

Congdon called Gentile "probably one of the smartest people I ever worked with."

At the climax, Congdon recalled that Gentile nudged him about those 28 points: "You're not going to stop it if one or two items fall short?" Congdon responded: "Joe, they all have to be met." The project failed on 14 of the 28 points, and the Board of Selectmen terminated the deal on Nov. 22, 2006.

"I think he knowingly made it sound bigger than it was," Congdon said. "You ran the numbers and said, 'This is crazy to think it could bring in the numbers of people like Disney World,' and we didn't have a mouse."

The town badgered the state again to make the property a top priority.

"The state got sick of us hounding them and said, 'for \$1, you can have it,'" Congdon said.

Could Preston, a town of 4,500 with strong traditions of farming and frugality, take on a nearly 400-acre property with 65 decaying buildings, creepy underground tunnels and unknown ground contamination?

"I struggled with that," Congdon said. "But I knew if we didn't do that, it would sit there untouched for the rest of our lives. I give the townspeople all the credit for taking that on."

Development proposals came as the Preston Redevelopment Agency applied for cleanup funding. Over the past 10 years the PRA has obtained \$24 million in grants and low-interest loans for the cleanup of the property now marketed as Preston Riverwalk.

Buildings came down, tunnels were cleaned and filled. Mohegan tribal leaders across the Thames River noticed. In spring of 2017, the Mohegan Tribe reached a deal with Preston to take the entire property, once it is cleaned, for a proposed major sports, recreation, housing, marina and commercial development.

Congdon said the town owes tremendous gratitude and an unpayable debt to the 18 PRA members who have volunteered uncounted thousands of hours and professional expertise to the task.

"If we're successful getting the Mohegan development, there's going to be a huge benefit not only for our town, but for the whole state," Congdon said. "I sure would have liked to have gotten that done on my watch."

PRA Chairman Sean Nugent said the cleanup and agreement with the Mohegans wouldn't have been successful without Congdon. Although an ex-officio member of the PRA, Congdon was critical to its work, Nugent said.

"When you've got a person who thinks and is a visionary like Bob, you don't say 'sorry, you're ex-officio,'" Nugent said. "The only thing he didn't do was vote. He was integral, engaged. We wanted him to be part of the conversations. We would have failed without him. I have to admit," Nugent continued. "I was always hopeful we would be across the goal line before he retired. We're on the edge of it."

That goal fell \$7 million short when extensive coal ash contamination — previously undocumented by the state, Nugent said — was discovered throughout the last 60 acres left to clean. The town and tribe are awaiting state action on a request for the final \$7 million.

Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, co-chairwoman of the legislative Appropriations Committee, said local legislators are pushing for the funding to be placed in a pending bond package.

Over the years, Congdon gave small Preston a voice in the region and state. He sat on the boards of the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the Council of Small Towns, the Connecticut Interlocal Risk Management Agency municipal insurance group, and the Council of Governments. Preston has been active in the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, and Congdon hopes to retain his seat on the regional Water Coordinating Committee.

'A cheap bastard'

Preston's and Congdon's reputations for fiscal conservatism are well deserved. The town often needs multiple votes to approve a budget. Yet even after cuts, town and school budgets often return unspent funds to town coffers.

As of Sept. 30, Preston's general fund surplus stood at \$2.9 million, 18 percent of the combined \$19.6 million town and school budgets — at least twice the target of most small towns. Preston's AA+ bond rating is as high as a town of 4,600 can get, Congdon said.

"I'm a fiscal conservative," he said. "Some say I'm a cheap bastard."

The town has mostly part-time planning, zoning and building inspection staffs and Town Hall is closed Mondays. The assessor doubles as the zoning enforcement officer and the town clerk as the tax collector.

Congdon, himself, also served in a dual role — as public works director, plowing streets, school parking lots and clearing downed limbs from roads, a task that put him in the hospital a few years ago when a limb fell on him while he was finishing up clearing another limb from a road.

But times are changing. Preston this year joined Uncas Health District for full-time health and sanitation services. The fire budget jumped 200 percent to hire part-time paid firefighters in response to a lack of volunteers. And Congdon said this past week he thinks it's time the town hired a separate public works director to oversee the road and transfer station budget and staffs.

Congdon said future Norwich Hospital development will dictate how town services expand. Future town leaders will have to figure out how to balance that growth with the town character as a small farming town, he said.

At Thursday's meeting, the departing board's final duties included approving the town's official request for the final Norwich Hospital cleanup money, approved refunds to taxpayers who overpaid — by \$6 — and passed along a few matters to the new selectmen.

They thanked supporters for turning out for their final meeting.

"This is exciting," Sinko said. "This is more people than we've had since Utopia."

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Lyme resident restores local veterans memorial (/local-news/20191120/lyme-resident-restores-local-veterans-memorial)

"I'm hoping that this isn't just a garden, that it can be continually improved and draw more attention to the memorial and the veterans it honors," St. Louis said.