

Town of Belmont, Massachusetts
MBTA COMMUNITIES ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

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BELMONT, MA

DATE: January 31, 2024
TIME: 8:18 AM

January 19, 2024

Present: Thayer Donham, Roy Epstein, Rachel Heller, Paul Joy, Patrick Murphy, Drew Nealon, Julie Wu

Town Staff: Christopher Ryan

MAPC: Josh Fiala

The meeting was called to order at 8:30 am. The meeting was held virtually via Zoom.

1) Discussion of Chapter 3A Compliance Model

Josh Fiala presented updated draft materials that looked at 5+ scenarios. They were able to achieve full compliance in only 3 of the scenarios and are still working on all the scenarios.

Chris Ryan asked about the map Newton submitted that uses a thin connector along a major street to join two commuter rail stations making one large district. Josh Fiala cautioned that their zoning has not been approved by EOHLC yet so it was premature to use it as a model for the Belmont zoning.

Josh reported that they are close to being able to share the scenarios along with Pros and Cons and should be ready next week. Roy Epstein suggested that both Waverley and Belmont Center need to be in the final model.

Rachel Heller requested that MAPC create a scenario with enough affordable units to meet 10% SHI. Josh Fiala responded that would be a separate exercise with supplemental modelling. Rachel Heller asked if they could provide the supplemental modelling since it would allow Belmont to decide where development is proposed in town. The committee is trying to achieve multiple goals so we should look at outcomes too.

Chris Ryan suggested that we could use the MAPC numbers and apply a template.

Julie Wu thought that was a good idea and would allow us to look at each scenario.

Chris Ryan and Roy Epstein wondered why we would pursue an option with only Belmont Center and Pleasant Street. The numbers are not there and it does not make sense. The committee agreed to suspend the 4B option from further consideration.

Patrick Murphy suggested the focus should be on Waverley and Belmont Center but that the Star Market and Car Wash sites should be removed from the map. He suggested that perhaps the Belmont Manor site or other ones could be added in lieu of the Star Market site. He thought Option 2 appears to provide the most flexibility for the town.

Roy Epstein suggested that the Star Market site could be designated as Mandatory Mixed-use. Rachel Heller reminded the committee that a grocery store cannot be mandated but there are creative ways to incentivize that use on the site.

Paul Joy made a motion to exclude the Star Market and Belmont Car Wash sites. The motion was seconded by Patrick Murphy. The motion was defeated by a vote of 3 in favor and 4 against.

Thayer Donham recommended that the committee reduce the number of options from 5 or 6 to a maximum of 3 for presentation and discussion in public meetings. The options are too complex for folks including those on the committee to grasp immediately and therefore in order for everyone to understand the proposal there should be fewer options under consideration. She also requested a copy of the presentation so the committee and the public could study it.

Josh Fiala said that it was a snapshot of where they are in their work today but they would be complete next week and could show the draft model results.

Julie Wu reminded the committee that we all agree that the BHA properties need to be in the 3A zoning maps in order to preserve future redevelopment flexibility and provide an opportunity for affordable units.

2) Meeting Minutes

Deferred due to time constraints.

3) Public Comments

Doug Koplow, Precinct 6, said that since the Star Market and the Belmont Car Wash were in the only LB II district in town, the proposal should not diminish the commercial zoning with an overlay. He wondered if the Town Counsel has looked at the statute to ensure that “contiguity” was a requirement.

Josh Fiala responded that the state leadership thinks that EOHLC has the authority to provide guidance and that guidance are mandatory requirements.

Mark Kagan said he was against limiting the number of units to the minimum required by the MBTA Communities law. The town needs more housing within the town.

Gloria Leipzig reiterated via the chat feature that the BHA sites should be in the zoning.

Bob Sarno agreed that the distributed scenario is a more equitable approach that he was in favor of pursuing. He recommended looking for other properties to put into the Waverley area zoning map so that the Star Market site could be removed from the map.

Madeline Fraser-Cooke agreed that winnowing the number of options to bring to the public is key. She suggested that there is a danger that people will only focus on the unit counts so it would help to have good visuals to accompany the zoning numbers. She indicated that the town needs affordable housing and this process should bring the Town to the 10% SHI. Also, the Star Market might want mixed-use on the site since people living on-site would increase revenues. She wondered if anyone had reached out to Star Market regarding the opportunities for the site.

Julie Wu asked if the existing unit counts were available for each parcel. Josh Fiala replied that he would look into getting the data for the committee.

Roy Epstein requested a copy of the spreadsheet so he could work with it. Josh Fiala responded yes but he noted that there are a lot of assumptions imbedded in it.

4) Next Meeting:

Thursday January 25 at 7:30 pm in a remote Zoom format only.

Public Forum on Monday January 29th from 7-9 in a Hybrid Format.

Meeting adjourned at 9:45 am

Minutes recorded by Thayer Donham.