

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP REPORT (January 11, 2010)

VALUE STATEMENT

The Town of Belmont is a community that is 94% residential with a wonderful quality of life, schools, recreation, convenient commercial centers, and small shops – a town you would want to live in! Although considered the “Town of Homes”, these homes need local stores to service their needs. Residents will shop in their local commercial areas if these areas have a welcoming feeling and provide at competitive prices the needed products and services.

The Town of Belmont values its commercial centers for the vibrancy and village atmosphere they bring to the community and for the goods and services available in close proximity to residents. Commercial centers enhance the quality of life experienced by residents and add to the sustainability of each neighborhood. Commercial centers can (1) provide an atmosphere that encourages community interactions, (2) help define the character of the Town, (3) provide a significant sense of place to residents and (4) contribute to the local tax base.

While the commercial centers are valued, the needs of these areas to adjust to changing market conditions in order to remain economically viable and sustainable appear to often conflict with perceived quality of life characteristics (such as small scale) desired by local residents. A balanced development framework is needed in order to accommodate essential changes while simultaneously enhancing the vitality and attractiveness of the commercial areas in new ways.

GENERAL ISSUES CONTRIBUTING TO A POOR COMMERCIAL CLIMATE

- There are approximately 20 vacant retail spaces in town. If vacancies continue into a commercial blight, then neighboring residential values and tax revenues will be adversely affected.
- The retail market is in flux due to competition from internet and on-line shopping, the current recession, and the big-box phenomenon (Wal-Mart, Costco, BJ’s, CVS, etc.) which creates increased competition for small retailers.
- The market (Supply & Demand), including current retail rents do not in many locations support new development or renovation of existing buildings (including underground or Off-Street parking).
- Generally, there has been neighborhood opposition to commercial development, i.e. density, height, parking, traffic, etc. It is difficult to get approvals for zoning changes, variances and permitting. Delays are costly to development and can leave some blight during the development period.
- There is a concern that adding 2nd and 3rd floors to existing facilities and/or new developments (i.e. mixed-use retail and residential) will make Belmont have a similar community feel like Medford and Somerville.

- Current regulations (zoning, liquor license, parking) and limited public improvements retard growth of niche markets and economically prevent major renovations or quality new construction.
- Regional competition, small sites, and multiple owners limit market potential unless incentives are provided for site assembly and new development
- Belmont's commercial squares are too small to provide their own private sector support for undertaking promotion, management and maintenance activities.
- In some cases the rents are not sufficient to support sign and façade improvements without support from local banks and the town
- Because there is no consensus as to what commercial areas changes are best for the town, zoning and rezoning issues are dealt with on a case by case basis with the abutters having the greatest voice leading to costly delays, ad hoc development decisions, and lost opportunities for substantial, quality economic development.
- There is no organizational mechanism to facilitate ongoing communication between the town and local business areas re. parking regulations, snow plowing, trash disposal, marketing.

ACTION OUTLINE

CONCERN: VIBRANCY OF COMMERCIAL CENTERS - PARKING

Issues: Low availability of front-door locations

High parking availability in inconvenient places

Creating new parking supply is prohibitively expensive

Residents complain about spill-over parking.

Residents and businesses complain about commuter parking

Local shoppers and employees are used to low cost or free parking.

Often, because many commercial parcels are small and do not include sufficient space to accommodate current zoning parking requirements, existing 'grandfathered' older buildings, which often have little supporting parking, are often the 'highest and best use'. Therefore additions or new construction cannot occur.

Goal 1: Develop a Parking Management Plan for Each Commercial Center

OBJECTIVE: MAXIMIZE FRONT-DOOR PARKING SUPPLY

Adopt graduated pricing/time limit strategy

Establish remote employee permit parking areas.

Install reverse angle parking where appropriate to increase curbside parking supply

Limit loading zone hours

OBJECTIVE: INCREASE CONVENIENCE FOR SHOPPERS

Provide clear signage indicating parking options.

Use enforcement personnel to “assist” consumers first and enforce regulations second.

OBJECTIVE: TREAT PARKING AS AN ASSET

Dedicate surplus parking revenues to local improvements as decided by local business community

Dedicate surplus revenues to residential neighborhoods that allow on street parking.

Goal 2: Encourage new and infill development

OBJECTIVE: REVISE PARKING REGULATIONS

Reduce minimum parking requirements

Allow off-site parking to meet parking requirements

Encourage shared parking

For townhouse and possibly mixed-use developments, consider separating cost of parking from cost of housing in order to reduce cost of housing, rate of auto ownership and encourage shared parking.

Goal 3 : Encourage Increased Use of Public Transit while reducing parking conflicts

OBJECTIVE: ENCOURAGE INCREASED USE OF COMMUTER RAIL STATIONS

Investigate possibility of private shuttle to serve commercial, residential and transit stations.

Provide parking near stations on edge of commercial districts utilizing side streets.

Provide clear signage, lighting and access to stations

CONCERN: VIBRANCY OF COMMERCIAL CENTERS – PHYSICAL APPEARANCE & VITALITY

Issues: Lack of “quality” tenants

Rents do not support improvements to buildings.

No consistent approach to streetscape in commercial areas.

Merchants, land-owners do not generally act cooperatively

Current signage for the most part has no appeal, and is not inviting

Goal 4: Improve Physical Appearance of Commercial Areas

OBJECTIVE: ESTABLISH STREETScape & PUBLIC PLAZA IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Widen Sidewalks

Enhance public spaces

Develop a palette of recommended street furnishings for each district

Establish uniform street lighting/traffic signals for each district.

Establish design guidelines for renovation and new development.

Dedicate surplus parking revenue to physical improvements

OBJECTIVE: ESTABLISH BUILDING IMPROVEMENT/SIGN AND FAÇADE PROGRAM

Develop signage guidelines, potentially as a component of design guidelines.

Create a resource guide for existing businesses including desired suggestions and examples for new signage.
Explore possible incentives to encourage property owners to update their properties (low interest construction loan rates, real estate tax credits)
Explore with local financial institutions private funding
Explore public funding options
Develop positive program and schedule meetings with absentee landlords to discuss renovation needs

CONCERN: ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF COMMERCIAL CENTERS

Issues: Market rents in older properties often do not support renovation or redevelopment
Regulatory environment discourages investment
No ongoing communication amongst business owners and the Town.
Marketing of Districts to support existing businesses is minimal
Commercial centers do not support one another. Generally, residents oppose new commercial development, citing density, community character, traffic, etc. concerns
Uncertainty of retail market and small scale local commercial markets.
Lack of ‘events programming’ to attract customers and visitors.

Goal 5: Support policies, programs and events that increase the competitiveness of local businesses

OBJECTIVE: MAKE TOWN MORE BUSINESS FRIENDLY

Assist commercial areas in promoting their services and goods through community events
Encourage public/private partnership to support commercial areas
Use parking enforcement personnel to “assist” consumers first and enforce regulations second.
Keep a single tax rate – do not penalize commercial property owners who are already having problems
Investigate potential for tax credit for property improvements (create a TIF district)
Study and amend permitting process as appropriate
Address issues of town services (e.g. snow and trash removal) that affect commercial areas

OBJECTIVE: ENCOURAGE FORMATION OF BUSINESS ORGANIZATION(S)

Delegate to a private/public organization authority to address issues that would improve appearance, conditions and experience of the district.
Allow parking revenue to be dedicated to commercial area improvement. (see parking recommendations)
Develop common marketing promotions and events.
Explore feasibility of creating a Business Improvement District

OBJECTIVE: IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY OF TOWN'S COMMERCIAL AREAS

Investigate possibility of private shuttle to serve commercial, residential and transit stations.

Improve Traffic Circulation

Provide clear signage indicating parking options.

Resurface and provide traffic calming in commercial areas as well as residential areas.

OBJECTIVE: REVIEW AND AMEND ZONING AND OTHER REGULATIONS TO SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT, REDEVELOPMENT, AND RENOVATION OF THE TOWN'S COMMERCIAL AREAS

Permit mixed use development including residential, retail, and office uses;

Require ground floor retail

Review and modify dimensional regulations including height, setbacks, and floor area ratios.

Modify major development regulations with design guidelines in place of Town Meeting approval. All development would still have staff review.

Encourage development incentives for mixed use, affordable housing, structured parking, or other public objectives

Review & update current district designations and uses to insure that zoning reflects a hierarchy of commercial centers/locations in order to make zoning more consistent with each specific location

Review & update locations and boundaries of current commercial districts and adjust mapping appropriately

Develop design guidelines for area

Review requirements for Liquor Licenses

*reduce 130-seat requirement for all alcohol and 39 seat requirement for wine/beer
increase number of licenses*

Eliminate parking requirement for outdoor dining

Visions for Commercial Centers

Within the context of developing recommendations to improve the Town's commercial areas, the Committee was also tasked with developing a vision of each of the Town's commercial centers that would act as the guide for many of the above recommendations. Additionally, the committee was provided with information from the consultant's research on several potential development sites. That information and recommendations are included below.

Belmont Center - *Town Center commercial district featuring specialty shopping (as well as regional and anchor tenants), restaurants, office uses, municipal and post office uses, commuter rail station, public parking, and historic architecture.* Consider changes to permit mix of residential, retail, and office uses that serve the community. Seek all opportunities for additional parking.

Waverley Square - *Transit hub and center for convenience, shopping, restaurant, and office uses.* Consider changes to foster community development by permitting mix of residential, retail, and office uses that include ground floor retail and serve the community as well as provide for additional parking.

Central/Palfrey Squares (Trapelo Road Corridor) - *Mixed use corridor with convenience retail, personal services, and entertainment.* Enhance the existing district with pedestrian friendly amenities, improvement of connections to adjacent recreational spaces, and required ground floor retail as a component of new development.

Cushing Square - *Mixed use center with shopping, dining, office, and multifamily residences.* Encourage ground floor retail uses and facilitate the development of additional parking.

East Belmont - *Small-scale neighborhood retail and services.* Enhance and encourage the continued ethnic diversity of retail establishments in this unique area.

Brighton Street - *Complement existing uses with new municipal and recreation uses.* Consider opportunity to relocate municipal uses here, including police station, light company, and skating rink. Subsequently, re-use existing police station/light company building and skating rink locations to achieve goals for the development of Belmont Center and municipal revenue goals.

Concord-Bright - *Small neighborhood retail/office district or long term plan to redevelop as residential.* Promote this area as a gateway to Belmont.

Pleasant Street - *Up-grade commercial corridor with flexible uses i.e. office, retail, or residential uses based upon market conditions. New development at this location should enhance Waverley Square as a transit hub and commercial center and not undermine the viability of Belmont Center.* Consider opportunity to relocate DPW yard to this location (in order to improve functionality of the facility); thereby creating the opportunity to re-use the existing DPW yard for residential development.

DEVELOPMENT SITES: GUIDING REUSE DECISIONS

The following describes the context of decisions to be made about a selection of potential development sites. The primary questions are:

- How can the town plan for the optimal redevelopment or reuse of these sites?
- How do these land use decisions impact the surrounding neighborhoods?
- How can the town's priorities be identified in order to make choices between conflicting objectives?

Purecoat Site

Location: Brighton Street, Hills Crossing

Current Use: Light Industrial/Office

Potential Uses:

- a) continued commercial activity, possibly with renovations, enhancements
- b) Municipal use, possibly including high school campus, light company, police station, skating rink?
- c) Residential – multifamily and/or mixed use development

Possible objectives/criteria

- Intensify/enhance commercial activity
- maximize tax base by possibly accommodating municipal uses in this location in exchange for private sector uses on former municipal parcels (police, light company, library).
- retain area as light industrial/flex space
- provide space for public facilities in a contiguous campus
- increase supply of multifamily, townhouse or mixed use housing, consistent with adjacent residential uses

Light Company/Police Station

Location: Belmont Center

Current Use: Police Department which is to be relocated in the future, and Municipal Light substation

Issues: Prior analysis determined that buildings are awkward for commercially viable reuse and site is insufficient in size to accommodate mixed use development.

Potential Uses:

- a) office
- b) residential townhouse
- c) retail
- d) quasi-public or nonprofit space for educational, entertainment, tourism, meeting, and/or other purposes?

Possible objectives/criteria

- provide short term revenues for Town through disposition
- preserve historic architecture in Belmont Center
- expand available commercial space in Belmont Center
- create focal point for Belmont Center
- increase density of housing near Belmont Center
- maximize tax base
- provide space for nonprofit or quasi-public activity that complements CBD.
- Promote commercially viable development opportunity
- Take advantage of proximity to train station

Clafin St. Municipal Parking Lot

The consultant team studied two scenarios for this site, {1.} a one level deck-total of 235 spaces (110 at ground level) and alternative [2] townhouses (15) with 30 at grade parking spaces located above an underground municipal parking garage of 125 parking spaces.

The team concluded that the revenue of this development i.e. sale of townhouses would not justify the cost of building the underground garage, a cost which might be in the range of \$5M for 125 underground spaces. Furthermore, the residential uses would distract from the commercial vitality of the district as charging shoppers high fees for structured parking would be a disincentive.

Former Auto Dealership

Location: Pleasant Street

Current Use: Vacant auto dealership

Potential Uses (may include some combination of the following):

- a) office building (70,000, sq ft., 4 floors)
- b) retail (30,000 sq. ft. single level retail)
- c) structured parking (275 spaces of which 65 on surface lot for commuters and 210 in a 3 level parking deck)

Possible objectives/criteria

- provide opportunity for major commercial development project
- anchor Pleasant Street commercial district
- strengthen connection to Waverley Square
- provide parking for commuters and /or employees on Pleasant Street and Waverley Square.
- Maximize tax base
- Allow for DPW yard to relocate to Pleasant Street permitting disposition of former DPW yard for housing.

Sandler Skate Shop

Location: Concord/Bright

Current Use: Vacant gas station and skate shop

Issues: site insufficient size for mixed use or development with below-grade parking. Current density higher than zoning would allow for redevelopment.

Potential Uses:

- a) Retail and/or office within existing skate shop building or
- b) 9 Townhouses with 18 surface parking spaces

Possible objectives/criteria

- Strengthen neighborhood commercial presence
- Shift node toward more toward residential character
- maximize tax base
- provide retail or services to serve surrounding neighborhood