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Patience as two big Mystic projects start

No doubt there will be times over the next several years when downtown Mystic merchants and visitors lose patience.

There are going to be inconveniences - ideally not too many of them - as work gets underway on the Mystic Streetscape and drawbridge projects in the next couple of months.

The \$5.5 million streetscape work will start next week, the first phase rerouting an aging sewer pipe on the north side of West Main Street from the drawbridge to Gravel Street. That project, which will remake the downtown business district by sinking utility lines underground, widening sidewalks, improving crosswalks and accessibility, and maximizing legal parking, plus more improvements, is expected to take about 18 months.

Shortly after that work gets under way, the state plans to start its three-year, \$14.8-million rehabilitation of the Mystic River Drawbridge.

Now try to compose yourselves Mystic merchants and Mystic visitors. While there will be delays and frustrations, authorities are making every effort to keep them to a minimum by coordinating the projects, keeping open lines of communication, and being mindful that businesses need to keep operating.

Plans call for doing some of the sewer work at night. Planners are dividing the project into sections so contractors aren't everywhere at one time, but instead focused on specific areas. Project designers do not expect road closures, although occasionally West Main may be limited to one lane of traffic. The goal is to maintain continuous access to businesses.

Take a deep breath and think about the finished project - an aesthetically pleasing West Main Street: no more gangly street poles and overhead electric, phone and cable wires. There will be wider sidewalks for pedestrians, including those with strollers or wheelchairs, to easily pass, and accessible crosswalks providing improved visibility of oncoming traffic.

Other features include attractive new streetlights, seating and more useful signs. Contractors will realign the roadway to make lane widths consistent.

Waiting for a perfect time to undertake a needed project like the streetscape would mean waiting forever because there is no perfect time. In the works for a decade now, the downtown district remake has been well thought out. The Town of Groton's website has all the pertinent information, and project managers have been conducting regular meetings with property owners, merchants and the public to keep them updated.

The bulk of the estimated \$5.5 million cost, about \$3.1 million, is covered by federal stimulus dollars from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and the balance by other federal funds with a state-paid match. A local firm, Pettini Contracting Corporation, is doing the streetscape work. It is one example that the much maligned stimulus plan has many success stories like this one that get needed projects done, create jobs and boost economic development.

From this vantage point, it appears officials are making every effort to ensure contractors do the work with as little disruption as possible. A town employee will be on site at all times to monitor the job. There will be periodic information meetings for merchants and the town will produce a newsletter updating the progress.

Despite everyone's best efforts, there will be times when the heavy equipment and digging cause problems. When that happens, think about spring - the spring of 2012 - when the new, improved downtown Mystic Streetscape should be ready.
